Falling upwards

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Falling upwards

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2006

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
CHAPTER ONE

Anagnorisis shifted his bound hands, trying to loosen the plastic cord cutting into his wrists, but it held tight. He could break the bonds on his own and escape, but not without causing more of a situation than he already had. Two policemen standing near their vehicle a few yards away eyed him. He could hear every word they said, but he wasn’t about to tell them that.

“Are you sure?” one said.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” the second replied.

The first officer took off his hat and scratched at his thinning hair. “Marty, we could’ve gotten the description wrong.”

“I’m telling you this is our guy, Jack,” Marty said. “All the eyewitnesses reported that he had short blonde hair and wore a light brown leather jacket.”

Both policemen turned to look at the tall man sitting on the curb. His hair was short and black, and his faded black coat curved about his folded legs.

“Or was it long blonde hair?” Jack said.

“Either way,” Marty said, “this is our guy.”

Anagnorisis gazed back at them. In all of his one hundred and twenty years, the darkness of night had never failed him, blanketing his movements through cities and towns as he shifted among the buildings with practiced ease. However, he should have paid closer attention to the stares of the humans he’d been attracting over the past few weeks. The university’s security had been gradually tightening around him, and he had been too distracted to notice until it was too late.

These two officers had detained him for nearly half an hour already. While they grew more confused with each passing moment, Anagnorisis doubted he could slip away without the worry that they would keep searching for him. The longer he stayed here, the more his presence affected these human lives. The area between his shoulder blades began to itch with suggestion of flight, and he pushed down his rising impatience.

Not yet, Ana.

“I think,” Jack said, slowly, “that we should take him in. Get his fingerprints.”

“Take who?” Marty asked.

Anagnorisis cleared his throat, and both officers jumped. “I’m afraid that will be quite impossible, gentlemen.”

“Keep quiet,” Marty said, “whoever you are.”

“You don’t understand. Taking my fingerprints is impossible. I simply don’t have any.”

Their blank stares told him that they didn’t understand. Anagnorisis sighed – it was useless to explain
anything to these humans – and scanned the rooftops of the nearby buildings once again. Still no visible sign, and the itching had grown worse.

“Come on, you.” Jack leaned over and grabbed Anagnorisis’ arm, hauling him to his feet. “We’re going to take you down to the campus security office. You definitely match the description we got.”

Anagnorisis tensed, ready for a struggle. He detested getting physically involved, but he couldn’t allow them to take his picture; pictures were too sure, too concrete. A feeling of calm that wasn’t his own brushed Anagnorisis’ mind a moment before he heard a voice call out behind them.

“Just a second.” Kepzelet stood between them and the car, his hands tucked into the back pockets of his blue jean shorts. He had bright orange-red hair that tumbled into his eyes. He was grinning.

“Who are you?” Jack demanded.

“Nobody,” Kepzelet said. “I’ve come to tell you that Ana promises to be good. If you let him go, he also promises to be more careful about not getting caught when he’s sneaking around here. Don’t you, Ana?”

Anagnorisis resisted the urge to return the grin and snorted instead. “I wondered how long you were going to wait, Kep.”

Kep winked. “I couldn’t resist watching you try to reason with them. Now, Marty – it was Marty, wasn’t it? I think I saw the man you’re looking for over on the other side of campus.”

“Really?” Marty’s eyes widened. “With brown hair and a red coat?”

“That’s the one.” The officers exchanged a look, at once excited. “But you need to let my friend go, first,” Kep said.

Jack rushed over and clipped the plastic cord, freeing Ana’s hands. “Sorry about that, sir.”

“No need,” Ana said, rubbing his wrists. “Kep?”

“Right.” Kep gave the officers a two-fingered salute. “I hope you catch the right stalker this time.”

The two of them walked briskly up the street, though not too quickly to attract the officers’ diverted attention again. As soon as they were far enough away, they ducked into a dark alley between two dormitories.

Kep doubled over in laughter. “Their faces, Ana! I’ve never seen two humans so confused!”

Ana leaned against the brick wall, tilting his head back to gaze up at the night sky. “It was my fault. I should never have been so careless.”

“But no permanent harm done, right?”
“I don’t believe so. I knew they would be more likely to remember me in daylight, but still I have been coming anyway. They remembered enough tonight to warrant arresting me. A man stalking a female dormitory attracts too much attention.”

Kep managed a blush. “I was only kidding about the stalking bit.”

“I know.”

The spring night air was warm and thick with approaching rain. Ana pulled a cigarette from his inside coat pocket and lit it, taking a long familiar drag. Kep wrinkled his nose at the smell but said nothing about it. They weren’t physically affected by such things anymore, but the mere act of putting the cigarette to his lips comforted Ana.

“So.”

Ana took another drag, then cut his eyes at Kep and raised an eyebrow. “So?”

“So is she the one you’ve been looking for?”

Another long puff. Then he ground the smoke into the brick, wiped the ashes away with a handkerchief, and wrapped up the cigarette to put into his pocket. Over the years he had become an expert at leaving no trace of his presence behind.

“Oh yes,” Ana said.

“Good. She’s cute.”

“I hardly see how that matters.”

“Sure you don’t.” Ana felt rather than saw Kep’s grin as the boy released his amber-colored wings in a rustling flurry of feathers. “Wow, I can’t believe you’ve found your final task, after all these years.” A pause. “What about the Director, Ana?”

“I will tell Scio.” Ana turned to face the wall and hissed at the sharp, quick stab of pain between his shoulder blades. “But not yet.” Then they were both in the air.

Below, the two officers had already forgotten about the tall man and goofy boy, or that they had anyone to search for at all.

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It was the end of an abnormally warm spring. The days had been consistently humid during the week, with the nights cool enough for a light jacket but not chilly enough to raise goose bumps along bare arms. Most of the trees had already finished blooming and a thick canopy of green blanketed the branches of the large oaks that lined the sidewalks and crowded buildings of the central campus.

The girl adjusted her backpack across her shoulders and inhaled a deep breath of the cooler evening air as she made the ten minute walk across campus back to her dorm. Ana had been
watching her since she had gone inside for her rather late general chemistry class. He had lounged in
the shadows of the building, out of the notice of the other students milling about but from a vantage
point where he could wait for the girl to emerge again. Now he followed her from a comfortable
distance.

She tilted her head back, eyes sliding closed, and breathed deeply again. Anagnorisis kept
back a smile at her behavior that had grown familiar to him. He knew she reveled in the change of
seasons, the visible shift of the present into the past. She had been taking trips out to the swings in
the park near the campus almost daily. She would push off the ground with her toes and lean back to
let the wind slant through her brown hair.

Her first year of college was drawing to a close. She had just finished her last final, and the
bounce in her step told Ana that she had done well. Her success didn’t surprise him; he’d watched
her study until late into the night on more than one occasion, until even he – someone who didn’t
need sleep – was yawning with her.

Ana had been watching every movement of this girl for weeks, studying her for months, and
been searching for her likeness for decades. He hadn’t lied to Kepzelet a week ago when he’d said
that he had finally found the right person, but he understood Kep’s hesitation to believe him. The
others of their kind knew Ana for his slowness, the way he glided through the years as though the
passage of time made no difference to him – and in the long run, it didn’t. But when he was sure
about something, he vibrated with the knowledge of it. He was sure that this girl was the right one.

“This is it,” he’d told Kep earlier that morning. “I am going to reveal myself tonight.”
Kep blinked. “Wouldn’t this afternoon be better? So she can see you in the full light?”

“No at all. She likes the stars.”

The girl continued her walk toward the dorm, and Ana slid around the corner of the building
as she passed. Before, he had never let her see him, not only because contact with humans had to be
done with the utmost caution, but because he’d been afraid that their eyes would meet and he would
feel nothing. He had invested too much time in this girl to be disappointed once again with a task that
would remain just that – a task.

However, the moment for hiding was over. When the girl began walking up the stone steps
to go inside her dormitory, Ana moved away from the wall, attracting her attention. Her startled
green eyes lifted to his face and widened, and Ana didn’t move any closer in case he frightened her.
But she didn’t react with fear. Instead she took a single step forward, and a grin lit up her plain
features.
Ana leaned back against the wall beyond her view and presently heard her enter the dorm. He lit a cigarette, though he didn’t put it between his lips. This was the first choice she had to make, to come back outside and find him. It was the easiest of the three. He rested his head against the cool stone and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long.

Hearing the door open, he glanced around the corner. She wasn’t alone this time. Another girl with blonde hair clutched at her arm in a clingy best friend way. “Look at the sky, Celie. Isn’t it beautiful?”

The blonde girl named Celie nodded. “It is, but why’d you bring me out here?”

“To show you someone, if he’s still here.”

Taking that as his cue, Ana climbed over the porch railing, staying far enough away that the dim light bulb hanging over the door didn’t touch his dark clothes and hair. The movement was enough to capture the first girl’s attention, though Celie remained oblivious to his presence. He knew he shouldn’t reveal himself now, not to someone who would always remain just a human, but the girl he wanted had brought her friend to him for a reason he hadn’t yet figured out.

“It is beautiful,” he agreed, aloud.

Both girls turned as he emerged fully into the dim light. He noted that Celie’s eyes immediately glazed over when she saw him, and he knew she would forget about him as soon as he left. The girl he had come for, however, met his eyes with ease and held his gaze steadily.

He stepped a bit closer, his calve-high boots clunking on the old stone of the porch. The girl smiled at him, and he held back his own. He needed to keep his emotional distance from her for as long as he could. He watched as her attention shifted to the half-powdered cigarette balanced between his left thumb and forefinger, and she made a small dismayed face.

“A bad habit anyway,” he said, grunting to himself. He put it out on the railing and wiped away the ashes, then tucked the but into a pocket. A stray breeze ruffled his bangs, and he brushed them aside. He moved even closer. “You like the sky?” he asked, though he knew the answer already.

The girl looked back up at the darkening down-turned bowl of atmosphere. Night was beginning to settle around them, the sky a dark indigo fading into a light blue as it merged with the city glow. “Yes,” she said. “I love it very much.”

“Why?”

“It’s the only thing that’s constant. It’s always going to be there, no matter where I am.” She seemed like she was going to say more, but Ana cut her off, smooth and musing:
“You’ve always had a special connection with it, though you are not sure why or exactly what that is.”

“Y-yes.”

Ana held out his hand to her, a subtle unfolding of long, slender fingers. “I can show you more.” It was the second choice she had to make, to take his hand and follow him away from the life she had now.

“Let’s go back inside,” Celie said. “I’m chilly.”

The brown-haired girl hushed her. She stared up at Ana, and he let a little of his true nature free, hoping she would see it but from past experience expecting she wouldn’t. His grey eyes and black physique melted into the wooded darkness beyond, his skin pale against the moonlight. His long coat snagged on a gust of wind and seemed to struggle to free itself from his shoulders. The shadow of his coat rippled along the side of the dormitory. The sides of his shadow shifted and stretched out like wings, like he had lifted his arms, though he stood in the same casual position, having made no detectable movement. Then the shadow across the wall had returned to normal as if nothing happened.

“Go back inside without me,” the girl told Celie.

“It’s dark,” Celie said. Her voice shook and she edged toward the door.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” the brown-haired girl said.

*No, you will not,* Ana thought but didn’t say aloud.

Celia nodded and closed the door quickly behind her. Soon, Ana could hear her laughing with some other girls inside, having already forgotten what had just happened.

“We’re alone now,” the girl said.

Had she brought her friend outside to show him how much she wanted this? That she was willing to leave everything she had behind? Ana remembered not caring that anyone shared his experience of leaving the human world behind. Nor had his previous tasks thought to include anyone else. The fact that this girl had wanted to show a human friend what would soon be forgotten anyway astonished him.

Ana shook his head and ran a hand through his messy bangs. “Come, then,” he said.

Turning, he walked down the stairs, not glancing over his shoulder to see if she followed. He felt her watching his dark form melt into the night-cast trees. His sharp words helped her to believe that he cared nothing about her decision, that if she didn’t follow he would simply continue walking to wherever he was going or wherever he came from. He needed to ensure that she did this without any pressure from him.
The grass cushioned Ana’s feet, thick from a rain that had occurred a few days ago. He heard footsteps behind him, and the girl quickened her pace to catch up. Neither spoke as she came to his side. Once they approached the woods looming jaggedly against the sky, other noises cut through the silence, insects loudly proclaiming their existence and nocturnal animals rustling in the brush. Ana ignored the eerie, unseen companions. The girl shied away from the unseen animals, brushing his arm in an attempt for comfort and getting none. Not yet.

They plunged forward into the wooded thicket until Ana stopped at a clearing. He assessed their surroundings, convincing himself that they would not be disturbed, and turned toward the girl. She looked up at him, her face more guarded than it had been before. However, he didn’t see confusion in her eyes like he had seen in some of his previous tasks.

Keeping his face blank, Ana shrugged off his coat and draped it neatly across a tree limb. Nimble fingers rose to his shirt collar, swiftly unlatching the glinting buttons.

Just as quickly, the girl stumbled away from him, emitting a gasp.

Ana’s head snapped up and his hands paused. “Fear will only blur your mind at this point,” he said.

“I’m not frightened!” She spread her hands and smoothed her skirt. In the dim light of dusk, a flush appeared along her cheeks. “I just didn’t want to get hit.”

True surprise made Ana suck in a sharp breath. “You know?” he asked thickly. How could she know so much, despite the fact that he had told her nothing?

“Yes,” she whispered, dropping her gaze. “I saw it in your shadow earlier. I didn’t mean to.”

Ana rubbed the back of his neck. He let corners of his mouth lift into a smile. Other tasks had felt that something new and grand was approaching, but none of them had ever known it took the shape of wings. He had thought that she had just seen shadows. “Never has this happened to me.”

“I– I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” he said, flashing a pair of white teeth. “I am thrilled, actually, to finally find you.”

“Yes.” His hands flew, even quicker than before, to the buttons. His black shirt joined his coat on the outstretched branch and he stood tall before her, solemn once again. Ana concentrated, sucked in a hiss of pain, and from between his shoulders shot two broad wings.

The girl stumbled back as the wings spread to their full lengths, each slightly shorter than he was tall. White feathers tipped in dark blue ran along the top edges and the bottom halves were thin-ribbed vanes resembling something like the dark grey wing of a bat. A few feathers had been
wrenched loose during the fierce exit of the wings and now they fluttered to the ground. One landed on the girl’s shoulder. She pulled the feather down and lightly ran her fingers up the quill.

“You’re beautiful.”

He scoffed, crossing his bare arms. “You are not seeing.”

“But aren’t the wings your soul?”

“No.” Fingers lifted an invisible cigarette to his mouth and then quickly lowered once he realized what he was doing.

“But...” She frowned and let a gust of wind snatch the stray feather from her loose grip. “I don’t understand.”

“Your eyes are seeing what they want to see, not what is really there.” Ana stretched his wings so that the arching expanses delved over his shoulders and brushed hers. “Look.”

“I still think you’re beautiful.”

Ana covered his face with a hand as he sighed. Between his index and middle fingers, he peered down at the girl. “I have been called many things and never beautiful.”

“But isn’t that what you are?” she asked. “A creature from both above and below, day and night, neither good nor bad? You try to live both existences and fill each void, just like I try to live as every normal girl but I can also look at you without being scared. Isn’t that why your wings are like that?”

He stared at her through his fingers. “Beautiful,” he said. His light and dark wings fanned the air behind him, shedding a couple feathers. Then he let loose a chuckle. “The wings aren’t your soul, but they do reveal something of your character. You catch on quickly.” In his excitement, he stepped forward and embraced the girl. Her hands flittered along his back before settling on the waistline of his pants. She leaned into him. He felt warm, flushed, heated by the forgotten passion and belief the girl had awakened within him. She had already surpassed his hopes.

Then his nimble fingers tugged at the nape of her neck, at her dress’s zipper, and she shoved backward, eyes wide. Ana’s throat constricted; he willed his face to open and return her searching gaze. His hands clutched her shoulders, awaiting the command to either stay or flee. This was the third choice, the hardest and the final one that would mark her as connected to him forever.

The girl’s lips parted, then closed, then parted again. Squeezing her eyes shut, she fisted her hands and crushed her face against his chest. She shuddered once and relaxed, breathing a damp sob that caressed his skin. Giving her time, he acquiesced and merely stroked her brown hair.

Presently, he again let his fingers drift down to the zipper. “You cannot be afraid.”

“I’m not. I’m just wondering why me? I can’t understand why you’re giving this to me.”
“Many humans have the ability to become Winged inside them, but few ever get the chance. I have chosen you because your ability shone the brightest of all I have seen.”

“I’ve . . . had dreams before,” she said. “Does that have something to do with it?”

Ana chuckled. “The dreams are normal. We all have them. I myself have had some of you, of your university and of these woods. And now they are coming true.” He dragged the zipper downward, parting her dress, revealing bare skin. Gently, he led them both to the ground. “Just breathe,” he said. He ran his forefinger up her spine, bumped over the tiny lumps, and stopped between her shoulder blades. He shifted so both hands rested on that spot and pressed.

The girl choked out a wet sob as pain laced hotly across her back. He knew it felt just as it had for him, so long ago, as though something under the skin was struggling to set itself free. She collapsed, lurching forward.

Something was wrenched out of Ana, violently torn from inside him. He grasped the girl’s shoulders with one arm to keep her from falling completely to the ground. His other hand he pressed to his mouth to stave off rising nausea. He had never felt like this before when he had tasked the previous eight people. He wondered, briefly, if it had to do with the fact that she was his final task.

Then the nausea faded, and, like with all his previous tasks, he was inside her head. His thoughts turned clouded and murky with confusion, as though he couldn’t separate her from himself, and he became lost in her. Glimpses of sunshine within his vision of her momentarily blinded him, his eyes used to the darkness of the woods. He caught snatches of blooming trees, and the sounds of rustling leaves were replaced with the bubbling laughter of children and the creaking of metal swings. Then he saw her standing by a wooden swing seat painted blue and saw what happened after that. He caught a glimpse of her future, and he knew he could never tell anyone else.

The visions were not one-sided. As their minds were stuck together and he could witness her vision of him, she saw a young man about her own age. He was tall and elegant, long hair neatly bound at his neck, and he wore clothes fashioned like those of a past century. Faceless people milled closely about him yet never quite touched his outstretched hand or arm. She felt his sadness, his barely-contained panic and loneliness. She saw his glistening tears.

Ana’s hands brought her back to herself, tender but insistent. “Stop it,” he said, and was able to keep his voice from cracking. “Stop it at once and listen to me. You must stretch them out.”

“What do you mean?” She tried to stand and almost tipped over because of a foreign weight on her back. A shadow enveloped the two of them – Ana’s wings were tucked carefully behind him – and she panicked, clutching his arms. The shadow flapped and she yelped in pain.

“Easy,” he said. “You’ll hurt yourself if you continue. Look.”
She turned her head, cheek resting on his chest to see the edge of a wing. The feathers were white at the fuzzy ends, fading into a deep piercing blue at the tips, similar to Ana’s own coloring. She twisted to get a better look but the wing followed her movement and she sucked in a hissing breath. “W-what?”

“They are your wings,” Ana said, smiling. “I will help you.”

“Mine?” She slumped against him. Ana ran his hands through her downy feathers, traveled his fingers up and across as he straightened the soft ridges and loosened cramped muscles that hadn’t existed a moment ago.

“Now you are one of us – one of the Winged. I will explain everything in time.” He fell silent, then lightly touched the sensitive skin between her shoulder blades. “What you saw was myself, before someone found me.”

“Like you found me?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t tell anyone what I saw,” she said. “Not if you don’t want me to.”

He gave a wry smile. “That is your choice. Others have heard snippets about my past life before, but generally we don’t discuss such things. When we gain our wings, we become who we were meant to be – our true selves. Our human lives no longer matter.” He straightened out a few more of her feathers, secretly pleased that her wings had turned out completely covered in feathers unlike his own. “Your exhaustion will start to settle in soon, so I will teach you how to fly later.”

She brightened at the thought of flying, as he knew she would. “I noticed that you didn’t have your wings out at first. We can make them go away?”

“We can. It only takes a little concentration, a little wishing. I will help you.” He laid his hands on each of her wings near the place where they met her back, and sent the mental command for them to vanish.

Wrapping her arms about herself, she winced as the wings were sucked back into her body. Will they always hurt?”

“Yes, when they come in and out, though you become used to it. Positive and negative – like you said earlier.” He arched his back, and the two great shadows of his wings streaked across the tree-broken sky. Then his wings were gone as well, sealed inside the tiny pockets where they hid, dormant, and he was once again only a man with an invisible cigarette held between his thumb and forefinger.
The girl adjusted her rumpled attire as she stood, keeping her head lowered. “Who are you?” she whispered. When she looked up, he had closed the distance between them, already dressed in his shirt and coat.

His lips curved in a thin smile. “You need to sleep,” he said. He lifted his hands and cupped her face, marveling at the tears that stained her skin. Some of his previous tasks had wept before, but the sight still amazed him.

“At least tell me your name,” she said and reached for him. He let her cling to his shirt, let himself brush those brown locks and hold her tight. She pressed her face closer to the roughness of his shirt, and his breath stirred the hairs on the top of her head.

“Anagnorisis. My name is Anagnorisis.”

“Such an odd name,” she said. “Where’d you get it?”

“I will show you,” he promised. “I will show you everything.”

She blinked rapidly, the usual exhaustion he expected beginning to overcome her. Finally, her legs crumpled and he gently lowered her to the ground. “Ana,” she murmured. “Your vision of me?”

He dearly wished she hadn’t asked. He couldn’t do anything but lie. “I saw a girl surrounded by people who will become her family. You were standing near a swing, one with a blue seat. I saw your future, and a bright one it will become.” He nearly choked on the words. He brushed a few strands of hair from her forehead. “Rest easy. I will be near when you wake.”

“Ana . . .”

“Sleep,” he coaxed. “Sleep.” And she did.
CHAPTER TWO

The university was having one of its many come-see-what-we’re-all-about days, where prospective students could follow around an upperclassman and listen to all the great reasons to get sucked into that particular cult of learning. The seventeen-year-old boy had gotten good at tuning out whatever the tour guide had to say – their opinions were always biased by money and school spirit anyway.

Instead he liked to listen to the other high schoolers attempt to bond with each other around him. He’d decided months ago that he wouldn’t base his college decision on the institution, focusing his attention on the people who’d share his freshman class. He could manage to avoid the social scene easily enough, but he couldn’t afford a private room with his part-time job and meager scholarships.

So far he hadn’t had any luck. He’d rejected the first university because some kid suggested they start up a Frisbee club since the school didn’t have one. The second college was an instant reject as soon as some dumbass in the back asked his mother if she’d remembered to pack his dehumidifier for the hotel room. He just couldn’t risk getting stuck in a cramped dorm room with someone he’d soon want to smother with a pillow.

A quick breeze pushed long strands of his blonde hair into his face. Annoyed, he quickly pulled his hair back with a black band off his wrist.

“So you are a guy.”

He glanced at the high school senior that’d spoken. “Fuck off.”

The girl shrugged. “I was just looking for some confirmation. Sorry if I hit a nerve.”

“You’re not the first.” He intended to move closer to one of the other groups of students to see what he could overhear, when the girl leaned over.

“Wanna hear a freaky story?”

He grunted without commitment either way. Sure, why not? He didn’t think she’d leave him alone even if he said no.

“I heard the guide talking to one of the parents about it earlier,” the girl said. “Turns out a student vanished a few days ago from one of the dorms. But that’s not the weirdest part. The thing is that no one can remember who she was – who she was friends with, what classes she took, where she was from, nothing. They just figured she dropped out, but people are starting to talk.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice as though letting him in on a conspiracy. “I say they’re making this up to scare us into being good little scholars. I don’t think she ever existed.”

“Would it matter if she had?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.
“Wouldn’t it?”
“I dunno.” The girl eventually joined the rest of the group as they continued on with the tour, but he slipped away. He’d made his decision to attend this university. Tales of vanished girls were vaguely interesting, and he hoped there were more secrets to keep him entertained. Besides, the subs at the food court had been tasty enough.

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That night, the boy tossed about in his bed, unable to sleep. The squeaky springs of his thin mattress kept digging into his ribs, and a neighbor’s dog wouldn’t shut up. He tried tucking a pillow over his head, but that just made him hot and angrier.

He rolled out of bed and flipped on a light, which cast long shadows across the bare floor of his bedroom. His feet were cold; they were always cold in this drafty hell hole of an apartment. Pacing over to the kitchen, he poured a glass of water and downed the stuff that tasted of dirt and metal. When the neighbor’s dog starting barking again, he hurled the glass against the far wall. It clunked loudly against the plaster, then shattered when it hit the floor.

Seconds later, he could hear voices through the thin walls. He snorted, his anger abated. Good. At least he wasn’t the only one awake anymore.

Careful to avoid the broken glass, he crawled back into bed. This time he put on headphones and cranked the jazz loud enough to drown out the other sounds.

Sometime during the night, he began to dream. He dreamt of a swing with its blue wooden seat rocking back and forth in a solid wind. The rusty chains creaked on their hinges. He moved closer, and saw that even though the swing continued to move in a steady rhythm, it was empty. He glanced about but no one was around. He was alone in the playground.

“She will come for you, Revelation,” said a voice from behind him.
He spun around but no one was there. “Who said that?”
“She will come, and you will tell her yes.”
“She?” He balled his hands into fists. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”
“Tell her yes, Revelation. Do it, and I will give you what you will want.”
“And what’s that?”
The voice chuckled. “A point to your life, of course.”
The wind changed direction and blew his long hair across his shoulders. Then there were feathers – white, gray, and black ones. His vision was swallowed whole by them.
He woke up to the sound of buzzing in his ears. The CD had finished playing, and now he heard only static. As he came back to the waking world, his back began to itch. He scratched at it,
and suddenly it blossomed into fiery pain that licked up toward his neck. He stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom, oblivious for the moment that the sole of one foot was now bleeding from the broken glass he hadn’ t cleaned up. He twisted so he could see his back in the mirror.

Two streaks of red darkened the skin between his shoulder blades.

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Ana strode quickly out of the main housing complex in Colonia, the city of the Winged. The fires lighting his path were dim, having burned down over the night, but Ana found his way easily through the narrow passageway that led to the library. He was old enough to remember when the first stones of the library, the oldest building in Colonia, had been mortared together. He could probably make his way through the tightest of corridors here without the use of his eyes.

A high stone wall encased their small community nestled among pine trees, though they didn’t need it to keep out the humans that sometimes hiked this mountain. When they had first built the wall, Ana had wondered if it was meant to keep others out or keep them in, or if it was just a reminder of how separated they were from the rest of the world. Either way, Ana had long stopped trying to understand some of the decisions the Director, Scio, had made throughout the decades.

The other buildings forming Colonia spiraled out from the library in the center. While housing mainly took up the area to the west between the library and the wall, other smaller groups of rooms were situated across Colonia. Oftentimes someone wanted to live closer to their particular hobby, so they chose living quarters near their art studio or beside the stream that flowed through a corner of the community. Ana liked simplicity, so he had chosen to live in the regular housing complex, his room only big enough for a thin bed, rickety desk, and rusty sink in the corner – enough for him.

His footsteps were almost silent on the packed dirt between buildings as he walked. Several of the Winged had been installing a stone walkway from the two-story housing building along the west wall to the library located in the center of Colonia, but the rain of the past few days had made the ground too muddy to work with. Judging from the feel of the dirt right now, Ana was sure they would be back to work as soon as the sun had risen.

Tonight, everyone should have been asleep. While they usually did not require more than a few hours sleep every week, they had been so busy on spring repairs that a full night’s rest had been suggested to prevent fatigue from creeping up on them. Ana hadn’t spoken to anyone since he had returned with the girl a half hour ago, not even Kep who had been fast asleep despite his insistence earlier to be the first to meet her.
Everyone should have been asleep, but they weren't. He heard Castigalia, a Winged a few years older than him, speak before he saw her muscular form step into the light of one of the torches.

"You really did it, Ana."
"So you heard?"

She shook her black curls and laid a dark hand against his cheek. "It is difficult for Kep to maintain any kind of secrecy. But even if he had not spread the word, we could all feel that this task was different from your previous ones. I wish you had told me."

"I had to be sure about her, Casi."
"And Scio?"

He withheld a wince. If he had told anyone about the girl, it should have been the Director, their undeclared leader that Ana had not spoken to since he had begun to watch the girl at the university. Previously Scio had been the one to assign the tasks to each of them, and they had always trusted him to pick the right ones. Ana still did trust him. However, the pull to this girl had been too great for Ana to ignore, and he had feared that Scio would not approve.

"Let me handle Scio," he told Casi.
"Do not run from him, my brother. If anyone could understand what you have gone through, it is the one who also went through it with you. Scio found his final task in you, Ana, when he did not find it in me, so he will understand that you have found yours within this girl. I just hope you have made the right choice."

"I know I have," Ana said firmly.

She gave a slight smile. "I can see in your face that you believe that." She leaned closer and pressed her lips to his cheek in a light, chaste kiss. "Do not fear Scio’s reaction to this good news. And I want to meet this girl as soon as she is named so I can welcome her into our people."

"Thank you."

Ana continued along the path toward the library. Casi had been a steady presence in his life ever since he met Scio all those years ago. He trusted the woman’s guidance and advice almost as much as he trusted Scio’s. He knew she was right that Scio would accept the girl as one of his own even though he had not directly chosen her.

Even so, Ana’s heart began to beat faster as he shrugged off his coat enough to bare his back. He released his wings in a stab of pain, and they shot through the slits in his shirt to fan out behind him. Immediately his head was filled with the strong presences of the Winged. These connections were even stronger if the others had their wings out as well, or if Ana was connected to a particular Winged through a link of tasking. They couldn’t transmit thoughts through this link, but it was useful
in locating one another or deciphering if someone was in trouble or hurt. Of all the Winged in Colonia, the Director was the only one that Ana couldn't sense.

Ana knew very little about Scio despite their connection through tasking. He had seen only fragments in the visions generated when Scio had tasked him, had brought out his wings and turned him into a Winged: a glimpse of a man bent over a writing desk, the shadowed faces of two children, and not much more. Scio kept his thoughts and emotions tucked inward tighter than any other person Ana had met since, even tighter than Ana usually kept his own. Of all of the Winged in Colonia, the Director was the only one that Ana couldn't sense. He suspected that it was because of Scio’s age; it must have taken centuries to learn how to hide his energy like that.

Though Scio had denied becoming their official leader, they still considered him to fill such a role within their little community. He was the one they turned to for comfort and support, and he was also the one who usually picked their tasks. So when Scio protested the title of the Director, his request fell on deaf ears. The name stuck and had been used ever since. If Scio wouldn’t be their leader, he would at least be the Director of their lives.

He couldn’t sense Scio, but he knew that the Director could usually be found in the library. Ana flapped his wings and swept into the air. Each floor of the library was ringed with balconies that had doors without any locks. Most Winged used these balconies to get around the library, even though there was a spiral staircase inside they could also use.

Ana landed on one of the balconies, pulled in his wings, and closed the glass door behind him. The room inside was dim since most of the lights were out. Electric lights had replaced the torches which lit most of the other buildings in Colonia after an unfortunate fire accident destroyed half of the old European maps on the sixth floor. A section of the floor had collapsed, causing the death of one of Ana’s older tasks. Ana noticed that a section of lights was turned on and followed them into a separate section of the room.

He found Scio bent over a large volume, the yellowed pages cracked and brittle along the edges of the book. Scio didn’t look up as he approached, his clear eyes reading across the page as a bony finger traced the words. Scio had been tasked at a young age, as all of them had, but he had an old feeling about him. His hair had been golden when Ana first met him, and now it had bleached white over the years. His face held a few wrinkles – shallow lines across his forehead, creases at the corners of his lips – that Ana suspected came from the stress of building Colonia from the ground up and not from age.

The word “master” was on the tip of Ana’s tongue, but he swallowed it. He had not called Scio that since his early years as a Winged when he had followed Scio around like a lost duckling.
After they had struck ground at Colonia, Scio had asked him to stop with all the formalities. Ana still felt like he should call out that unused word or bend to one knee, but instead he stood there in silence, arms limp at his sides.

After a moment, Scio finished reading the page, turned to the next, and looked up. “Come here,” he said, his voice not as hard as Ana expected.

Ana took a step forward, but only a step. “This girl is my final task. I know you had others lined up for me, but I’ve finally found who I have been searching for since I became a Winged. If you only met her, I’m sure you would agree.”

“I am sure I would.” Scio rose to his feet and crossed the final distance between them. “I felt her tasking like a bright light in my mind. Surely you have made a wise choice, even without my counsel.”

“Director—”

Scio raised a hand to silence him. “Have you seen the title of the book I am reading?” He held up the leather-bound book. Ana didn’t need to read the title to know it concerned him. Every Winged had mini histories written about themselves, mostly concerning their lives after their tasking. Ana’s contained a chapter on his life before tasking, mainly because Scio had been the one to write it.

“I have not seen that book in a long time,” Ana said quietly.

Scio laid the book on the table and spread open its pages. “You ought to pick it up every few years. No Winged should forget his past, no matter how long he has been human. I very much remember the young man of twenty-two who tried to have me thrown out of the University library.”

Ana winced at the memory. “I was too headstrong. I had no consideration for those around me.” Kep would’ve laughed if he had been around then. The red-haired Winged was constantly trying to drag Ana off on some new adventure outside Colonia walls, saying that Ana never liked to have any fun. Few Winged still living in their city were old enough to remember the person Ana had once been.

Ana’s demeanour had been quite different back then. As a boy growing up, he had resisted leaving the private academy he’d attended since age six to seek his fortune as a wine merchant at the insistence of his family. As a young man, he had protested becoming part of a market made up of bachelors, maidens, and the pressure to find a wife before his father passed away. Certainly, being an only child had heightened that pressure. He had not wanted to get married, not then, not without even knowing the woman.

After Scio came and took all those possibilities away, Ana had quickly abandoned the older man, heading off on his own with no purpose in mind. But after a few years of wandering on the
outskirts of human cities, he realized that he could no longer mingle among them. Those humans that he met quickly forgot about him, and it was impossible to form any sort of meaningful friendship.

It was a curse that soon became a blessing. Faced with an eternity spent alone, he had tracked down Scio at a Spanish harbor, who seemed to have known he'd return all along. Scio didn't force him onto that ship, and thus Ana had actually wanted to go with him. Ana had moved to the plot of American land in the mountains that would eventually become Colonia.

Up there, under the trees and stars and pure life, Ana found a new freedom away from changes over which he had no control. He could do as he wished, provided that he tasked new Winged, as was Scio's request. Though the Director had wanted him to task several Winged per year, Ana had grown picky in his selections. Over time he had settled into a comfortable pattern of tasking a new Winged once every few decades, a slowness that suited him.

Over time, however, the solitude of Colonia began to affect him. Younger Winged found their own paths, seeking others like them and gradually populating Colonia, and then drifting off to form their own small groups. Bands of Winged had formed all over the world, though none of them were as large as their own.

As he watched the younger Winged go about their lives, Ana began to feel old—old as in stale bread or rusty hinges. There were older Winged than him, surely, but they had been unorganized during his tasking, drifting about the world with a distilled sense of existing. Ana had met few of them; those who eventually found their way to Colonia had seemed detached from reality. Some of them had stayed to aid in the construction, while others had slowly faded into the past.

Scio's voice brought him back to the present. "You were headstrong, yes. While you have certainly mellowed through the years, as we usually do, the others are not so experienced yet. I fear your rather brash actions have triggered a movement within them. Already I anticipate that at least two among the youngest of us will come to me within a few turns of the sun, seeking permission to do as you have done and choose their own tasks."

Ana stiffened. "What will you tell them?"

"I wish that I could deny their wishes, but what can I do but give them what they ask for? I feel they would do what they desired even without my permission, no matter the consequences."

Ana didn't know what to say to that. He had hoped that things would continue as normal after he returned with the girl. If Scio already suspected that two Winged would come knocking at his door in the morning, how many more would gather up their courage and do the same in the future? Or perhaps they wouldn't bother going to Scio and, as Ana had done, would simply go out
into the world, alone, and bring back a tasked stranger. Until now, Scio had helped them in choosing their tasks; what would happen if he was no longer needed?

Ana cleared his throat. “Scio, I had no intention of letting others know of my actions. If there is anything I can say to them—”

Scio raised a hand to cut him off. “They would only think I had instructed you to do so. No, a watchful eye must be kept on everyone, but nothing more than that. Sometimes the pull of tasking is too strong for us to resist, and the final task is the strongest of all. How do you fair thus far?”

Ana raised a hand and clenched it into a fist. “I felt nauseous during the tasking, but since then I’ve felt little difference from before I tasked Epi. I expected to feel much different from before. Older, somehow.”

“In time, you will begin to feel older. Your appearance may begin to change, and you might not feel as connected to your fellow Winged as you once did.”

Ana frowned. “How long should I expect to wait?”

“Years. Sometimes decades. Though it has been over a century since I tasked you, I only began to feel the effects a few years ago.”

“That long?”

“Others have felt it sooner. Trust in me, my son — your time for peace of heart will come soon.” He stood and replaced the book on the shelf. “Now, promise me this one thing and I will forgive you of all the rest: bring the girl to me after she has chosen her new name so that I may meet her.”

“Of course, Director,” Ana said. He gave a bow, bade the old man good night, and left the room.

Ana had known few Winged to make their final task, and all of them had left Colonia soon after. Scio had always told him that afterward he would feel different from before, that he would cross over into the realm of understanding that only the eldest of them all had. The Director hadn’t been more specific than that, saying that Ana would eventually discover the truth on his own. Ana began to wish that he had someone other than Scio to talk to about this.

As he expected, Castigalia was waiting for him along the path back to housing. When he passed, she reached out and touched his arm. “Wait, Ana.”

“I didn’t ask for his forgiveness, but he gave it anyway.”

“You didn’t confide in him like he has always wanted. He must have been hurt by your deception.”

He pulled back from her touch. “I have always trusted him, Casi, you know this.”
“But still you tasked her on your own,” she said.”

“The force of the call to task her was unlike any I’ve felt before. Should I have ignored it, because Scio still had others he wanted me to task?”

“Perhaps you should be more open with him.” Casi gazed across the open courtyard that spread between the front of the library and the surrounding buildings. Blanketed with night, everything was unusually still and quiet. “And open with me,” she said.

He sighed and shook his head. “I have made a mess of this, haven’t I?”

“Once the girl becomes settled into her new life, I am sure things will settle back to normal around here.”

“As am I,” Ana said. “I feel a distance between me and everything else that I’ve never felt before.”

Casi touched his arm softly, but her next words cut deep. “Perhaps that is part of the reason all the others left Colonia after their last task.” She gave a small smile. “Get some rest, Ana. Tomorrow will be your busiest day yet.”

The gold circlet around her upper arm glittered in the lamp light as she turned away and left him alone on the sidewalk.
Ana waited until the sun had fully risen and dusted the tops of the trees with yellow before he dressed and left his room. He headed down the hallway and climbed the stairs to the second floor of the two-story housing complex. He could hear others among his people beginning to stir.

Stopping before a door at the end of the hallway, he raised a hand and lightly knocked. He expected the occupant to still be asleep, so he was surprised and also delighted when he opened the door. The girl sat in a chair pulled next to the window, her knees tucked up near her chin, eyes gazing at the rising sun. Her small form was enveloped by golden rays.

“Morning,” he said, smiling.

“How are you feeling?”

She stretched her arms above her head and took a deep breath. “Warm inside.”

“That happens when you sit in the sun.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in the main housing complex of Colonia, the home of the Winged. There are at least a thousand of us throughout the world, but roughly one hundred twenty live in Colonia itself at any one time.”

She lifted a hand and tapped a finger against Ana’s nose, making him blink. “One thing at a time, if you would. The Winged?”

“The Winged are people with wings, who once were humans. I am a Winged, and now so are you. We are created through a process called tasking, when we share part of ourselves with humans in order to release their wings. Since you are my final task, I have given you all that I had left to share.” He paused, and decided to plunge forward. “We no longer consider ourselves human. We do not have to eat, though we still enjoy the taste of food. And our appearances usually do not age over time, though the oldest of us sometimes show a few changes.”

The girl was silent for so long that he started to become fearful about her reaction, but then she only nodded. “I can’t ever go back, can I?”
"I apologize for my bluntness, but those who knew you before wouldn’t remember you if you did. We remain separate from the humans in every way, even in memory.” He stood. “There are many things to tell you, but they can come later. For now, it is important that we make our way to the library. If you like, you can bathe first and change into some fresh clothes.”

“That would be nice.” She began to follow him, then stopped before the door. “Ana, I had a dream last night, one I think I should tell you about. It seemed so familiar.”

“Tell me.”

She folded her hands and stared down at the interlacing fingers. “I was on a playground, and there was a boy about my age who was swinging. I couldn’t see his face, but I got the feeling that I recognized him from somewhere. He had long blonde hair and wore flip-flops. I felt like I should do to him what you did to me – the tasking, you know.” She shook her head. “That’s all I can remember.”

Ana’s eyes widened, and he tried not to let the surprise show on his face. “Skies above.”

“What is it?” she asked, frowning. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No. I only . . . Never mind. The dream is nothing to worry about. We all have them.” He pointed her in the direction of the showers and explained that he would have clean clothes available when she was done. She gave him a puzzled look but didn’t say anything more.

Once she was gone, Ana leaned against the cool stone wall. How was it possible that she had already experienced her first tasking dream, the nightly visions that hinted at the next human a Winged should task? The girl hadn’t even chosen her new name, yet she was a step ahead of some of their youngest. If she kept having these dreams every night, Ana suspected that she might learn enough about this boy and his location to be able to find him within the week. Most new Winged took months before they were ready to start tasking their own.

Ana patted his coat pocket with a hand before he remembered that he had thrown away his cigarettes.

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The library was empty except for a few Winged lounging with open books among brightly colored pillows on the ground floor. The wrought-iron lanterns that dotted the walls were turned off since the day was sunny. Sunlight poured through the large glass doors that lined the walls. The girl was wide-eyed as Ana led her past shelves of books, some of the volumes stained with layers of dust from lack of use while others had spines cracked and falling apart from overhandling.
“Naming,” Ana explained as they began to climb the stairs, “is a process all Winged go through as a way to leave their old lives behind them. Most of us do not even know the previous names of our friends and acquaintances.”

“Don’t you ever get curious and ask?” the girl said.

“I never do. Who they were before they became a Winged doesn’t matter to me. As I see it, they have now become their true selves. Though, if you ever wanted to know, snippets about the human lives of various Winged are sometimes recorded in books here on the fourth floor.”

They stepped off the staircase and entered a room filled with low bookcase, each about three shelves high. Like the first floor, this room mainly contained large cushions for seating, with the occasional desk or high-backed armchair. Ana explained that because this floor contained the most information specifically about the Winged, it also housed several portraits. One of Ana’s older tasks, Sedatus, had painted them over the years. Pictures of themselves weren’t allowed – they could too easily fall into human hands – but Sedatus had taken it upon himself to record their faces on canvas. Ana gestured to a likeness of himself hanging on a far wall, taken during a period when he had let his black hair grow long.

Turning away from the paintings, Ana led her to a small room separate from the rest of the floor. A single wooden desk and chair stood in the middle of the room. The walls were completely bare. Pressed up against them was a row of thick books stretching twenty-six volumes long.

“Each volume covers one letter of the alphabet,” Ana said. “Names already taken or unavailable are marked through. There are brief definitions under each name, if you’re curious of the meaning.”

Leaning over, she touched her fingertips to the volume marked with a bold E. “I can tell you’ve given these informative speeches before, about Colonia and how everything works.”

“Admittedly, yes.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how many humans have you tasked?”

“Eight, before you. Only two of them still live here. One of them passed away in a fire, while the others have left to join other Winged groups. It’s a small amount for someone my age. But after a while you fall into a routine of explaining things over and over. I apologize if I sound bored.”

“Not at all,” she said, holding up her hands. “I just wondered. So, uh, I choose a name from one of these books?”

He nodded. “Any one you like. No one will disturb you while you’re in here. I will wait near the stairs until you are finished.”
As Ana walked back toward the center of the library, he heard a pecking sound on glass. He turned around to see Kep waving from a nearby balcony, his orange wings fanning out behind him. Then he glanced over his shoulder and took off around the curved side of the library. Moments later, a man with dark green wings jumped onto the balcony, giving chase. Ana shook his head in amusement. Sedatus always seemed to get roped into playing games with the energetic Kep no matter how much he protested. Ana was glad that two of his tasks had found close friends in each other.

Ana sat on the curved arm of a high-backed chair. He pulled books free from the shelves now and then, reading titles and sometimes the first pages. His mind was too focused on the naming to get distracted for more than a few seconds.

When the girl emerged about a half hour later, Ana dropped the book he had been browsing and rose to his feet. Her face was aglow with delight.

“My name is Epiphany,” she said.

Ana smiled. “Welcome, Epiphany. May I shorten it to Epi?”

She gave him a hug. “I’d like that.”

“You chose well,” he said. He looped an arm about her shoulders to guide her toward the nearest balcony. “You are the first of my tasks that has chosen a name similar in meaning to my own.”

“I’m honored,” she said and winked. “So what’s next?”

“Scio, our Director, wishes me to bring you to him for an introduction.” Ana swung open the balcony door, and fresh air eased into the room. “But I think we can squeeze in a quick flying lesson, don’t you?”

Her laughter was the most brilliant sound he had heard in a long time.

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Later that day, the thick smell of burning wood wafted in through Ana’s open window, carried across Colonia upon a cool night breeze. He sat at his low desk, flipping through a book but not really reading the pages.

Epiphany was quickly becoming everything he had hoped for in a final task, and he felt that he lit up whenever she walked into the room. He was still amazed at how quickly she had taken to the Winged way of life, though he couldn’t shake off the nagging concern he had about her dream. During her tasking, when their minds had connected, he had seen a swing that was somehow connected to her future. He worried that it might be the same one she had seen in her first tasking dream.
A knock rapped at his door, cutting into his thoughts. He ran a hand through his bangs.

"Enter."

Kep stuck in his head. "Come on, Ana. You're missing all the fun."

"I had not intended on joining in," he confessed.

"But you have to," Kep said, pouting. "Epi promised me a dance if I dragged you along." He grabbed Ana's sleeve and tugged. "Please? Just this once?"

Ana closed his book and pushed it aside. "Kep, when did you have your first tasking dream?"

"About three weeks after you found me, I think. Why?"

"No reason." Ana stood and pulled on his coat, though he would probably be too warm in it. "I will join you, but only for a moment."

Outside, Ana could see the glow of the bonfire beyond the high Colonia wall, and hear the beat of drums and sounds of other musical instruments. A thin layer of clouds was building across the dark sky, and the wind quickened its pace, signaling an approaching rain. Winged filtered in from various places across the grounds, smiles on their eager faces. Some carried torches to add to the pile of wood. When Ana flew over the wall and landed near the Winged gathered around the bonfire, he caught sight of Epi dancing in the golden firelight. Her brown hair caught the orange and red tones and seemed to shine. Kep laughed and linked arms with the girl, spinning her into a dizzying dance of stomping feet. She stumbled in the foreign dance steps, but her smile was still just as beautiful to Ana. At one point, she glanced up and caught his gaze, her brown eyes twinkling in the fiery glow. Yes, she was beautiful to him.

Ana stuck his hands in his pockets and lingered on the edge of the crowd, not really one to join in such social events.

"She seems happy," Casi said, joining him. She had changed out of her usual attire of leather leggings and a sleeveless shirt into a loose-flowing green dress. Her black hair was held back from her face with a golden comb.

"Yes, she does," Ana agreed. "You look nice tonight."

She raised an eyebrow. "A compliment, Ana? I am both flattered and suspicious."

"As well you should be," he said, lips twitching into a half smile.

"All right, I suppose I am flattered enough to give you what you want. I was there when Epi went to speak with Scio for the first time today. The Director had me cleaning up some of the older books a few aisles away. I attempted not to overhear their conversation... too much."

"I trust it went well?"
“As I knew it would. Ana, you had no cause to worry. Scio greeted her with warmth and fully welcomed her as one of us. Epi seemed quite at ease around him, too, even revealing her first tasking dream to him.”

“What?” Ana jerked back. “But she had no idea what the dream entailed.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“I didn’t want to confuse her with thoughts of tasking her own humans only moments after she became a Winged herself. Why would she volunteer this information to a stranger?”

Casi gave a short laugh. “The Director is hardly a stranger to her. She’s connected to him, even if it’s only through you. Besides, he already knew about the dream, so I thought you had told him earlier.”

“I did no such thing.” Ana grasped her bare shoulders. “What did he say about it?”

“They moved into another room, so I couldn’t hear anymore after that. Ana, he wouldn’t send her off for her first task right now anyway, not so soon.”

“But for her to have her first dream already . . .” He sighed. “You are right.”

“Easy, my brother. Your overprotective nature is showing again.”

Laughter drew their attention back to the party. Kep led a group of younger Winged in a dancing line around the bonfire. Others were spinning through the air, their wings keeping them just above the treetops. The clouds had thickened overhead, drowning out the stars. A few drops of rain dampened Ana’s forehead.

When he couldn’t find his newest task among the crowd, Ana pulled Kep aside. “Where is Epi?”

Kep shrugged. “She said she was tired. I think she went back to her room.”

“I will check on her and see that she is well.” Releasing his wings hurt as usual, but Ana was too focused on getting back to housing to let the stinging slow him down. He tried not to hurry too much, not wanting to make anyone worry, but he needed to locate Epi as soon as he could to ease his own mind.

He alighted on the porch lining the east side of the housing complex. Along the way to Epi’s room, he met few Winged since most of them were outside beyond the wall. The clunk of his boots echoed down the hallway. He knocked twice on Epi’s door before turning the knob and opening it.

She wasn’t inside. A brief glance inside her closet revealed that the extra sets of clothing Ana had given her were also missing. His chest tightened and breathing evenly became difficult.
The night became alive with the sound of rain moving in across Colonia. Soon Ana could hear excited voices as Winged dashed back indoors. He moved to the open window and shut the thin glass pane. The rain became a distant roar.

“I’ll meet you at the north wall,” Kep said to someone from down the hallway. “There’re some great puddles formin’ there.” He passed by Epi’s room, leaving wet footprints along the way, then backed up to wave at Ana. “Did you find Epi? I wanna see if she’ll come, too.”

“She is gone,” Ana said.

“She is gone?”

He didn’t want to say it aloud, but he couldn’t think of any other possibilities. “To find her first task. Where that is, I do not know.”

Kep squeezed water from his hair into the sink. “She’s only been here a day.”

“Scio must have thought she was ready and encouraged her.” Ana stared at the rivulets of moisture beading down the window. “But why so soon?”

“I’m sure the Director knows what he’s doing.”

“Yes,” Ana said, straightening his shoulders and forcing himself to relax. “I know he must. Kep, take this as a lesson in tasking. Always follow your inner feelings when you start to feel a new task, but also remember that Scio has lived far longer than any of us. His advice is worthy of taking.”

He only wished he could believe his own words. He had no choice but to seek out the Director and discover what was really going on.

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The boy tucked his long blonde hair behind his ears and glared down at the kid who had just run full speed into his leg. The brat scrubbed at a runny nose and scrambled away without so much as an apology. Around him, many more half-sized people were climbing over various pieces of playground equipment. Their screams and giggles grated on his nerves.

He really needed to find another job before his first semester of college began at the end of summer. Every afternoon he had to cross this small park to reach the convenience store on the other side where he worked evenings and nights. No matter how close he stayed to the outer ridge of the park, he still couldn’t drown out the sounds of happiness.

Perhaps things would change once he moved into his dorm room on the other side of town. He’d quit this crappy job as soon as he found something to do on campus that either gave him more than ten hours a week or didn’t involve handling raw meat.

He paused to kick aside a paper McDonald’s cup. When he looked back up, he noticed a girl about his age standing between two swings. The children on the swings didn’t seem to notice her. If
they did, they certainly didn’t care if they hit her as they swept back and forth in the air. She had brown hair and brown eyes, and he felt like he recognized her, though he’d never seen her before.

“Hello.” They were standing on opposite sides of the playground, but her soft voice made its way over to him as if she’d spoken directly into his ear. “Don’t be afraid.”

He scoffed and scratched at an itch between his shoulders. “I need more sleep,” he muttered, and continued walking. The memory of his dream last night tugged at his thoughts – one of those swings had been blue – but he brushed it aside.

Once he had crossed the playground, he looked back. The girl was gone.

He arrived five minutes late to work, just in time to see Fred Dower, the owner of Fred’s Kuik Market, put the finishing touches on the following week’s time schedule. Fred was a short bearded man with a belly nearly as large as his temper. When he saw the boy enter, he tossed over a red apron.

“Hurry up. We’ve got a spill on the third aisle.”

The boy glanced at the work schedule. “I told you already. I don’t do mornings.”

“You do tomorrow,” Fred said. “Marsha is down with the flu, and Champ can’t walk around and straighten shelves with his broken foot.”

“I’m not waking up that early. Find someone else.”

Fred used the edge of his sweat-stained sleeve to wipe off the counter. “Look, either you show up tomorrow morning or you don’t show up ever again. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.” The boy dumped the apron in the garbage can near the front. “Good luck hiring someone else desperate enough to take this job.” He slammed his palm against the glass door and stalked out onto the sidewalk. Once he had walked a block, he leaned heavily on the wall of a nearby building. Then he spun on his heel and punched the brick. His knuckles throbbed.

“Well, that was a dumbass thing to do,” he said aloud.

Scuffing his way to a bench near the playground, he slumped with his elbows on his knees. A couple of kids kicked around a soccer ball close enough that he knew he’d get hit eventually, but he didn’t care to move. He had twenty bucks crumpled inside his wallet and bills to pay next week. Quitting his job was the last thing he should’ve done.

“Are you all right?”

He looked up and saw the brown-haired girl who had been standing near the swings earlier. Her knee-length skirt ruffled in the light breeze, and she smoothed it down with her hands. Her eyebrows were drawn together.

“I don’t enjoy being followed,” he said.
She tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear. “You seemed distressed, and I wondered if I could help.” She gave a small smile. “My name is Epiphany, but you can call me Epi.”

He snorted. “What was your mother on at the time?”

“My mother didn’t give me this name,” she said, her smile slipping a little. “And you don’t have to give me yours. I already know who you are.”

“Right.” He stood, hands in his pockets. “Stop following me.” He began to walk away, but she spoke again.

“You’ve had dreams, haven’t you? Dreams like I used to have. You recognized me earlier—I saw it in your face. If you want to find out more, meet me here tonight once everyone has left, near the swings. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Not answering, he waved a hand in farewell as he continued out of the park.

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It didn’t take long for Ana to find the Director standing on one of the library balconies. The night was cool, and Scio had drawn his hood low over his head to keep out the breeze. Scio’s sharp eyes watched Ana as he landed on the wide balcony and drew in his wings. Then the older Winged refocused on the distant city glow that could be seen through the rustling tree tops.

After a moment of silence, Scio said, “I thought you might come to see me.”

“It was only two days ago that Epi was tasked,” Ana said, not bothering to hide his apprehension. “Now she has been gone a full day searching for a task of her own.”

The corners of Scio’s mouth curled upward. “You are afraid it is all too soon.”

“Yes.”

“My son.” Scio reached out a hand and laid it on Ana’s shoulder. Ana felt the weight of it. “When did she have her first tasking dream?”

Ana thought for a moment. “I suppose it must have been just hours after I tasked her. She told me about it the following morning.”

“For a new Winged to dream so quickly, it is abnormal. Therefore, we can assume that the timing of her first tasking would be abnormal as well.”

Ana frowned at the logic. “I had hoped to be by her side through it all, or at least while she was searching for the task.”

“Ah, you are disappointed that she did not ask for your assistance.” Scio turned away from watching the sky and gave Ana a long stare. Ana managed not to look away or shift his feet under the scrutiny. “Your emotions surrounding this girl are selfish ones, my son.”
Ana did take a step back then, stunned by the accusation. He opened his mouth to deny it, and closed it just as quickly. “I meant no harm with them,” he said finally.

“Of course not,” Scio said. “However, you know well the laws of conduct that have been sustained among our people since the very beginning.”

“I do.”

“We as Winged,” Scio continued, “have pledged to separate ourselves from the rest of humankind. Physically, we have changed our shape and created our own city. Mentally, we have changed our life goals to those of higher ones, seeking out art and beauty while the humans are focused on their jobs. Emotionally, we have disconnected ourselves from the feelings that plague the humans, those of hate and anger. Those of envy and lust. In doing so we ensure that our people will continue to survive long after the humans have killed each other. Thus, my son, it is important for you to hold tight to the reigns of your emotions toward this girl. She is your task – never forget that. You can never become more than a father-figure to her.”

Ana’s ears burned in shame. “I have no intention of breaching the trust between Epi and me.”

“See that you do not.” Scio turned back to watching the horizon, signaling that their conversation was over.

Ana bowed his head, thanked the Director, and left the balcony.

He knew well the codes of conduct that had existed between Winged for centuries. Before now, he had never found difficulty in maintaining nothing more than deep friendships with the other Winged. If anyone else had broken the physical codes of conduct between each other, Ana didn’t know about it. How Scio had ever managed to see so fully inside Ana’s own heart was a disturbing mystery.

Back in his dark room, he laid on his bed fully clothed and closed his eyes. As he was drifting off to sleep, he felt a stirring within him, the warmth that signaled that a new Winged had just been tasked. He could tell from the strength that it was someone connected to his own line of tasking. If Epiphany had found the boy from her dream, then she would soon be coming home.

Moments later, the usual warmth within his chest was replaced by a wash of cold. The essence of this new unknown Winged was unlike anything Ana had felt before, and it left him with a metallic taste in his mouth.

He got very little sleep that night.
CHAPTER FOUR

The rising sun was just beginning to highlight the budding trees when Epiphany returned to Colonia. Ana felt her arrival before he saw her, and clenched his fists to keep from rushing to meet her. He wanted to see her as soon as he could, but knew that she needed time to settle her new companion into his room. A few hours after she had arrived, Ana heard that she was heading to the library for the naming. He caught sight of Epi outside, leading someone behind her.

_He is hardly a man_, Ana thought. Most humans were tasked between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, and this one seemed to fall early in that age range.

He leaned over the edge of the balcony so he could see better, resting on his folded arms. Drawn from their studies, other Winged in the library crowded on the balconies above and below Ana. Their whispering voices floated to his keen ears. They were all eager to catch a glimpse of the newest task.

The door to the inside of the library behind him slid open. “Yo, Ana,” Kep called, his freckled face split in a wide grin. “Epi’s back!”

“So I see,” Ana said. “It seems she completed her task.”

“I’m so happy for her.”

“Yes.” Ana landed his gaze once more on the figure following Epiphany. The task – no, the new Winged – was wearing loose jeans, a faded t-shirt, and dark blue flip-flops, the standard getup for a college student. What broke the standard look was the mass of light yellow hair that hung freely down his back. Although Ana knew little about teenage fashion of the last decade, he was sure such a style had made the youth noticeable in a crowd. The young Winged looked to be shorter than Ana by almost a head, with a slight build that probably enabled him to be quick on his feet.

_He is hardly a man_, Ana thought. _But hardly a boy either._

Ana heard Epi call his name. He raised a hand in return, lips lifting into a smile, and the young man next to her looked up. Bright blue eyes met Ana’s own. The edges of the blue eyes seemed to crinkle, though the young man was not smiling, and then he focused his attention on Epi who had touched his arm.

Ana released the breath he had unconsciously been holding, blowing wisps of dark hair from his forehead. He still wished Epi had spoken with him first about this task, though he trusted her to make her own decisions. He couldn’t shake the coldness he had felt last night, and he wondered if Epi had felt the same.

“He looks the part, doesn’t he?” Kep said, tugging on his own rope of orange-red hair.
Ana fingered the short strands at the nape of his neck. Since hair was the only thing that continuously changed about a Winged's appearance, always growing longer, most of them kept it at least shoulder-length. Ana was one of the few exceptions. "There are more important things than hair that make a Winged."

"Of course. I only meant . . ."

Ana turned away from the balcony and saw the embarrassment written on Kep's face. Thirty years ago, it had been difficult to stop the boy from running long enough to talk to him. That first day, under the shy exterior, Ana had seen potential, and the boy had become Kepzelet soon after.

Ana crossed the distance between them and laid a hand on Kep's shoulder. "Forgive me," Ana said kindly. "You were right in your observation. Shall we go and greet them? Epi ought to have taken him to the library by now."

Kep nodded. "I wonder what name he'll pick."

"Something easy to pronounce would be nice."

"You're joking! This coming from the man with one of the longest names ever chosen in the history of the Winged."

Ana shrugged as they walked through the upper levels of the library. "Someone calling me by my full name is highly unusual anyway."

"No one has the breath!"

He put on a mock scowl and was rewarded with one of Kep's infamous cheeky grins. Kep stuck out his tongue and broke their slow stride, dashing to the stairs. "I wanna be the first to hear his name. I've missed the last two tasks -- besides Epi, of course -- because I was researching in Hampton."

"Have you seen her?" Ana asked, genuinely curious. Kep had been slow about his tasking, almost as slow as Ana. This girl would only be his second.

"Not yet, except in dreams. She's got green eyes and curly hair, and she's fairly young at the moment, turning twelve in September. I don't wanna get my hopes up or anything, but I have that feeling, you know? Kinda like you had with Epi."

Yes, Ana knew that feeling well, the drive that pushed a Winged into selecting a task. But he had waited centuries to find Epi and awakened several others along the way. Kepzelet wasn't young, but he wasn't as old as the other retired Winged, either. Ana doubted that this task would actually be Kep's last.
Retired. Ana secretly detested using that word. Couldn’t they come up with something more appropriate? Tasking wasn’t a job but a way of life; it was something you did because you wanted to, not because you gained something material from it.

Kep tugged on his sleeve, and Ana allowed himself to be led down the stairs. Despite Scio’s warning, he found himself anxious to talk with her again, to hear her happy voice, and to feel her slim body in his arms as they hugged. As long as he didn’t act on his feelings toward Epi, what was the harm in having them?

“Hurry, Ana,” Kep urged.

The choosing of a name was taken seriously, so by the time they reached the fourth floor where the name books were kept, the new task had already been left alone and the area had been closed off. Epi was waiting just outside the room, sitting in one of the high-backed chairs with her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Ana went to her immediately and embraced her; she laughed lightly, the sound a bit nervous.

“Easy, Ana. I missed you, too.”

“No one heard anything while you were gone,” he said. “Then I felt him awaken, but still heard nothing from you.”

She held him at arm’s length so she could look up at him. “I’m sorry I made you worry. And I’m sorry I ran off without telling you first. I just . . . I felt this connection so strongly, and I felt like I couldn’t wait.”

He stroked her hair. “I understand – I do. I’m relieved that everything went smoothly.”

“Not as smoothly as I’d hoped, though,” she said, stepping out of his arms. “This guy . . . he didn’t want to believe any of it, but everything’s fine now.”

“Did he fight you?” Ana said, worried.

“Oh no,” she said. “He wasn’t violent about it. Just kind of difficult, maybe.” She laughed again, softly. “I guess after all the talk about how eager they usually are for the change, waiting for it for years, I was expecting it to go more smoothly. He recognized me, but that was about it. So instead of trying to awaken him then, I left and came back later, and gave him the choice. Once he seemed to understand more . . . well, you know. It was so easy for me; one moment I was meeting you and the next I was looking at my own wings.”

“I remember,” Ana said. “I had never seen such trust before.”

She batted him playfully on the shoulder. “What can I say? I was swept off my feet.”

Ana felt a pang of regret but shoved it aside. She didn’t know what she was saying or how it affected him.
Kep cleared his throat, wiggling his fingers at them. “Someone else is in the room, you know.”

A light blush pinked Epi’s cheeks. “Kep!” She puffed an indignant breath, but went over and hugged the redhead anyway. “If I wasn’t becoming so fond of you . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. You’d give me an earful, I’m sure.”

Ana resisted the urge to roll his eyes like one of the younger Winged might. “Would you like anything while you wait, Epi?”

“No, thanks.” She sat back in the chair, stifling a yawn with her hand. “Actually, I’d like to take a quick nap, if you two would wake me when he’s done. I know we don’t need regular sleep, but I’ve exhausted myself.”

“Of course we’ll wake you,” Ana said. He pulled off his long black coat and spread it wide to use as a blanket. She curled up in the chair and let him tuck it around her without question as her eyes drifted closed. It wasn’t long before her breathing evened, and she didn’t stir when Ana brushed a stray brown strand of hair from her cheek.

“Did he really fight her?” Kep wondered, voice hushed so he didn’t wake her.

“She said he didn’t,” Ana said. “He only needed coaxing.”

“Yeah, I heard, but . . .” Kep bit his bottom lip. “Why would he resist the tasking? I-I’ve never heard of such a thing. I mean, sometimes they cry or get emotional, but it’s never like that. They’re always so eager for it.”

“Every task is different, Kep. It is best that we accept him warmly and make him feel at home.” He gave the younger Winged a slight smile. “Right?”

“Right,” Kep agreed.

They heard footsteps on the stairs a moment before a pair of Winged stepped onto the floor.

“Evening, Casi,” Ana said. He had heard that she left Colonia late last night to find one of her own tasks, but he didn’t think she would be back so soon. He caught a glimpse of someone standing behind her and suspected it was her task.

Casi nodded her head in return. Sweat beaded her brow and her face was flushed. Ana suspected she had flown back at full strength to become so out of breath, but why had she been in such a hurry, especially with a new Winged in tow? “Evening, Ana, Kep,” she said. “Are you here for a naming?”

“Yes.” Ana stepped aside, revealing the slumbering Epi. “The task is hers.”

“Ah, so she has returned. I had heard of it. I just returned myself.” Turning, she took the hand of the boy behind her, gently tugging him forward. “No reason to be shy, now.”
The boy, looking about sixteen, grinned at them. “Hi.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kep beamed. “I’m Kepzelet, but everyone calls me Kep.” His usual rambling tongue got the better of him, and he jabbed a thumb at Ana. “He’s Ana, the one who found me. He’s definitely older than he looks. I guess you’re really young, huh? I was tasked about thirty years ago myself, which makes me nearly forty-seven.” He pinched his own cheeks. “I don’t look it, do I?”

“Sure don’t,” the boy replied.

“My wings are almost the same color as my hair.” Kep dragged a strand of orange-red over his shoulder. “What color are yours? Just curious,” he added hastily, in case the other took offense to such a personal question.

But the boy only grinned wider. “Black! Want to see?”

“Not here.” Casi stepped in, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Kep, take him outside and show him around, would you? It will be a while yet until he can choose a name.”

“Sure,” Kep said. “Let’s go to housing, huh? You can see my room!”

As soon as the two had left, Ana turned to the woman next to him. “I know you would not have normally sent a new task off like that. Casi, what is wrong?”

She puffed a sigh and paced to the other side of the room, her long black braid swishing against her thighs. “I need to speak to you.” She stared out the window, watching Kep lead away the fledgling Winged.

“What?” Ana frowned at the seriousness of Casi’s tone. She was usually somber and spoke little, but not like this, not this tenseness that hung about her tall form. A sheen of sweat glistened upon her dark skin, and her hands slowly clenched and unclenched. Ana took a step forward. He had known Castigalia almost as long as he had known Scio, who had awakened both of them only years apart. He’d never had an older sister, but he thought she would’ve been somewhat like Casi – strong and kind and unrelenting. “Casi—” he began.

She cut him off. “On my way here, I saw Scio flying out of one of the balconies. He had just been to the eighth floor. You know the one.”

“Yes,” he answered, though he had never ventured there himself. As far as he knew, only Scio had ever entered that top floor.

“He told me,” she continued, “that the door was unlocked when he arrived.”

“Unlocked? By whom?”

“That’s just it – he did not know. Only Scio has a key and it never leaves his person. And the door automatically locks once it is closed.”
Truly, it was puzzling. However . . . “Why are you telling me this?” he asked. The top floor of the library, the eighth floor, contained only books from Scio’s private collection meant to be kept safe from prying eyes and nothing more, reasons to panic. Ana had never even had the desire to venture there, much less learn of its secrets.

Casi stepped closer, less than an arm’s length away. Her brown eyes darted, once, to Epi’s sleeping form, and she lowered her voice even more. “Scio seemed alarmed by the unlocked door, but . . .” She sighed, her warm breath washing over Ana, and whispered, “I sensed no surprise in him. He told me that change was in the sky, and Colonia was shifting on its foundations. As if, as if the door had unlocked itself.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Only to be cautious.” Her elegant shoulders slumped. “It may be nothing. Scio does not want to worry anyone else. Only you and I know.” Again she glanced at the young woman lying on the chair. “Will you tell her?”

“No,” he said. “Why would I?”

“You can’t hide your feelings for her from me,” Casi said. “I believe I am no longer the first person you choose to share with.”

Ana averted his eyes. “You know that’s not true. Besides, she has only just completed her first task. She’s still too young to be burdened with such things.”

“Perhaps.” Reaching out with a long-fingered hand, she grasped his chin and turned his face so he would look at her. “Dear one, we have been friends for many, many years, and have never been shy about expressing our thoughts to one another. Final tasks are the hardest to let go of, especially when you search so long for the right one. You must take care not to suffocate her with your attention, no matter how much you want to give it.” Her eyes softened and she released his chin.

“She brings out a brightness in you that was not there before.”

He snorted lightly. Nothing about him could be called bright, with his black hair and dark wings; even most of his clothing was in dark hues, although that was his own choice. The only spot of color on him were his green eyes, and those were too often clouded over with gray thought. “You have searched longer than I have,” he reminded her.

“Ah, yes,” she said, her lips tugging upward. “I am too picky, I suppose. When the right task comes, I shall know him as you did Epi, and as Scio did with you.” Behind them, the door that led to the naming books began to open, and Casi stepped toward the balcony. “The naming should only be between those most related to the young Winged. Excuse me while I go find mine before Kep loses him.”
Ana watched her leave, her feet barely making a sound across the floor, then turned to wake Epi. Before he had a chance to rouse her, the young man he had seen earlier, the one with the strange blue eyes, emerged from the room and stood in the doorway. For a moment, neither said anything. Just as Ana opened his mouth to speak, the young man moved, shifting from one foot to the other and sliding his hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

"I guess you’re Anagnorisis."

Ana blinked, mildly taken aback that the young man already knew his name. Epi must have spoken about him. “I am,” he said. “And what’s your Winged name?” It was a bit rude of him to ask so directly. This task had only just picked his new name, and he may not be comfortable with using it yet.

The young man wasn’t looking at him, eyes trailing over the windows, across the bookshelves, and past Epi curled in the chair – anywhere but at Ana who stood a few feet away. “The book said I was Revelation,” he finally answered. “Whatever that means. It could’ve done better than that, but it’ll do.”

Ana nodded, storing the name in his memory. “Welcome to Colonia, Rev.”

The scarlet eyes snapped over and alighted on Ana, and Ana calmly stared back. “Actually, no. Revelation. That’s it.” He slid around Ana, heading over to Epi.

“Have you met Scio yet?” Ana asked.

“Yes.” Revelation kicked Epi’s chair to wake her.

She stretched, smiling up at him. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” Revelation said. “What now?”

Ana hung back, observing the two of them as Epi explained the usual orientation that Winged went through during their first few days. Everyone was given a new life, a second chance, so to speak, and Ana shouldn’t be so swift to judge. He considered going to talk to Scio and find out what their undeclared leader thought of the new Winged, but found himself reluctant. He trusted Epi to choose her tasks wisely, and he wouldn’t cheapen that by sneaking around behind her back.

Besides, Scio might bring up the unlocked door, and there was a subject Ana would rather stay away from. He had no desire to seek out old secrets and uncover them, no matter how worried the normally composed Castigalia had seemed. They were locked up for a reason, after all.

Not saying anything else, he slipped silently from the library.

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Revelation watched the man called Anagnorisis leave, then focused his attention on the girl who was still talking to him. Epiphany rattled on about housing and different people he had to meet, but he held up a hand to cut her off.

"Who was that?"

The smile on her face explained all that he wanted to know. "Anagnorisis," she said. "He’s the one I told you about, the one who found me a few days ago. He’s been very kind to me."

"I’ll bet," Revelation said. "As kind as you’ve been to me."

Her happy expression should have darkened at that, should have fallen into a frown, but she kept right on smiling. "Let’s go find Ana or someone and see what room we should put you in."

Revelation narrowed his eyes. "Fine," he said. They began to walk toward the stairs, when Epiphany suddenly stopped.

"I’m so sorry! I forgot to ask you about your name."

"It’s Revelation."

She nodded. "It fits."

"I suppose, though the book could’ve done better."

"What I meant was that its meaning fits. It’s similar to mine and Ana’s." One of her hands reached out to touch his shoulder, and he moved aside before it could land. "It does feel weird to have a new name at first," she said, "but I think you’ll get used to it, eventually."

He didn’t reply.

He hadn’t missed the stares of the Winged as Epiphany had led him to get his new name. Now, as they made their way outside, the balconies ringing the curved edge of the library were empty. Once they had caught a glimpse of the new arrival, the Winged were seemingly no longer interested in finding out about him. Revelation wondered briefly if they treated everything in their lives that way, with fleeting interest. Were events in their lives so routine that even tasks had become mundane?

His eyes took in his surroundings, sliding along the wall that surrounded Colonia. Beyond the library he could see the main housing complex rising in two-story chunks of faded red brick. The accommodations didn’t appear much better than the crappy high rise building he’d paid rent for two months prior. Housing was the only other building besides the library that he recognized. The others were in various stages of disrepair. He noticed portions of brick crumbling, painted stone white-washed in the glare of decades of sun, and only parts of Colonia had any kind of decent landscaping, a large oak or pine brushing up against a building or piles of bushes lumped together.
The library appeared to be the most well kept building in the place. At least its concrete walls were kept free of moss and grime, and the glass was shined clear. The stone walkway from the library to main housing also seemed newly laid, with dirt disturbed on either side. It didn't shift under his feet, indicating that the Winged, at least, knew how to lay stone.

You're one of them now, he reminded himself, snidely. Don't your “they’s” need to become “we’s”?

The two of them entered one of the spaces in housing, a small single room tucked in the middle of a row of others just like it. The soft plop of water upon porcelain told Revelation that the sink was drippy, and leaky too, from the sheen of water on the floor. He thought he could smell mold or wet plaster. A blanket lay folded on top of a thin mattress. He walked over and tested the brown fabric with his fingers. Yes, it was as scratchy as it appeared and starched stiff.

“How cozy,” he said.

Epiphany gave a small laugh. “Most Winged live as simply as they can, I've been told. It's just not in our nature to want a lot of material things.”

“We spend our time on other matters,” said a voice from the doorway. Anagnorisis leaned against the wooden frame, dressed all in black with his black hair tumbling into his eyes. Some people tried too hard.

“That’s right,” Epiphany said, smiling. “Like finding other people like us.”

Anagnorisis nodded. “We usually find them in our dreams or through Scio’s guidance. Everyone has the potential to become a Winged, but only a very few receive such a gift.”

“Congrats to me,” Revelation said.

They stood there in silence for a moment before Epiphany pressed the heel of her palm against her forehead. “I can’t believe I forgot! Revelation, I’m sure you’re wanting some new clothes.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

Anagnorisis stepped forward. “I can get them.”

“No, that’s all right,” Epiphany said. “I can figure out where they are, and this way you two can get better acquainted.” She squeezed Ana’s arm as she passed, and soon her footsteps faded down the hall.

Revelation stared at the dark-haired man until Anagnorisis stared back, at which point he shifted his focus to the drippy sink.
"We have clothes of various sizes stored for new Winged," Anagnorisis said, "but you can venture into the human world to pick out some better clothes later. This is all a lot to take in at first, but you get used to it, after a point."

Do you? Revelation thought. He studied the patches of rust clinging to the exposed pipes under the sink.

He heard Anagnorisis shift from one foot to another. "If you have any questions, Rev, let me know."

Why did he keep calling him that, even after he’d said that Revelation was his name? At least the girl could get it right. He finally met Anagnorisis’ eyes straight on, and asked in a deadpan tone, "Can Winged die?"

The man was clearly taken aback, his eyebrows raised. Revelation wondered if he’d even answer the question. Then Ana said, "We can, but not from natural circumstances such as disease or old age. Our bodies heal quickly, so Winged deaths are rare. The last one that happened here was forty years ago, when one of us was trapped inside a burning portion of the library. It had collapsed, and we could not get to her in time." Anagnorisis paused. "Why do you ask?"

Revelation looked out the window, where he could see two Winged chasing each other through the sky. "Just to see if anything is still human."

Both of them remained quiet until Epiphany returned minutes later, carrying a bundle of faded clothing. As Epi flitted about, trying to find something that fit Rev, Ana kept his attention trained on the younger man. He hadn’t forgotten about the wash of cold he had felt at Rev’s tasking, nor about how difficult the very act had been for Epi. He knew on some level that his dislike for Rev was anchored in pure jealousy, but he would be keeping a close watch on this one.
CHAPTER FIVE

Her name wasn’t Tiltmeter when she was born, but later she would gain the name, and her new family of sorts would call her Tilt for short. She had a mass of dirty blonde hair that hung past her waist, the wild strands kept away from her face by several loose braids. When she was angry, the freckles dotting her cheeks flared brightly and made her blue eyes a stark contrast. She wasn’t beautiful, but she wasn’t plain, either – rather a sort of tomboyish pretty all her own.

She had grown up near the ocean in the northern part of the country, where the waves crashed hard and coughed white foam upon the packed sand. Her parents’ house rested on the cliffs along the thin stretch of beach, held up on stilts so that when she sat on the old wooden porch, it seemed as though she sat on the water. The sunsets there were more vibrant than any other place she had ever been, and she never got too warm or too cold, not even after her parents passed away.

At least, that was how she remembered it.

She’d had dreams, like most sixteen-year-olds, of taking acrylic painting classes, of marrying a man with warm brown eyes, of maybe even kids. She’d also dreamed about painting, her eyes working under her lids as she slept, sweeping back and forth like a brush over canvas. But most of all she dreamed about something else, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, dashes of flight and sky.

They had died in a car crash, her parents. The first snow of the wintry season had iced the road and sent their little car spinning until it wrapped around a tree. Father had sunk into debt years before that, and after his death, lawyers came to take over the small estate. She would have to leave the house on the hill and move across the country to live with an aunt she had never met, being too young to live by herself.

She was given two days to pack. On the night between them, she had stood on the porch and looked down at the rocks far below. Often she had painted their jagged edges, trying to capture their deadly, solid reality. She could become a part of them as easily as taking a step into empty air, where wood met nothing.

Then a voice cut through her thoughts, a voice low and musing, catching her as she stood on the edge. “Watch where you fall, girly. Step out too far and you’ll meet mostly sand. If you want to be sure to die, you need to land closer. Fall head-first, too. That always helps.”

He was clothed in darkness, staying in the night shadows and letting his voice carry over to her. But even without seeing his face, she had moved away from the edge of death, the sense of something more clenching her heart. It was the same sense that most tasks felt when meeting their first Winged, though she didn’t know that was what he was back then.
She moved away from the edge of the porch. Her hands were shaking. “I wasn’t going to jump,” she said.

“Could’ve fooled me,” he said. “But at least you’ve reconsidered. I’d hate for my first task to commit suicide. Rather discouraging, you see.”

“Task?” She peered into the shadows, but still could not see anything beyond an outline of his body. “This is private property, so you’re not allowed here.”

He laughed at that, tossing back his head. “Not allowed? What kind of task are you?”

There was that word again, a word strangely familiar. “I don’t understand.”

He broke off his laughter and hummed lightly to himself. She felt like she was being evaluated and sort of mocked, yet she couldn’t bring herself to rush inside and do something smart like call the police.

“They say these things go smoothly,” he said under his breath, “but I don’t believe it. Mine certainly didn’t, and this one seems to be going downhill.”

Was he talking to himself? She stayed silent, and after a moment he spoke again.

“Let’s start over. Girly, don’t you dream?”

“I dream,” she said quietly.

“Then come here,” he said. His hand stretched out to her, steady and beckoning.

She hesitated, resisting the tug that drew her to him. “Who are you?”

“They call me Revelation, whatever that means. I’ve been searching for you. I can make you like me.” He took a step forward, detaching from the clinging shadows. Her eyes widened as they trailed from his back to the gray-feathered wings arching from his shoulders.

She took his offer, then. She let him strip off her shirt and dig a finger on either side of her spine. Beyond the pain, her mind was filled with images of a forgotten boy, his off-centeredness pushing others away from him. She saw him bring a knife to class so that the older boys wouldn’t dare to beat him up after school anymore. This rough boy had met his fate on a swing as Epiphany had come to him and created the young man called Revelation.

Then she saw blood and the deaths of people she didn’t recognize, and she wondered if this was the past or the future. What if it was the present?

“Now we’ll go, and you’ll pick a new name,” he said after that.

“Where?” she asked. Her shoulders ached because of the extra weight of her wings. She didn’t want to leave the house on the cliff, where her parents had once sung “Happy Birthday” to her and kissed her cheek and smiled so lovingly when they saw another of her paintings.
He followed her gaze to the inside of the house, dark and empty. “Leave it behind,” he said. “It doesn’t matter now. You aren’t who you were.”

She took his hand and held onto it tightly before he could jerk it away. He seemed perplexed by the action, as if no one had ever touched him like that. “What’s next?” she asked.

“I told you already,” he said, frowning. “We’re going to Colonia, and you’ll pick a new name.”

“No, no,” she said. “I meant after all of that, after all the beginning. What do you do next?”

He was silent for so long that she thought she might have offended him somehow. Then he shrugged. “I don’t know. Do what you want, I suppose. We’re... beyond the normal rules that humanity has been bound to.”

“Rules?”

“Yeah.” He tugged loose her grip on his hand, and his coat fanned behind him as he walked away. “Now stop asking so many questions before you annoy me.”

Her parents’ house faded into the night behind them.
CHAPTER SIX

Ana leaned against the wall of the hallway with his arms folded. Epi rummaged among a closet in the main housing complex, one of the smaller rooms that no one used except to store random items. For days she had been looking for various items to decorate for the Midwinter Festival, the largest Winged celebration of the year.

Tiltmeter, Revelation’s first and only task, was helping her dig through various piles of junk. This bright-eyed girl had taken well to the Winged way of life and was eager to socialize, unlike her predecessor Revelation. Since she was also a painter, Sedatus had taken Tilt under his wing, so to speak, and they spent many long hours in the studio.

“No,” Ana said for the second time. Kep stood in front of him, wringing his hands in distress. The redhead was not going to easily settle with Ana’s answer.

“Please?” he begged.

“Absolutely not.”

“Come on, Ana,” Kep said, voice bordering on a full-fledged whine. “I want you to go this year, and you can’t go without putting them on.”

Ana eyed the pair of ... shoes ... that Kep was carrying. “But they look ridiculous.”

“They’re practical.” Kep caught Epi’s shoulder as she passed by with an armful of decorations, long white candles and thick pieces of blue ribbon. “Help me out?”

She smiled at the two of them. “Ana, they aren’t that bad.”

“See?”

“I can fly or stand where the snow has been shoveled,” Ana said, folding his arms. “I shan’t miss anything.”

“But that’s so boring,” Kep said. “Only part of the Festival takes place in Colonia. The rest is in the forest. You know that. Midwinter Festival only happens once a year, and I was hoping you’d come with us this time, especially since Epi is in charge.” Oh, he was definitely whining now.

Tilt stuck her head out of the closet. “Really, Ana, say yes so he’ll shut up.”

Ana’s lips twitched. “Everyone wears them?”

Kep nodded. “You got to. The snow’s so high this year that you’d sink to your knees without these shoes on.”

“As you well know,” Epi said, patting Ana’s back, “snowshoes are common this time of year. You’ll blend right in.”

“I should only hope,” Ana muttered. “All right. I will wear them.”
Epi's eyes twinkled, and Kep let out a loud victory whoop. Ana had known he'd cave eventually with those two prodding at him. Sometimes it wasn't worth it to argue.

"Ana, would you take these candles into the forest?" Epi asked, setting down a box. "I know it's still morning, but I'm eager to get them set up."

"Do I have to wear the shoes?"

She smiled sweetly. "Nope. You'll have to fly, actually. The snow shouldn't be disturbed yet. We need a table, too." She opened the door that led outside, letting in a rush of cold winter air.

"Revelation," she called, "would you give Ana a hand, please?"

"One or two?" Revelation replied from somewhere.

"Two is nice." Epi set the table outside, while Ana picked up the rather large box of candles. "Sea should already be there, and they can tell you where they go."

"Excited, aren't you?" Ana said.

"I'm happy that Scio put me in charge this year, even though it's only my first. Now, you'd better get going while there's still enough light to see." Her small hands pushed him gently through the door and shut it behind him.

The snow was still falling, icy pieces of cotton that stuck to Ana's long coat and chilled his bare face and hands. Turning so he wouldn't hit the side of the building, he closed his eyes and drew in a sharp breath against the quick spasm of pain. His bat-like yet feathered wings burst through the slits in his coat, tossing a few dark, bluish feathers into the cold air as he stretched them. One great beat of his wings and his feet lifted off the ground; it didn't take much effort to float.

"They couldn't decide, could they?"

Ana looked up to see Revelation perched atop the roof of the two-story dormitory. He had already released his wings, and they fanned from his back like two large gray curtains. "Excuse me?"

"Your wings," Revelation said. "Half like an angel and half like a bat. You're a bit confused, aren't you?"

Ana narrowed his gaze, noticing that Revelation immediately averted his eyes. Less than five months had passed since Revelation became a Winged, and something about the boy continued to rub Ana the wrong way. On several occasions he had caught Revelation staring at him, and he guessed that the feeling was mutual. Not that Ana hadn't wanted to be friends... In the beginning, he had offered to show him around Colonia, but Revelation had bluntly refused. The blonde-haired Winged was more anti-social than even Ana.
Tilt had already surpassed Revelation in her number of tasks with her second beginning to appear in her dreams. However, Revelation had made no move to find more tasks since bringing Tilt back to Colonia two months ago.

*Maybe he is in shock,* Ana thought, although the usual signs of vacant expressions and detachment from reality were not present. Ana was at a loss.

Ana shifted the box in his arms. “Carry the table, if you will, and make sure not to damage the snow.”

Revelation frowned, or at least it looked like a frown to Ana, and hopped off the roof. He caught himself with his wings just before his feet touched the ground, one eyebrow lifting as if to say, “Good enough for you?”

Colonia’s main courtyard was quiet and still under the thick white snow. Most of the other Winged were resting for Midwinter, when they would stand under the trees at midnight and lift their faces to the dark sky. The falling snow was starting to cover any footprints, and the shoveled walkways were again turning white.

Ana flew over the stone wall that surrounded Colonia, heading deep inside the surrounding forest where the morning light was dimmed by overarching branches. The pine trees were laden with snow, and every once in a while a branch would give way and dump its load to the ground. The further they traveled, the closer the trees grew together. Soon Ana was having to brush snow out of his collar before it melted and ran down his back. His broad wings had a difficult time of staying away from nearby branches.

Winged could travel at an astonishing speed when they wanted to, but Ana was in a rather lazy mood and set a slow pace. Revelation fell into place at his side.

“Are you coming tonight?” Ana asked.

Revelation shrugged in answer. They continued in silence.

Soon they came to the site where the Festival would be held, a large clearing surrounded by towering trees. Sedatus was there, flitting about the trees as he secured the hangers for the candles. His brown skin stood out among all the white. He smiled when he saw them enter the clearing and floated down to their level.

“Thank you, Ana, Revelation. Hook the table over a branch for now until Epi decides where she wants it.” Sea’s nearly black eyes gleamed slickly in the fading light. “It will be a beautiful ceremony – one of the best I have seen.”
“I look forward to it,” Ana said. “Rev—” He paused, noticing that his fair-haired companion wasn’t beside him. He saw Revelation at the far end of the clearing, his back a rigid line as he gazed toward Colonia. He didn’t appear to have heard, so Ana called again.

Revelation tilted his head ever so slightly to the left like he was listening to Ana. His long blonde hair, now kept tied back in a loose ponytail, was draped over his shoulder and blocked his expression. “Yes?” His voice sounded low, distracted.

“You can go now,” Ana said. “I will stay and help Sea.”

“Fine.” Revelation’s wings swept him up and above the treetops. He hovered there for a moment, his off-white coat fluttering about his ankles, then his form blurred and he was gone, heading back toward their tiny city.

Sea’s eyebrows knotted together. “Is he all right? If not, he should not be alone.”

“Sea,” Ana said softly. “How much do you know about Rev?”

Sedatus scratched at the back of his black hair. “I have never spoken to him until now. I see him around from time to time, but that is all.”

Melancholy was nothing new to Ana, so why did Revelation’s apparent low bother him? A chill had crept up his spine when he had watched Revelation hovering in the air, focused on something beyond the clearing.

Ana shivered in the cold, helping Sea place the candles in their wire containers. Epi would light them tonight, and the trees would become dotted with flickering spotlights of flame. Despite how much he had protested going, he was looking forward to the ceremony.

Glancing once more in the direction Revelation had flown, Ana decided he would see if Tilt would talk to the younger man. Revelation ignored him and Epi, for the most part, but Ana had seen him engage in conversation with Tilt on occasion. Maybe the girl could draw Rev out of his dark mood.

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Revelation had flown in the direction of Colonia, but once he reached the wall he just kept on going, heading toward the city where he’d been tasked. For months he had silently endured what those people dared to call a life, sweeping when they told him to sweep, cleaning gutters when they told him to sweep. Doing nothing but meaningless chores and attempting to read the boring books in the library. He had been encased in that desolate town like a caged rat. Now it was time for him to get out for good.

He headed to the top of an electricity tower for a smoke. He had a pleasant view of the dingy city below, which reminded him of the one he used to get from his old apartment window.
Sometimes he’d taken enjoyment in watching it ever so often, after a long day at Fred’s Kuik Market. The smoky cars and piled garbage made him feel clean inside.

He was alone for the better part of an hour before Tilt appeared on a section of the tower beneath him.

“There you are,” she said with a hesitant smile. “I’ve been looking for you.”
“Score,” he muttered.
“You’re going to miss the Festival if you stay out here for too much longer.”
“Score, again.” Revelation took a puff on his cigarette and released a thin gray stream of smoke. “Wasn’t feeling too good,” he said louder so she heard. “Think I’m getting a cold.”
She gave a small laugh. “We can’t get sick, silly.”
“My mistake.” He flicked the stub away, and saw Tiltmeter watch it drift down to disappear into the grass. “Maybe I just feel sick.”
“I thought you don’t smoke.”
“I didn’t until today. Unlike Anagnorisis, I don’t like to pretend when the real thing is much better.”

Her smile faded a little. “You feeling okay, Revelation?”
“No, I’m not, my dear Tilly. I’m not.” He flexed his shoulders and silently grimaced against the pain. His wings shot out the slits in his shirt, slicing through the damp sky.
“Wait a minute – not out in the open!”
“The humans forget anyway.” He leaned forward and let the feathered appendages snap on the air and catch his fall. He floated to Tiltmeter’s level and folded his arms. “You came to tell me something?”
“Not really. I was just checking up on you.”
“Like you would a child?” Surprisingly, he asked the question with little heat in his voice. He wasn’t mad at her, even though he knew she was only there because someone had sent her.
She scoffed. “You’re hardly a kid. Look, if you don’t want to go to the Festival, you don’t have to.”
“Thanks, Mother.” He flapped his wings and rose higher in the sky. Not surprisingly, she followed him. “Go back home where you belong, Tilly.”
“Isn’t it where you belong, too?” She flapped her yellow wings, raising herself to his level.
“Not anymore.” He began to drift away again, and again she followed. “Damn it, don’t make me hit you.” He fisted a hand, but she didn’t seem to take him seriously.
“Let me go with you. Epi can find someone else to help her at the Festival.”
Growling, he flew closer to her, flattened his palms against her shoulders, and shoved her away. “Go home, Tilly.”

This time, she listened to the seriousness in his voice. “Just trying to help,” she muttered, but he had already turned his back on her. He let his wings carry him away from the electricity tower and further away from Colonia.

***

They gathered in the courtyard in front of the library, the only place within the walls spacious enough to hold all of them. Sometimes the Midwinter Festival took place right there in the middle of Colonia; other times they had to fly to reach the meeting place. This year Epi had chosen the forest, saying that she wanted to share with everyone a setting similar to the small patch of woods where she had been tasked.

She stood on one of the library balconies as she waited for everyone to arrive. Tilt and Kep stood on each other side of her, carrying torches they would use to light the candles in the trees. Ana had declined Epi’s invitation to help; he preferred to watch from afar. This was her moment, and he didn’t want to overshadow her with his own presence.

Despite how he had protested earlier, he stood there now with the wide snow shoes trapped to his feet that would keep him from sinking in the thick snow out in the forest. Most of Colonia’s usual residents had them on. Those Winged who had traveled from various places had either brought their own to use, or they would simply wade through the snow. There would be too many of them for there to be room for flying under the trees, and they would miss most of the ceremony if they stayed above them.

Glancing around, Ana saw men and women from all kinds of backgrounds, some from this country and others from far beyond it, like Ana who had traveled here long ago. They couldn’t all communicate with words, but then they didn’t need to. Most of them Ana knew, for every Winged was connected to the next at least on a basic level, though he may not know their names or even have met them. He estimated that about three hundred had come to Midwinter, a little over double the population of Colonia. He held back a smile, pleased that so many had made the journey here in order to partake of this celebration of the connection that held them all together.

This Festival was older than Colonia itself, started during a time before Colonia when the Winged had no permanent home. The ceremony that would follow was meant to bring them all together again, no matter where they were physically. It had served to bond Winged back together even when they were thousands of miles apart.
Ana did not see Revelation among them, but he pushed aside his worry. When Tilt had returned earlier, she’d said that it was likely Revelation wouldn’t come. Ana had hoped that he would. The experience of Midwinter might have convinced Revelation to finally feel more at home here.

When it looked like no more Winged were going to show up, Epi motioned to Tilt and Kep that it was time to leave. Instead of releasing their wings and flying off the balcony, as they usually did, they turned and entered the library. Moments later, the three of them emerged on the bottom floor, having taken the stairs down. Ana understood immediately. No one would release their wings from this point onward until the time was right during the Festival.

Of course, there was the problem of getting beyond the high wall that encased the city. Earlier that day, several ladders had been erected on each side of the stone. Epi and her two companions were the first to climb over the wall, and then the crowd began to follow. Thus began the slow exodus out of Colonia. The Festival had begun.

***

Revelation had ignored the dreams of other tasks after Tiltmeter had followed him back like a lost puppy. He didn’t care to trek across the country in search of nameless people, no matter how much they tried to convince him that this was his only job as a Winged. The one called Anagnorisis had taken a stab at this on multiple occasions, but the feeble attempts were easy to ignore. This time, though, Revelation had his own agenda, and the required hour-long flight couldn’t deter him.

The girl he sought was fifteen, just entering high school. She had her whole life spread out before her – a career in music, playing at Carnegie Hall. She was a piano player, and music was her addiction. In good Winged fashion, Revelation was supposed to take it all away from her, to turn her into yet another inhuman thing with foreign wings.

Well, he would take it all away, but not in the manner he’d been taught.

He had done a bit of research beforehand, so he knew exactly where to look. The girl lived in a dusty little town with a brick-paved downtown and a Dairy Queen, and not much else, surrounded by miles of dead farmland sleeping out the winter. He took his time with flying, his wings lazily beating, so he arrived well after nightfall.

Her house, or rather her parents’ house, was easy to find. The two-story home was a pale sickly yellow, and the owners obviously wasted too much time on landscaping. If he hadn’t been about to take away their precious daughter, he might’ve dug up a few of their more expensive-looking plants for the hell of it.
He landed in the narrow alley along the side of the house. The sense of tasking that pulled him to her drew him to a low window near the back of the house. Even from outside he could hear the pounding notes of a piano a bit muffled through the glass. The curtains were pulled back and the light was on, so it was easy for him to peer inside. The girl sat at the piano, her light brown hair tied back from her face, and she was alone. He rapped a knuckle on the window pane.

The girl's head jerked around, and she saw him immediately, but she just sat there and stared. Her eyes were the deepest shade of blue, and they reminded Revelation of the blue streaks in Epiphany's wings.

"Fee, fie, fo, fum," he hummed under his breath. "Let me in, little girl." This time he tapped harder, rattling the glass in its frame.

She slowly got up and came to the window, turned the lock and swung it up. "There you are," she said, seeming to know on some level who – or what – he was. Her hands were shaking, fingers long and white. Her eyes, those blue eyes, kept flickering up to his wings that he hadn't bothered to hide.

"Aren't you gonna let me in?" he asked.

"Sorry," she said, and unscrewed the screen.

He helped her push it out, then pulled his wings into their invisible pockets with a stinging pop so he could slide through the window. Once inside, he released his wings again, knowing they would serve a purpose later. "Don't you know not to speak to strangers?"

"You aren't a stranger," she replied. She moved aside as he stood up and straightened his clothing.

He wanted to laugh in her face. "You don't know anything about me. Just what do you think I came here to do?"

She hesitated, then stuttered, "Give-give meaning to my life . . . ?"

"Wrong," he said, suddenly fierce. "Life has no meaning. You lose."

Across the walls of the room he could see various piano posters, some with keys shining white against black, others with images of Carnegie Hall's golden backdrop that she would never see in person. He grabbed onto her fingers, and their coldness bit into his flesh.

***

Ana walked silently among the others through the dark trees that towered over them. No one spoke, though every once in a while someone he hadn't seen in a year would clasp his shoulder or nod in greeting. Some of them walked with their arms around each other's hips, while others walked
alone. All of them were lost in their own thoughts. The beginning of the Midwinter Festival was a
time for reflection, and it would end with them all coming together as a connected whole.

When they could no longer see the soft light of Colonia behind them, they linked together to keep from wandering off the path in the growing darkness. Ana touched a shoulder in front of him and found it was Sedatus. A Winged he did not know grasped his coat from behind. He could hear the airy sounds of breathing all around him and the crunch of snow beneath their wide shoes. Someone stumbled in the dark and fell head-first into the snow amid quiet puffs of amusement.

It seemed as though they walked a long time, but only minutes had passed. Then Kep and Tilt began to light the previously arranged candles with their torches. The forest gradually started to glow with firelight, and various Winged stayed near the candles to keep the tiny flames from getting out of control. When they reached the large clearing, they fanned out around the table situated in the middle.

Epi came to the front of the gathering, taking Kep’s torch to light the last candle on the table. Her plain features seemed to glow in the firelight, her brown hair flowing over her shoulders in shiny waves.

Kep sided over to Ana and nudged his elbow. He leaned close to whisper, “She looks kind of pretty, doesn’t she?”

Ana didn’t have to answer.

Epi’s voice slid over them, warm and smooth. “Thank you all for coming tonight. I’m honored that the Director chose me to lead the ceremony, and I hope that all of you will join us back in Colonia for the rest of the festivities afterward.”

She paused and picked up the candle in front of her. Tilt, at her side, held up a second. “The core of each of us burns as brightly as this single flame. However, when we are together, our flames blend together and grow stronger.” She and Tilt pressed their candles together, and the flame grew brighter, highlighting both of their faces. “Tonight we will strengthen our bond by releasing our flames all at once, to reunite as one living mass. Winged from all over the world who are unable to be here will sense us and join us.”

Epi raised the candle to her lips and blew out the flame. All around, other Winged extinguished the rest of the candles, casting them all in darkness once more. Unable to see, Ana could only hear and feel. Around him he could hear the rustle of fabric as Winged shed their shirts or pushed aside slits in their clothing along their backs; he let his own coat fall to the ground and bent over so his back was aimed at the sky.
They released their wings as one, the feathered arches fanning into the dark sky above them, stretching toward the stars. Ana imagined Epi’s wings spreading above her head, the white blending in with the snow and the dark blue tips blending in with the night. He could hear small hisses of pain, and then the wash of three hundred different minds swallowed up his senses.

***

The girl didn’t scream as Revelation crushed her cold fingers with his own, too shocked to do anything but stare. He looked down at the sudden warmth of red blood on his skin, and saw the delicate way her hands snapped. He hadn’t thought it would be so easy to crush bone with this new strength he had tapped into.

He heard her whimper, and he shoved her away. She slammed against the wall and slumped to the floor. Her back of her head left behind a smear of color on the flowery wallpaper. The blood was sticky on his hands, so he wiped them on her clothes. He knew he had no fingerprints, and any tracks he left behind would be overlooked by the police. Such was the mystical disappearing act of the Winged.

“There’s one fatal flaw in their grand scheme of things,” Revelation said aloud. “They trust each other.”

The girl didn’t reply.

***

Ana closed his eyes and let the presences of his fellow Winged overwhelm him. In the midst of all of their warm and light, a flash of dark smothered his chest. He stumbled forward to catch his balance, but the feeling was already gone, lost among the hundreds of others melding with his mind. He thought he heard Epi cry out, but she was too far away from him to be sure.

He wanted to deny that he knew who that particular sensation belonged to, but he had already felt it once before. Something had happened at the moment they all had released their wings, but what, he couldn’t yet determine. However, the coldness in his chest began to strengthen; Revelation was on his way back to Colonia.
CHAPTER SEVEN

When Revelation arrived back in Colonia, its inhabitants were just beginning to reenter the stone walls. He doubted they could have heard about his misadventure already, since they had been so focused on themselves. The library was seemingly empty. He went to one of the rooms on the forth floor where the books on all the past tasks were dutifully kept. Collecting the volumes he wanted, he found a comfortable collage of pillows and lounged among them. He only had to wait.

It wasn’t long until he found Revelation; Anagnorisis haunted this place like a stale odor. His nose was red from standing out in the cold for so long, and under other circumstances Revelation would’ve laughed at him. Anagnorisis was wearing his faded black jeans and black buttoned shirt and heavy black duster, and his dark hair was neatly messy. More so than ever before, Revelation detested the sight of him.

“Rev,” he said.

“Anagnorisis,” Revelation said, almost with a snarl.

“Where have you been?”

“Tasking, of course. So much to be done, you know.” He tapped the book spread on his raised knees. “Interesting stuff here. I didn’t know you were an aristocrat in the late 1800s, and with long hair!”

“Why did you not tell Tilt where you were going?” Anagnorisis asked. “She was worried about you.”

Ignoring the question, Revelation picked up another book and thumbed through its pages. “Epiphany used to be a first-year college student, and the poor lamb was so unhappy. Funny how I was supposed to go to the same school as her. Funny how I heard rumors about her disappearance back then. The humans don’t know what the hell they’re talking about, but she’s become quite the legend.”

“Rev.”

“Of course we all know the real story,” Revelation continued. “A tall, dark, and handsome man came and woke up her wings for her like a nice gentleman. And everything’s been fine and dandy after that for you both, hasn’t it?”

Anagnorisis took a step forward, eyes darting to Revelation’s clothes. “What is that on your sleeve?” he demanded.

Revelation looked down at the red that had soaked into the white fabric. “Bits of my task, I suppose.” He jabbed a finger at another book. “This one says I’m a nice guy! How darling of them. Now, why do you suppose they’d say that?”
The older man’s face had drained of color. Revelation thought he might be sick. “What have you done?” Anagnorisis finally said.

Revelation stood, the books clattering to the floor around him, and strode to stand beside Anagnorisis. “I know why’d they say that.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “They tried to make themselves believe it.”

“Your task is dead, isn’t she?”

Revelation smirked. “Yep.”

***

Ana could sense other Winged beginning to enter the library, and he wished he could tell them to stay back. Revelation was standing close, too close, and Ana could smell the blood on him. Never had the boy spoken so many words aloud or acted so confident in front of Ana. Had Revelation ever grinned like before? Had he ever grinned at all, or smiled?

Ana stared at Revelation’s sleeve, now close enough for him to see the streaks where Revelation had tried to wipe it off. The stuff was crusted and thick, dried in place. Wildly, Ana thought, He’s not a boy anymore, not a child. But he has just murdered someone that was.

He took a step back from Revelation, but it was too late. A knife flashed in Revelation’s hand, drawn from under his shirt. Ana had no time to react. Revelation quickly bent one leg and stabbed Ana in the knee, twisting the blade to cause more damage, then sliced through the muscle and bone along the side.

Blood. Ana saw blood first and the pain swiftly followed, numbing his ruined knee. His vision blackened around the edges, and he fell to his other knee. He swung out an arm, ready to defend against another attack, but Revelation had already left. Ana had never felt such strength before – not because it was impossible, but because no Winged had ever lifted a hand against another. It was unheard of; violence simply never happened. Not until . . .

Gentle hands pressed around his leg. A Winged Ana did not personally know tied a strap of clean cloth to his wound, trying to slow the bleeding. Ana batted his hands away, not concerned for he would heal too quickly to die from blood loss.

Winged were shouting around him, and he yelled at them to stay inside. If any of them tried to follow Revelation, they would no doubt also be hurt. Numbly, Ana wondered why Revelation hadn’t simply killed him like he had the task. He had to have known Ana would recover from such a wound.

Casi appeared on the floor and knelt beside him. Her voice sounded like it was struggling to keep from rising too shrilly. “What happened? Ana, who did this?”
“Rev,” he murmured. “To the window, please.” He couldn’t stand on his own. Casi and the other Winged slipped a shoulder under each of his arms and half-carried him to one of the large windows.

He saw Revelation emerge from the library’s ground floor as Winged scattered out of his way. The blonde-haired young man didn’t seem to notice any of them, heading toward the stone wall that encased Colonia. His sole purpose in coming back seemed to be to attack Ana, but Ana couldn’t understand why that was all he had done in the library. How long had he been sitting there before they returned from the forest?

Revelation had made it halfway to the wall before his path crossed that of another Winged heading toward the library: a smaller boy with black wings. Undoubtedly the boy didn’t know what had just happened, and he walked up to greet the other Winged unawares. Ana couldn’t make out any details from his distance, but he saw Revelation lift his hands and the boy’s head snapped awkwardly to the side. The boy landed in a crumpled heap on the ground and lay still.

Someone screamed, the sound coming from behind Ana in the library, and the stench of fear rose swift and choking. The other Winged outside backed away from Revelation, who let his wings loose in a burst of gray feathers. Soon he had disappeared over the stone wall, and no one followed.

Casi pressed against Ana in order to see better outside the window. Ana moved his shoulder aside, giving her room, knowing there was no way to protect her from the truth. When she saw the black-winged boy lying on the ground, his neck twisted at a horrible angle, she spoke his name through her teeth.

It burned in Ana’s ears. *Arduous.* Casi’s youngest task.

Somewhere nearby, Scio wrote furiously in a book with thick magical pages. Clouds gathered thickly overhead. More snow would soon cover the body until someone finally gathered enough courage to move him.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Ana stretched out on his bed with his injured knee propped up on a pillow. The wound had been a messy one, but the bleeding had stopped quickly and now it was just a matter of waiting for it to heal. Epi sat on the edge of the bed beside him. He tried at one point to put his arm around her, but she didn’t register the contact. Her dull brown eyes stared out the window, flickering to the sky ever so often, searching. Ana’s arm hung lifeless about her shoulders for a moment before he let it fall back to his side. He said nothing. None of them had spoken since they had gathered in Ana’s room hours ago.

Kep was sitting on the opposite side on the room, straddling the desk chair. His head rested on his arms folded on the back. He bounced his legs on the balls of his feet, unable to sit still. Next to him, Tilt sat on top of the low desk, leaning against the wall with her legs crossed. Her eyes were closed, and tears leaked down her cheeks.

Her task, Logia, perched on the edge of the desk, his narrowed eyes taking in the expressions of all the others. Logia was a tall skinny boy of seventeen with bat-like wings the color of dark tree bark. When Ana’s gaze alighted on him, he fist his hands and jumped to his feet.

“Why aren’t we doing anything?” he asked, his voice shrill.

“The Director told us to wait,” Ana said calmly.

“What for? Every one of us in this room is connected to that bastard in some way or another. We all know where he was when he stopped flying. We should—”

“Wait for the Director’s summons,” Ana told him. “Things will be clearer then.”

Logia shook his head. “Ard was my friend! I can’t sit around and do nothing.”

He sprinted for the door, and Ana was swift to catch Kep’s arm before he could follow. “Let him go,” Ana said, “if he thinks he needs to.” Moments later, they could feel Logia release his wings and take off across Colonia’s stone wall.

They lapsed back into silence, until Castigalia appeared in the doorway. Ana hadn’t seen her since they had buried Arduous in the small cemetery just outside Colonia’s eastern wall. Afterward, Scio had called her into a back room, closing the door behind them. Now, her jaw was set in a firm line, and no anguish or sorrow was present in her features any longer.

“You bring news?” Ana asked.

“Scio has called a meeting,” Casi said, deadpan. “Everyone is gathering beneath one of the north-side library balconies.”

He frowned. “And you?”
“I’m to seek out those among us who are currently away finding their tasks.”

“And bring them home,” he concluded.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Scio thinks it’s best if I do not spread panic. He has requested that I only inform them of the situation so they take the utmost caution.”

Kep glanced back and forth between the two older Winged. “But that’s not exactly safe, is it? I mean, we saw what Revelation did when one of us was alone.” He was careful to avoid using Arduous’ name with Casi in the room. Even the slight mention caused her to narrow her eyes.

Epi stirred for the first time, folding her arms tightly against her sides. “Revelation isn’t a killer.”

“Epi –” Ana began.

“It was an accident,” she said. She turned away from the window, and her eyes were glassy. “It must’ve been.” When Ana put his arm around her again, this time she let him hug her close.

The gold bangles at Casi’s wrists jingled as she stepped into the hall. “Believe what you want, child.”

Epi stiffened at that, but gave no reply.

“Revelation could have killed Ana,” Casi said, looking away. “Instead he decided to murder a boy he had never met. Do not blind yourself to the truth. Once I have finished spreading the word on this floor, I must leave. I am sure Scio will be expecting you at the meeting.”

“Please be careful,” Ana said.

“As should you.” Her dark form disappeared down the hallway.

Ana turned back to the Winged behind him. “Is anyone going with me?”

“You’re still injured, you know,” Kep said, raising an eyebrow.

Ana glanced down at his bandaged leg. He highly doubted that he could make it outside on his own, and injuries of this kind were so rare that they didn’t have any crutches or the like for him to use. “I can still fly,” he said firmly.

With Kep and Epi’s help, he managed to hobble outside, where he was able to have enough room to release his wings. The dark expansive appendages spread out behind him, and a few great flaps lifted his feet from the ground. He knew that there would be no place for him to sit around the library with everyone trying to pack as near to Scio as possible to hear him. After telling the two younger Winged that he would meet them back at his room after the meeting, he flew toward the library.

As he neared the library, he observed other Winged beginning to emerge from various buildings. He was reminded of how, just last night, they had joined together in a similar fashion. But
Scio’s meeting was attracting a larger crowd than even the Midwinter Festival had, and Ana suspected that nearly every Winged present in Colonia would gather to hear what the Director had to say to them. When he passed close to the outer wall, he could see more Winged flying over the top of the high stone. Casi was already reaching those near enough to come home for the impromptu meeting.

The last time Ana had seen most of the these Winged, their faces had contained smiles of joy and their eyes had shone with anticipation for the future. When they had released their wings, Ana had felt an overwhelming sense of content from his people, a calmness that eased his mind and inner emotions. Now, with his wings extended, he felt nothing but dread and confusion. He hoped that whatever Scio had to say would bring an absent peace back to them and erase their fears. He knew his hopes were high ones.

He caught sight of Scio standing on a second level balcony, his white hair partially concealed by his raised hood. Indeed it was a chilly day, and Ana tugged the collar of his black coat tighter to his bare neck against the invading wintry breeze. Picking out a balcony a few away from where Scio stood, Ana sat on the corner of the metal railing. It wasn’t the most comfortable of perches with the cold metal digging through the seat of his thin pants, but his wings helped maintain his balance and he knew that his injured knee wouldn’t be able to support his weight for more than a few minutes.

Ana was glad that Scio had chosen to meet on the opposite side of the library. A blanket covered the place where Revelation had struck Arduous down, a reminder of the young Winged that was now missing from among their ranks. For a brief moment, Ana wondered if Rev had chosen Arduous or if Ard had just been at the wrong place in the wrong time. Both Rev and Ard had been tasked on the same day . . . But Rev might have just attacked the first Winged he had run into after leaving the library. Whatever the reason, the fact was that Arduous, with his black wings and bright smile, was now dead.

The crowd that formed around the library was nearly double the size of the one that had attended the Midwinter Festival. Ana was saddened that it had taken such a tragedy to cause so many of them to gather together. As he observed his fellow Winged, he noticed how their eyes darted about them and they kept their arms tucked close to their sides. Rev had attacked one of them in the midst of their sanctuary away from such human-like violence, and their sense of comfort and protection had been shaken.

Ana rubbed a hand over his aching knee and felt relief when Scio finally raised his arms to call for silence. At the movement, the Winged standing below fell quiet and turned their expectant faces upward. A few gazes landed on Ana, but he kept his eyes focused on the Director. He hoped
that his own presence and obvious support for Scio’s upcoming words would also offer some 
consoling to those that knew him. Epi and Kep stood below him, waiting to hear. Tilt was there also, 
off to the side by herself.

Once Scio had everyone’s attention, he pulled back his hood so they could see his face. “My 
children,” he said, projecting his voice so everyone could hear. “I am here to confirm the rumors that 
have been spreading among you. One of our youngest has been slain in an act of violent behavior. 
Arduous, task of Tiltmeter, is no longer alive, killed by the hand of Revelation.”

He paused as the buzz of Winged voices started up again, then quieted them. “Arduous did 
nothing to provoke such wrath. As Winged, we are above the emotions of rage and hatred; we do not 
strike against another no matter the situation. However, Revelation has broken the unspoken 
agreement of pacifism that exists in our community. He has decided to separate himself from us, and 
so we shall let him.”

He raised a hand to keep them from speaking. “Some of you call for revenge, but I beg you 
to remember the codes of conduct that have existed for centuries. We shall not lower ourselves to his 
level by striking against him. Let him face the consequences of his actions by being separated from 
the rest of his people. A life alone is the most desolate future a Winged can face.

“However, neither we shall not run away in fear or hide behind locked doors. The Colonia 
way of life will continue as it always has. I do beseech you, my children, to grant me two wishes. 
One, that you continue your lives as you would have otherwise, to continue to task. Two, to come to 
me for guidance with your tasks before you make them. By being so selective, we can avoid making 
mistakes like Revelation again.”

Ana frowned at Scio’s words. He remembered Casi once telling him that Epi had sought out 
Scio’s opinion after she’d had the tasking dream about the boy who would become Revelation. Ana 
had assumed, when Epi rushed to find the young man, that Scio had encouraged her to do so. Now 
the Director was making it sound as though Epi had done it all without his blessing, like she had just 
rebelliously ran off. He sounded as though he was blaming her.

Scio concluded his speech by telling him that after one week of mourning for the loss of 
Arduous they would open up tasking once again. The Winged way of life, he said, must continue. 
After this proclamation, he turned and vanished inside the library, leaving everyone behind.

By then, Ana’s whole leg throbbed and warned him that he should find a way to prop it up 
soon. He wasn’t quite ready to leave his spot, wanting instead to speak with some of the others first, 
but he hoped that they would realize where to find him. Using his wings to balance, he slid off the 
railing and caught himself before he touched the ground.
The hallway of the main housing complex that lead to his quarters was too narrow for his wings to be of much use. He pulled the feathered extremities back inside his body and limped as best he could back to his room. He collapsed back on his bed. The pain made breathing difficult, and he focused on relaxing before someone saw him in such a state.

Epi entered the room first, with Kep trailing behind her, a worried expression creasing his freckled face. A few moments later, Tilt also appeared, her eyes focused on the floor.

“I was kinda expecting a bit more of a speech,” Kep said, biting his lip. He tugged on the end of a strand of red hair, a nervous gesture.

Ana rubbed the cold out of the top of his thigh. “Scio has always been one for conciseness.”

“But he didn’t even tell us what we should do about Revelation. I mean, are we supposed to just leave him alone? Pretend nothing ever happened?”

Ana didn’t have a good answer to alleviate Kep’s concerns, but he understood where the younger Winged’s line of reasoning was coming from. The Winged way of life consisted of nonviolence and pacifism, and none of them had engaged in fighting after their human lives. Those among them who had previously trained in a fighting art as humans had been out of practice for at least decades, if not much longer.

Revelation had entered Colonia and killed one of them without the caution that someone might fight back. He’d known that they wouldn’t be able to protect themselves. There was a vulnerability hanging in the air that everyone felt.

A high keening sound pierced the silence. Tilt fisted her hands over her chest and doubled over – the sound had come from her. Ana leaned forward to ask her what had happened, and then he felt it too, a dull throb in his chest that told him someone else had just been killed. Kep and Epi also seemed to have felt it; tears spilled from Epi’s already watery eyes. Tilt was three generations removed from Ana, but he was still closely enough connected to her to be physically hurt.

“Logia,” Tilt said between clenched teeth. She lowered to her knees, pressing her forehead against the floor, and her shoulders shook beneath the weight of the death of her only task.

“Not again,” Kep whispered. “He was just here. It can’t have happened again.” He slumped beside Tilt, though he didn’t make a move to comfort her with his touch.

“I’m sorry,” Ana said, because there was nothing else he could say.

Tilt was crying, her body quivering. “He shouldn’t have gone after Revelation. I shouldn’t have let him.”

“You can’t hold yourself responsible,” Ana said. “Logia was determined to avenge Arduous no matter what anyone did.”
“That bastard killed a part of me.” Tilt lifted her head to glare up at Ana. “Do you know what that feels like?”

“Yes. One of my own tasks died once. I’m so sorry,” he said again, unable to come up with anything else to give.

“Revelation knows who Logia is – was. He knows that I was the one who tasked him.” Tilt got to her feet, and through her tears her eyes were blazing with fury. “He can’t expect me to just ignore this.”

“Please, Tilt,” Kep said, grasping her arm. “Stay here with us.”

She shrugged him off. “Tell the Director that I won’t be back to Colonia anytime soon. I need some time to myself, to figure things out.” Her voice had become hard and deadpan, and Kep shrank away from her. “Don’t go looking for me.”

Ana understood. Other Winged had chosen to vanish before – self-inflicted isolation was nothing new to their people. “Kep is right. Stay away from Rev.”

“I’ll do that,” she said, and her lie was obvious. The only consolation Ana received was the knowledge that Tilt wasn’t the type of person to rashly try to track down Revelation. She would spend time alone first, working things out in her head, of that she was certain.

“There are small pockets of Winged scattered around that I am sure you could find. They would welcome you if you wanted to stay with them for a few days. Help her pack, would you, Kep?” Ana asked the younger man. It was likely Tilt wouldn’t take much of anything with her, but he wanted a moment alone with Epi, who hadn’t said a word since before Scio’s meeting.

Kep glanced at Epi, then nodded. “Will do.”

Epi had moved over to the balcony window and was gazing passively outside. The snow had finally stopped, but it was so cold outside that the glass had fogged. When Ana came to her side, she raised a hand and pressed her palm against the glass.

“Epi-” he began.

“It wasn’t a mistake,” she said quietly.

He sighed. “No, it wasn’t.”

“He meant to do those things, to kill those people. He wouldn’t even let us try to see it as anything but murder.” She finally looked at Ana, and her brown eyes were clear. “I’m to blame.”

“Of course not.” Ana took her shoulders, his hands probably less gentle that he meant, but her words reminded him of Scio. The thought of who to blame echoed Scio’s earlier statements, and Ana finally realized that he disagreed with their undeclared leader. The only person to blame for this atrocity was Revelation. He wished Epi could believe that.
She shook her head. “I’m the one who tasked him – that can’t be forgotten. *He* can’t forget that.”

Ana wanted to shake her, to hug her, to tell her that she was safe among these stone walls, among his arms. But he could never lie to her. He knew she was right.
CHAPTER NINE

Ana spent most of the rest of the winter indoors, trying to occupy his mind with various books or sketches. He wasn’t much of an artist, but the constant motion of the pencil kept him from thinking about other things. The injury on his knee, which would have probably caused a human to lose his leg, had fully healed, though he still carried a bit of a limp.

Epi had become more and more withdrawn from him. She woke up early and helped one of the other Winged prepare a flower garden for spring for most of the day. At night she watched Sedatus paint or played a game of Checkers with Kep. Whenever Ana tried to speak with her, she would give short answers and then take her leave of him.

When spring sprang into full bloom, everyone in Colonia seemed to hold their breath as the first anniversary of Revelation’s tasking came and went. This first anniversary was usually celebrated in some way, but Ana couldn’t bring himself to suggest it when Epi’s time came. Hers was too close of a reminder.

The days slowly became warm enough for Ana to spend part of his days outside. The cold weather had done little to help the healing of his knee, and he knew the warmth and sunshine would do him some good.

He was folding clothing on his bed one afternoon when he caught sight of Epi working alone in the flower garden. Under her tender care, the plants were blooming beautifully, and he realized he had never told her how much he admired her work there. Setting aside the busywork for now, he slipped on his shoes and headed outside.

She didn’t look up as he approached, concentrating on weeding around a thorny rose bush. Her brown hair seemed almost golden in the bright sunlight. He thought he might find a hat to keep the top of her head from burning.

“You’ve done well with this garden,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied. She patted the loose dirt back into place around the bush. Then she drew a sharp breath and jerked back her gloveless hand.

He knelt beside her. “Here, let me see.” He cradled her hand in his, examining the small cut one of the thorns had made on the back of her hand. Already it was fading. He smoothed a thumb over the cut, and it was gone. “I should find you some gloves, along with a hat.”

“Thank you,” she said again. She tried to slip her hand free, but he tightened his grip slightly. “Please, Epi.”
For the first time, she met his gaze. He saw the sharpness of pain within those brown depths. He wanted to take it all away, to take her in his arms again. When she tried to free her hand once more, he let her go.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t-” Her body tensed, and she jerked her head around to stare across the courtyard. Ana didn’t understand what was happening or why her demeanour had suddenly changed. She straightened to her feet, and he rose with her.

“What is it?” he asked.

She didn’t answer. He was about to ask what was wrong again, when she spoke.

“Revelation.”

***

The blonde-haired young man leaned against the chain-link metal fence that encircled the small park, watching the kids as they screamed and shot each other with their finger-pistols. It had taken Revelation a couple days to find the right town, and a couple more after that to find out where the child he sought lived.

The funny thing about tasks was that they were branded with the potential to become Winged at birth, so they were fairly easy for a Winged to pick them out in a crowd. Most humans had some level of this potential, but the strongest were the ones eventually chosen. Even though they were human, a Winged could sense them from miles away. Unfortunately for Revelation, this brand grew stronger as the task grew older. The kid he wanted was only six, so it had taken a while to track him down.

At the end of a week of searching and then physically stalking the boy, he figured out that the child’s mother was horribly predictable. Every afternoon she took her son to play in the sand pit, and every afternoon she left him alone for a few moments while she went to buy a coke or ice cream from a vendor.

As he watched from the fence, the woman entered the playground, her son in tow. Revelation glanced at the digital clock mounted to the side of the nearby bank. Right on time.

The child went straight for the sand pit, his skinny legs running at full force, a happy grin plastered on his face. Revelation’s lip curled with disgust, but he pushed down his anger. He had a job to do. When the mother headed for the vendor, fishing change out of her purse, Revelation pushed away from the chain link fence and walked over to the child.

The child looked up as he approached. His eyes were a deep gray color, almost the color of Revelation’s wings.

“Hi,” Revelation said.
The child turned to find his mother in the crowd, and Revelation saw his chance. In one quick movement, he had grabbed into the boy’s thin wrist with one hand and covered his mouth with another. Then Revelation’s wings burst from his back, and he shot straight up into the air. He glanced down once, and it was obvious that any humans that had seen him had quickly forgotten.

He took the boy to the rooftop of an apartment across the street. The kid was struggling in his arms. Once Revelation had lowered to a height he knew wouldn’t cause the boy to break anything, he dropped him onto the gravel roof. He landed beside the boy and sat back on the balls of his feet. The boy didn’t move, though Revelation could hear his breathing. After a while, he could also hear quiet sniffing.

Finally, after the crying began to annoy him, Revelation poked the blonde head. “Hey you, stop that. You’ll spoil my fun.”

The boy stirred and looked up. His nose was running. “Where’s my mom?”

“Down there,” Revelation said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “You won’t be seeing her again.”

The boy’s gray eyes widened. “Are-are you gonna kill me?”

“Maybe,” Revelation said, even though he knew he wasn’t. “Take off your shirt.”

“How?”

Revelation poked him again harder, in his side, his fingernail digging into him through the shirt. “Do it, else I’ll rip it off you, arms and head and all.”

The boy obeyed with shaking hands. His frame was small and very pale. Revelation pushed him down with his knee and stuck two fingers against the bumps between his shoulder blades.

“Think happy thoughts,” he told him and pressed.

The boy screamed as his back began to buckle like something was moving just beneath the skin. Then the flesh finally gave way, and two large masses of feathers and blood burst through.

Everyone’s wings are a different color, but no matter what shade they might end up, they always start out being the exact same.

The child’s wings were nearly double his size and white, white, sterile white.

“Lookie there,” Revelation hummed, pulling out one feather to show him. “I just ripped out your soul before it was fully baked. Don’t worry about the red part; your feathers are as white as death.” He laughed thinly. He fist a handful of the downy stuff and tugged until it gave up and came loose, feathers scattering, laying stark against his clothes. “Careful. Don’t lose too much blood or else you might die.”
The boy was crying, maybe, but Revelation didn’t bother to find out. He wiped his hands on the discarded shirt and stood, brushing off the white feathers. “She won’t want you now. Not broken. But have no fear – he’ll come and save you soon so stay where you are. And maybe one day you’ll come and get rid of my life for me, hmm?”

He didn’t bother to wait and see if the child gave an answer. Releasing his own wings, Revelation leapt from the rooftop, heading toward yet another park where he knew he’d soon be found.

***

Back in Colonia, Epi took a few steps away, her eyes focused inward on something Ana couldn’t see. He grasped her shoulders, but she didn’t seem to notice him.

“What do you sense?” He gave her a shake, and she did come out of her trance then.

“Revelation is acting again,” she said. “I must go after him.”

Ana shook his head. “I can’t let you do that. He will kill you.”

“Epi, he will kill you.” I can’t lose her, he thought wildly. She is all I have anymore.

She took his hands in hers, her skin warm to the touch. Her face was calm, and a cool breeze pushed her brown hair over her shoulders. “Revelation has just attacked one of my tasks, a six-year-old boy I had planned to find in the future. Don’t you see, Ana? It’s my fault. He won’t stop until I go out there. I have to do this.”

Things were happening too fast. His mind was spinning and he couldn’t slow his thoughts long enough to tell her everything he wanted to say.

“He’s done something horrible to the boy,” she said. “Something that’ll kill him if we wait too much longer.”

“Let me go with you,” Ana said.

She shook her head. “You have to find the boy.”

“So I will find him, and then follow you.” He grasped her shoulders and pulled her close, making her meet his own insistent gaze. “Don’t confront Revelation until I catch up with you.”

“Promise me you will find the boy.”

He promised, and realized that she had never promised back. He saw her dart across the courtyard, heading toward the dormitory. Seconds later, she appeared back outside; her skirt pulled against her legs as she ran. She pressed something into his hand.

“Take this box, Ana, and give it to Revelation when you think he’s ready to end all of this. I trust you with it.”
He looked down at the tiny box wrapped in thin tissue paper. He wondered what was in it, what could be so important that would have an effect on Revelation. He wanted to rip open the delicate paper right then, but there wasn’t time for that right now. Tucking it into one of his pockets, he nodded. “Tell me where I need to go.”

They paused once on the other side of the stone that surrounded Colonia. The high wall cast a protective shadow over them. Seized with a sense of urgency, Ana grabbed Epi’s hand and pulled it around his own waist. She complied, letting herself be pulled against him. He bent down and their lips met for the first time. The kiss wasn’t soft, like he had always imagined, but firm and rushed. Their teeth knocked against their lips as they pressed into one another.

Then Epi stepped away from him, not meeting his eyes. They said nothing to each other, because there was nothing they had to say.

They took off in different directions across the sky.

***

Revelation plunked down on the blue wooden seat of the swing. A few children crawled on nearby monkey bars, but it was early in the day and school was still in session. He hadn’t been back to this particular playground since he’d been dragged away from his human life. But she’d know to look for him here.

Using his heels, he pushed himself back and forth a little. He’d never cared much for swings and their cheap excuse for amusement. He’d always preferred something more satisfying as a kid, like throwing rocks through the windows of his father’s house.

He felt Epiphany approach and grinned to himself. She’d come alone like he knew she would. She had too much empathy to involve anyone else in their little tirade.

She landed a few yards away, facing him. Dark circles framed her eyes, and her skirt struggled across a cool breeze. She said nothing.

“Well,” Revelation said, jumping up from the wooden seat. “I’ve waited a long time for this moment.”

She just looked at him, her brown, assuming eyes just looking. Then, she finally spoke. “I’m sorry for what I did to you.”

He shrugged. “I could tell from my tasking vision of you that you didn’t mean it. You’re too good for that. Really, it’s too bad that you weren’t experienced enough to understand. So many lives could’ve been saved.”

She took a few steps forward. Her voice turned pleading. “I came here like you wanted.”

“Very obedient,” he said nastily.
“I won’t fight you,” she continued.
“You wouldn’t win even if you tried. You Winged have no penchant for fighting. This has been so easy, it’s almost been boring.”
She folded her arms over her chest, and then lowered them. “After you take your revenge with me, there won’t be any reason to continue all of this. Just please – don’t hurt anyone else.”
He laughed. He crossed the final distance between them, smirking when she didn’t move away. Slowly, so she knew exactly what he was about to do, he lifted one of his hands to her neck. Fear darkened her eyes, but she stood still.
“You’ve always been a good girl,” Revelation said, sneering.
He clenched his fingers around her neck, choking off her oxygen. Her hands reflexively came up to grasp his fingers, but she didn’t try to pry them away. Her eyes slid closed, accepting her fate. He grinned. Just like everything else, this had all been too easy. Now he decided to let her in on just how complicated it was about to get.
He leaned in close to her ear. “In the beginning, I might’ve been satisfied with just seeing you pay. But, my dear, this stopped being just about you a long time ago.” He pressed his lips to the shell of her ear and whispered the truth that he hadn’t told anyone else.
Her eyes flew open, but it was too late. Revelation’s free hand swung up and plunged a long knife deep between her ribs. Her punctured heart pumped blood out of the wound, the thickness sliding silkily between his fingers. Revelation’s breath was uneven and so very loud, but he wasn’t out of breath. As he held the knife inside her, her body could not heal, and she bled to death in his arms.
CHAPTER TEN

“Where are you, Ana?”

Someone was calling him, the voice soft and far away, blocked by the mental wall separating
the man from the conscious world.

“Ana! Ana!”

No, his mind responded, not so much a retort as a whimper. Warm. He was warm here. He
had no body; he needed no body. He could have stayed there forever, floating among the quiet recess
where he didn’t have to think, didn’t have to face the truth he had sensed –

“Come on, Ana. Give me somethin’.”

– Epi was dead.

No . . . Already he felt himself slipping from the warmth, the darkness of his mind, falling
into the light of the outside consciousness. He could feel his surroundings again, the old leaves crisp
and cool beneath his fingertips, the bark of a tree rough against his back, a breeze caressing his up­
tilted face. Here I am. He sent out the message before realizing his wings were hidden, and the
person calling couldn’t hear his weak reply.

He opened his eyes, squinting against a sudden onslaught of sunlight. He stared through the
branches looming above him, through the dark shadows to the blue, blue sky. How long had he been
sitting here in the middle of the woods, at the base of this tree? Hours, probably, he thought.

“Here,” he called aloud, voice crackling. He cleared his throat and wet his lips, then tried
again. “Here I am,” he said, louder.

“Ana!” Kepzelet ran to his side, cursing as he crouched on his toes. “Your life force was so
dim I couldn’t sense you five yards away. What the hell happened to you?”

“Nothing,” Ana croaked. “Nothing happened to me.”

“I’ve been looking for you for hours, Ana. Rumor got around that you and Epi had taken off
to fight Revelation. Some people started saying that we should go out there and help, while others
were frozen in place with fear that Revelation would kill us all off for revenge. Colonia was in a
panic – people zipping frantically everywhere until Scio ordered us all grounded. Grounded, man!
I’ve never seen the like. I had to take a bus to get to the nearest town, and I haven’t taken one of
those damn things in twenty years.”

The Winged were grounded? Scio hadn’t used that desperate move since the humans had
thought about settling in the mountains close to Colonia, and everyone thought they would have to
travel somewhere else and start all over again. The grounding had forced everyone to keep in their
wings and stay hidden, until Scio had done something about the human settlers. But why had Scio used it now?

Ana leaned his head back, gazing up at the broken sky. No wonder he had gotten so dizzy. At the same time everyone else had closed themselves up tightly, Epi’s presence had also vanished from his mind.

Why had she gone alone? Why hadn’t she waited for him? Ana struggled to tuck away his pain for now. He had other things to focus on.

“Scio said to bring you back with me,” Kep said. A solid hand on his shoulder helped Ana sit up, and an arm slipped under his. “I have to find Epi, too. You two are the only ones unaccounted for. Do you know where she is?”

Kep did not realize the truth, and how could he? He had pulled up his barriers right before, shutting out everyone’s presences. It was likely no one knew what had happened yet.

“I know where,” Ana said. He pressed a thumb and forefinger to his aching eyes. “She’s in a town far from here, too far to travel today if we are grounded. I spoke to her earlier.” His throat clenched; he forced the words out. “A task was attacked today.”

“A task?” Kep sucked in a sharp breath. “R-Revelation?”

“Yes. The task belonged to Epi. She felt as though Revelation had contacted her directly, so she went after him by herself. I tried to follow, but she sent me to find the task. The boy was not dead at the time.”

Kep quivered visibly, and Ana would have tried to comfort him if it hadn’t been about to get worse. “And Epi?”

Ana straightened to his feet, standing without support. “We will go to pick up the body later.”

“Ana!” A choked sob.

“The boy may still be alive and if so, we must get to him now. How long did you say you have been searching for me?”

“T-two hours. Maybe a little more.”

“I made it most of the way before I crashed into the woods. I can’t be but a few miles outside of town.”

Kep visibly collected his courage, then said, “It’s probably the town I road the bus to. I know the way.”

Being so close to human civilization, the woods weren’t very dense, and most of the underbrush had been cleared out. The two of them made it out in less than half an hour.
Ana swept his gaze around the outskirts of the town, wishing Scio had not grounded them. Epi had described a small park where the task liked to frequent, and such places were easier to find from the sky.

Epi . . . He felt an internal pang of guilt and sorrow, and pushed it aside. No time for such thoughts now; he needed to find that boy. “Revelation can’t have taken him far,” he said. His sharp eyes landed on a set of apartment buildings towering beside the park, and the flat roofs seemed an appropriate place for dragging a little boy somewhere only a Winged could spot him.

“This way,” Ana told Kep, motioning toward the apartment complex.

The building was six stories tall, too high for two grounded Winged. Going inside and trying to pick locks would take more time than they had, and direct contact with the normal public was strongly discouraged. Ana found a fire escape attached to the side and they swiftly climbed the metal ladder.

Immediately he could see that no one was there, but at least they had a vantage point from this height. He could peer onto the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. He crossed the roof, the gravel crunching under his feet. The wind was stronger up here, tugging at their hair and clothes. A quick glance at the nearby apartments told him that the boy wasn’t there, either. Ana pushed down his rising frustration.

“Maybe we should check the other side of the park?” Kep suggested.

Ana nodded. They would have to check the whole area before resorting to other measures. They crossed the park, dodging kids running about and kicking soccer balls. On the other side, Ana felt a tiny twinge along his senses.

“Feel that?”

“I’m still in grounded mode,” Kep said. “You feel something?”

“Yes.” Ana knew that he could track the faint presence nearby. He also knew that he shouldn’t be able to sense someone else’s task, even if it had been Epi’s. “This way.”

The next escape contraption wasn’t so easy to climb. Ana had to lift Kep up so he could reach the bottom of it, then the younger Winged dropped the lowest ladder for Ana could climb up. The sense that someone was up there grew stronger.

Immediately upon stepping onto the roof, Ana smelled blood, a heady scent lingering in the air. Kep, behind him, mumbled something unintelligible under his breath. A crumpled heap of feathers lay at the far end of the rooftop and when the heap shifted, Ana caught sight of skinny legs tucked under a body.
The boy was still alive. His wings had been ripped from his back, forced prematurely into existence, and dried blood stained the white feathers and the pale skin underneath them.

Kep clapped a hand to his mouth. “Skies above, Ana. That bastard tasked a kid.”

Ana knelt beside the boy and touched one narrow shoulder. The boy flinched. “Calm, little one,” he said as gently as he could. “We wish to help you. Easy, easy now…” The child turned his head and fixed two hazy gray eyes on Ana, his expression blank and... unfinished.

Kep shivered. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Revelation didn’t finish the tasking,” Ana explained. “He is only half-tasked.” Such a thing presumably could happen, but Ana had never heard of it actually occurring. Half-tasked meant that the wings had been pulled out, but the human was still just that – a human. Without a Winged’s strength and ability to heal, the human would eventually bleed to death. Or worse, remain forever a creature neither Winged nor human, but something mangled and in between.

“We can’t just leave him like that, can we?” Kep asked.

“He will certainly die.”

“Then we have to finish it, right?” It was an admirable move on Kep’s part, and later Ana would remember to tell him so. The redhead stepped forward, offering up himself. “I’ll do it.”

But Ana shook his head. “No, I will.”

Kep’s eyes were wide. “Can you do that? I mean-”

“My final task is dead,” Ana said, more harshly than he meant. “If there is anything left in me to give, I want to give it to the task that would’ve been hers.” Honestly, he didn’t even know if it could be done. No Winged who had a final task had ever tried to task someone else afterward. He remembered Scio words telling him that he would gradually start to feel different, but Ana had yet to feel any of those effects.

He lightly traced a finger from the boy’s neck to somewhere among the mass of feathers protruding from between his shoulder blades, and pressed.

The boy screamed, and black swarmed into Ana’s vision. He heard sniffling cries, a dry and humorless laugh. Red exploded before his eyes and he saw blood and white feathers, and then lastly a mother’s face bathed in shadow. In turn, he knew that the boy saw events from only a few hours ago; Epi pressing a box into his hand, Epi trying not to cry as their hands parted, Ana suddenly pushing her against the outside of the stone wall, where no one could see, Ana pressing his lips to hers for the first and last time. Ana closed his eyes and shook his head to clear the memories. He found his eyes were wet, and he wiped them before he stood.

Revelation had only begun the tasking of this male child, and now Ana had finished it.
He could hear a woman wailing nearby. He stood and walked to the edge of the roof, and saw her slumped at the feet of a police officer. He recognized her as the mother from the memories. Kep heard her too, and Ana raised an arm to block his path.

"Don't."

"Ana," Kep insisted.

"What could you say to comfort that woman? We have to take your son with us and you will never see him again? It never works that simply."

The younger Winged slumped. "What will happen to her?"

"She will slowly forget she ever had a son, as all those who knew a task must. Come, we must return to Colonia." They did not have time to think upon such issues.

The boy had lost consciousness sometime during the completion of his tasking, and Ana wondered how much of his vision he had actually seen. Ana stroked the unruly wings that were a third the size of a normal wing, yet a perfect size for such a small boy. Ana frowned when his touch had no effect - the wings should have vanished by now, especially while the child was asleep.

He gathered the boy into his arms, careful to let the sprouting feathers dangle freely. "Kep, we are going to fly."

"But the grounding--"

"We cannot very well travel by bus with a white-winged, blood-strained boy, can we? Walk if you like, but we need to get him safely back."

Kep hesitated, then rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. "You're a rough guy when you want something, Ana," he muttered, moving away from the other man. "Scio help me if I ever make you mad." He flexed his shoulders, closed his eyes against the pain, and a few moments later they were on their way home.

Home. Colonia had gained another Winged.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

His mother smiled down at him, her hand surrounding and holding his. She asked him if he was thirsty, and he grinned and said he wanted a soda. He had been playing in the sandbox since he got out of school that afternoon. Bent over his newest castle-like creation, he didn’t notice the long-haired figure approaching from behind. He was too surprised to yell when a hand clamped onto his arm and then another over his mouth.

He was taken from the park and tossed onto a rooftop alone and frightened. He lay still and quiet, and silently cried out for his mother. The man standing over him spoke roughly.

“Are you gonna kill me?”

“Maybe. Take off your shirt.”

“Why?”

“Do it, else I’ll rip it off you, arms and head and all.”

Pain flashed between his shoulder blades, and he saw things he didn’t understand, memories that weren’t his own, and he felt a part of himself being pulled out from the inside. His face was damp, his back hot and sticky, and he couldn’t see anything. His captor still talked, speaking of feathers and souls and of some girl. He remembered a girl with brown hair and eyes; she had been nice to him, saying she was a friend and she’d be back to ask him something later on. He never found out her question, or who she was, or why he’d felt happy whenever he thought of her.

Eventually he lost consciousness and floated among his own thoughts and feelings. He thought about his mother. He cried. He called out to the brown-haired girl and received no answer in return.

He had snapped back to reality when someone touched him, a firm presence among all the emotion. This man was different, unhostile and maybe even kind. His cool hands soothed the burning along the boy’s back, but when the fingers pressed on a particular spot, the same pain returned. This time the pain contained less violence, the foreign memories that assailed him less angry but with the same sadness and loneliness. The pain had receded, and he slipped into darkness once more.

Deep inside the city of the Winged, the boy slept on.

***

Ana wanted a smoke. He remembered the heat of the flame, the wispy fumes that filled his nostrils, the comfort balanced between two fingers, and realized he missed his cigarettes. The day he met Epi – or rather the girl that became Epiphany – she had shown her dislike for the rolled strips of paper, and he had quit the habit that very night. There might be a stray pack somewhere among his
quarters, and if he looked hard enough, perhaps he could find it. Yet he couldn’t gather enough courage to get up from his chair.

He glanced at the clock. Almost four hours had vanished since she died.

His knee ached, and he absently rubbed smooth circles over the scarred skin hidden by his black pants. The wound had healed quickly enough, but the pain remained or just the memory of the pain. The sound of the bones breaking echoed in his head, and he doubted he could ever forget that triumphant face, bright blue eyes glaring down at him. I won, Anagnorisis. I won.

And maybe he already had.

A knock sounded on the door, and a woman with reddish hair gave him a strained smile. “The Director wishes to see you.” She scanned him obviously, but he supposed his drained appearance warranted such staring. “Are you not well? Should I tell him–?”

“No, thank you. Is he in the library?”

“Seventh floor.”

He thanked her again and was glad she left before he stood. He placed some weight on his left leg and, when it held, felt confident enough to walk the rest of the way.

Though hours had passed since everyone unaccounted for had returned, the grounding had not been lifted. Climbing the spiral staircase was slow going, but he eventually made it. He found the Director on one of the balconies that jutted out from the library’s seventh floor, and he closed the glass door silently behind him as he stepped outside. Scio rarely took off his cloak, but this time the hood was drawn back and his thick white hair lay freely about his shoulders. He didn’t turn around as Ana came to his side.

“For the first time, no one flies above our city,” Scio said.

Ana followed the older man’s gaze to the skies. “No, they do not.” He hesitated, then asked, “Why did you ground us today?”

“Look at us,” Scio told him, not answering. He swept out a hand. “We have been reduced to cowering in fear as though he would sweep down at any moment and devour us all.”

“But he won’t. Revelation may have killed several of us, but he cannot entirely destroy our people, and he knows it.”

Scio pressed a hand to his chest. “We lost yet another one today. Tilt has not been heard from in months.”

Ana pushed aside his rising grief. Now was not the time to mourn Epi. “We lost two,” he said, “although the second may not realize it. Epi felt that Revelation blamed her for his tasking, that
all of this was her fault. But he can’t deny the connection they shared. He is not as unaffected by her as he wishes.”

“The boy.”

Ana nodded. Revelation had targeted the child specifically because of Epi’s interest in tasking him. Had jealousy been Revelation’s driving force behind targeting that specific person? Epi had thought it was a ploy to pull her out of Colonia, but Ana thought the reasoning ran much deeper than that. “I was going to look in at the infirmary after we talked.”

“It will do no good at this time,” Scio said. “He has been through what no one should have to experience. Such wounds take longer than mere hours to heal. He won’t wake for days still, or longer.”

“What should I do? He is only six years old, much too young for a Winged, and his wings are so damaged that I’m not sure if they will ever work properly.” Ana felt anger bubble hot within him. “He cannot be sent back to where he belongs.”

Scio turned weary eyes to the sky once more, where the reddened sun dipped into the horizon. The sky seemed to stretch forever toward the west. “Then,” he said, “he belongs here now. Revelation may have begun the tasking, but it was your hand that finished it. This child . . . I fear he has not seen the last of Revelation. Can I entrust his care and instruction to you?”

Ana bowed his head. “Yes.” He paused at the door, needing to know an answer to his earlier question. “Master,” he whispered. The word had slipped out, the sound foreign on his tongue. He had not called Scio that title in many decades. “Why did you ground us?”

“She asked me to,” was the reply.

Epi had ensured that no one would be able to follow her — no one, especially Ana. Ana’s hand tightened on the doorframe, fingers clenching the cold stone. He spoke to no one as he returned to his empty room. He managed to fully close the door before the tears came.

***

The child awoke, gray eyes snapping open, mouth sucking in new air. He stared wildly up at the ceiling. He tried to sit up, his elbows brushing downy softness, and he pushed upward, gasping in surprise as the action trapped him from rising. Two blankets of white feathers fanned along either side of him, trailing past his bare feet to seep over the edge of the bed. He tried to sit up again before giving up and lying back down.

Ana entered the room in time to witness all of this. He wanted to rush over and help the boy, but he feared he might frighten him. He knocked gently on the open door, and the boy jerked his head around to stare at him. Ana lifted his hands in a calming gesture.
“Hullo,” he said. “My name is Anagnorisis – Ana, if you like. I came and helped you at the rooftop . . . do you remember?” Ana hardly had any experience with children, and he was a bit shocked to find nervousness making his hands shaky. He lowered them and resisted burying the fingers inside his pockets. “You have been unconscious for several days. Are you hungry? Would you like something to drink?” He took a few steps forward, stopping when the boy attempted to move in the opposite direction. He was lying on his wings, a position that made moving difficult, which was why most Winged slept with the extra appendages sealed away.

The child watched him cross the room, caution written all over his wide-eyed face. Ana rested to one knee beside the bed. “You are tangled. Let me help you?” The boy didn’t answer but stayed still. Ana slipped an arm under his shoulders and lifted him enough to slide the wings free. The wings looked better than before, clean and only slightly rumpled, twice the child’s size though much smaller than normal. The child tucked skinny knees under his chin and blinked at him.

Ana sighed. “We can work on your wings later after they gain more strength. How are you feeling?”

The boy did not answer, his large gray eyes merely staring.

“Are you all right? Can you understand me?” Perhaps the child was deaf, although he had not appeared that way earlier. A young voice screaming still rang in Ana’s mind, and he decided not to press the boy into speaking. Ana had met silent Winged before, people who refused, or lost the ability, to speak and never uttered a word after their tasking.

Finally, Ana received a slight nod in answer. Good, he thought. Now back up. Let’s start over.

He held a hand over his chest. “I am Ana. What is your name?”

The boy hesitated, then dug a child-sized plastic wallet from his back pocket and flipped through the clear sleeves inside. He showed Ana a library card printed with his name.

Ana gave him a slight smile. “Now that we’re acquainted, I’m sure you have questions.” He thought a moment about where to begin. He had explained these things to plenty of tasks before, but certainly never to a child. “You are in Colonia, where we all live. We are the Winged, people who have wings like you do now, and we find others like us who want to have wings too. You were chosen to become a Winged years from now, but this man . . . this bad man hurt you.” Ana trailed off. The boy seemed to comprehend. He hugged his arms tighter around his knees.

“You are safe here,” Ana told him. “I’ve been instructed to take care of you and help you learn how to be one of us. The first thing we need to do is seal away your wings. They are in the way, aren’t they?”
The boy touched one of the feathers and looked back at Ana with question in his eyes.

Ana sat on the bed beside him, glad that the boy didn’t flinch away. “A dear friend of mine once asked me if the wings are the soul, and I said they weren’t. But they are often compared to the soul because they represent an inside part of you that most people don’t get to see. It takes time to get used to them. May I?” He reached behind the boy and thumbed the area where feathered bone and skin met the rest of his body. “To make the wings go away, you only have to concentrate on that thought. I can help you.”

The boy sucked in a sharp breath as the wings slipped into his back and vanished into their hidden pockets. Ana rubbed circles over his bare back, smoothing out the pain. “They will always hurt like that. You can decide not to use them unless you have to, if you want.”

Ana stood and crossed the room to the closet, searching for a suitable shirt. “Here, put this on. It’s is a bit large but will do for now.” The shirt fell nearly to the boy’s knees, and the short sleeves fell past his elbows. “The second thing we need to do is go the library so you can choose your new name. Come and I will show you.” Before he could stop himself, he held out a hand.

The child stared at the fingers, then slowly reached up and grasped Ana’s hand.

As the two of them walked from the housing complex and crossed the main courtyard, the child surveyed everything around him, wide-eyed. Ana sensed no fear, only an open curiosity that gave him more hope for the child’s full recovery than before. The Winged they encountered greeted the boy with sad smiles and gentle handshakes; they all knew what had happened and their pity was evident.

“The library,” Ana said, “has eight stories and every book imaginable, including our own records of every Winged past and present and all potential Winged as well. You might even be able to find a passage about yourself, if you looked hard enough. The books containing names are kept on the forth floor along with most of the records.”

“You will find this place fairly full today,” Ana said, “but you should be left alone to pick your new name.” Ana held open the door and ushered the boy inside. Then he proceeded to explain the act of naming, finishing with what he told each of his new tasked Winged: “Each volume covers one letter of the alphabet. Names already taken or unavailable are marked through.”

The boy’s grip on his fingers had tightened. Ana gently pulled them free and bent to place both hands on his slim shoulders. “Trust me. When you find the right name, you will know. I will return in an hour.” Straightening, he left the boy alone in the room.
The child wasn’t sure what to do. He stood there, fidgeting slightly and tugging at the sleeves of the large shirt slipping off one shoulder, before shuffling over to the bound volumes. What name should he pick? He didn’t know. Right now his first name began with a R, so he reached up and took that volume off the shelf. Small fingers opened the cover.

//“Names already taken or unavailable are marked through.”//

Every word on the first page had a thick black line drawn through it.

He turned to the next page and the result was the same. Again he turned and again and again, and every name was marked out. He grasped a section of paper and flipped rapidly through the pages; a splotch of black ink stood out from one leaf and he paused. The name was almost indecipherable, so many black lines crossed through it over and over, scratches going so deep they cut two or three pages beneath them. R...e... ending in n with a l somewhere in the middle... The boy couldn’t decipher any more than that.

Why would someone cross out that name so many times as if desperately trying to ensure that no one ever used it again? His hands trembled, a sudden weight pressed against his chest, and he banged the book shut with a resounding clap.

Slightly shaking, he returned the volume to its shelf. His last name began with a C, so he would use that instead. He held his breath when he opened the book, but only a few of the names on each page were unavailable. What name to pick... He really wasn’t sure and didn’t know what most of these words meant anyway, if they meant anything at all. He decided to just flip through the book and see what happened.

He had only turned a few pages when he heard someone speak behind him.

A solid thumping inside the room alerted Ana, and he grew concerned for the boy. Maybe he was moving too fast after all. He probably should’ve waited to do the naming later. Frowning, he reentered the small room.

“I heard a loud noise. Is everything well?”

The boy visibly flinched. Ana stepped closer, relieved that everything seemed okay. He tucked his hands within his pants pockets. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. If you haven’t found a name yet, I can leave.”

The boy pointed to a name on the page, and Ana leaned over to read the selected word.
“Catharsis,” he said softly. “It represents the resolve of emotion and conflict at the end of a story. Yes, that will make a fine name for you.” He almost reached and patted the boy on the head, but checked himself and only smiled. “Scio, our Director, wishes to meet you. Shall we go, Cath?”

Cath touched the name written in the book once more. Ana knew that soon a line would be drawn through it, establishing the boy’s ownership, sealing the name from use. Ana offered a hand like he had earlier, but Cath walked past him and the stairs, pausing once to motion “this way.” Acquiescing, Ana silently followed.

They walked to another section of the library, a pale boy dressed in a too-large shirt and a tall man all in black; the scene would’ve seemed strange in any place except Colonia.

Cath came to a particular row of books, a section of the library Ana knew well. He had first sensed the madness hidden within Revelation at this place, the younger man reading their biographies and laughing at whatever he found amusing. Ana had received his injury in this room and, glancing down at the carpet, he squinted and thought he could still see the outlines of blood.

“Is there something you are looking for?” he asked.

Cath did not reply and selected a book from one of the lower shelves. Ana watched as he opened the book and turned to a picture, then held it up for Ana to see. It was a black and white photograph of Revelation, or rather an older snapshot of the young man he had been before his tasking.

“He has killed many of us,” Ana said. “We have been fighting him for many years. You won’t find the newer books on him here, as they are kept locked away.” Cath gave no response, fixed on the picture of a smiling face and cropped blonde hair. Ana gently took the book, hid the image, and replaced it on the shelf. “He hurt you and he will not be forgiven for it. But now isn’t the time for thinking about him. Let’s go find Scio.”

When Ana took his hand, the boy didn’t resist, and they walked out of the library together.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Ana was dreaming. He knew he was dreaming from the fact that he was standing next to his bed, watching himself draw the deep breaths of sleep. He leaned over and tried to touch his own face, but his hand went through the cheek of his slumbering self as though he wasn’t really there.

He shivered and folded his arms against his torso. Looking around the room, he didn’t see anything out of place. His black coat still hung across the back of his desk chair, and the window he had left cracked open was letting in a chilly night breeze. He shivered again and briefly wished he had on more than the simple white t-shirt and cotton shorts he had gone to bed in. Though, he shouldn’t be able to feel anything in a dream, anyway.

He could see the dim glow of light coming in from under his door. When his hand went through the door knob instead of gripping to turn it, he took a quick glance at his sleeping body and stepped through the door.

The lights in the hallway were on, though he precisely remembered that they were off when he went to bed. He saw no one in the hallway, but the door to Cath’s room was wide open. It seemed like the light from the hallway was actually coming from the room. Ana looked closely at the hall lights and saw that they were indeed off. As Ana walked toward the door, which was only a couple doors down from his, his footsteps echoed loudly. At one point, he stopped walking, thinking that he was hearing something besides his footsteps, but the sound stopped, and then started again once he continued to Cath’s room.

The light inside Cath’s room was bright, so bright that Ana had to squint against it until his eyes adjusted enough. Once he was able to see clearly, he peered toward the bed at the far corner.

Cath lay face down in the pillows, his blonde hair obscuring his face. Ana’s eyes trailed down to the boy’s back and he gasped. Blood covered Cath’s back and the sheets. His wings were shredded, white feathers lying in loose clumps all around the bed.

Bile rose in Ana’s throat and he stumbled toward the still boy. He fell to his knees and reached out even though he knew he couldn’t touch anything. His hand went through the boy’s cheek, but at that moment, Cath turned his head. Instead of gray eyes, bright blues stared up at Ana. It wasn’t Cath’s young face that Ana saw, but Revelation’s, a grin revealing white teeth.

*I won, *Anagnorisis.*

Ana awoke, gasping for air. His room was empty. He could hear birds beginning to chirp outside through his cracked window, and the sun was peeking over the top of Colonia’s stone wall. He threw back the covers and hurried into his usual pair of black pants, then rushed out of his room. He could feel other Winged stirring about him.
The door to Cath’s room was closed. Ana tapped lightly on the door, and when he received no response, he held his breath and opened it. Cath lay beneath the covers, his face, smooth and peaceful in sleep, turned towards the door. There was no blood or torn feathers, and Ana heaved a sigh of relief. He sat in the desk chair and cradled his face in one hand. He had been having these dreams for weeks now. This one had disturbed him more than he had first thought, and it took a while for his heart to slow its frantic beating at his chest.

There was a knock on the door and Kep stuck his head in. “The Director is callin’ a meeting,” he said, whispering once he saw the sleeping boy. “I think you’d better come.”

“What is it about?”

“I’m not sure, but I heard someone sayin’ it was about time we went after Revelation all together, as a group.”

Ana raised his eyebrows. “As a group?”

“No. We’re gonna attack the bastard.”

***

It had been raining since yesterday morning, and Tiltmeter felt like the world was drowning in it. She had entered this sleepy town nearly a week ago, following the weak trail that had ended here. The man she followed – hunted – normally made no mistakes, but his movements had grown sloppy the past few days. Just when she thought she had lost the trail, a rumor came from some Winged in the west that he was here. But once the rain had started, all traces of his presence had been washed away. She had no choice but to stay here and wait. He could have left during the storm, but she wouldn’t know that until the endless downpour ceased.

The money she had stolen from a woman at a gas station had run out quickly. Winged hardly kept up with the stuff, not needing food or drink to survive. She had sought shelter at first though, but when she used up all her money, she lost her hotel room as well.

Tilt leaned against the door and pressed her back to the rear entrance of the restaurant to escape the rain. The narrow molding did little except keep the back of her neck dry. She was tired, so tired. She missed her squarish room inside Colonia. She missed the warmth of a fire and the scent of her paints. Colonia was several thousand miles from here, but she could make the flight in less than a full day at top speed.

She gritted her teeth, looked up at the dark sky, and saw no stars. For a moment, she had almost regretted making this journey, but now she had to focus on what she’d came here to do.

Other Winged had tried and failed this same mission. They had lost what she had – someone close to them, someone who had not deserved the unmerciful death he or she had received. When she
had heard about Epi and the boy now called Cath, her resolve to stop Revelation had only grown. But unlike those other Winged, this wouldn’t be a simple act of revenge for Logia’s death. No matter how much she wished to ignore it, Tilt and the man she hunted shared the undeniable connection of Winged and task.

Lightning flashed, zigzagging through the sky and briefly casting a glow over the street. From her position in the alley, only a section of the street was visible between the buildings. She caught sight of someone walking alone down the sidewalk, his slow pace indicating that the rain didn’t bother him. His sandy-colored hair hung in damp clumps to the sides of his face and trailed down his back. The hem of his off-white trench coat and the soles of his black shoes were stained with mud. The moonless night was dark, and the sickly lamp hanging over the street gave off little light, but Tilt recognized him instantly.

Her chest tightened and anger blazed hotly within her. She slid a hand around her back and grasped the switchblade tucked into her pants, pulling it out and exposing the blade with a barely audible click. The person – Revelation – suddenly stopped, bent to one knee, and began retying his shoe.

This was it. She had waited long enough. She spread her feet apart, splayed the fingers of her other hand against the door, and pushed off with all her might. Her sneakers slapped against the rain-slick earth, and a crackle of thunder swallowed up her cry. His head jerked up, and his scarlet eyes widened with something almost like surprise. Tilt aimed her knife at his heart and lunged.

Lightning split the darkness once more. He straightened at the last second and barely missed having his chest torn open. In the same movement, he grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back, forcing her to drop the weapon. He knocked her legs out from under her, and her back and the side of her head hit the pavement roughly.

“No!” she cried.

His weight kept her pinned. His left hand moved to cut off her oxygen, pressing into her throat. She choked and squirmed, trying to draw a breath. She had failed horribly, and now she would pay with her life.

“I’ll admit,” Revelation said casually, “I hadn’t expected to get attacked here. I commend you.” The hand left her throat, and she gasped in much-needed air. She felt him tug on the hood of her sweater. “I want to see your face, little assassin.” The drawstring finally broke, and the fabric was wrenched over her head, exposing her face and curly hair. She saw recognition flash in his eyes.
“Tilly . . .” The sincerity within his calm voice shocked her, and she struggled to hold onto her anger. This was the man whose death she had played through her mind for months. And yet he had called her by that hated nickname, the name she hadn’t let anyone use since.

“It’s been a while, Revelation,” she said, watching the motions of his hands warily. She knew that they could destroy and kill at amazing speeds, and she didn’t doubt he would use them on her.

“It has.” He eased off her, bending to pick up her knife. “So, what’s up?”

“W-what?” she sputtered, rising on her elbows. After everything that had happened, this was all he could say? Skies above, he acted as though they were old high school buddies, as though nothing, none of it, had ever happened. The dull throb that pierced her heart felt more painful than choking to death.

When she didn’t answer, Revelation shrugged and waved a hand at the rain as if now slightly annoyed by the constant pitter-patterting. “You look like hell,” he told her. “Come on.” Leaving her there on the sidewalk, he continued walking in the same direction as before.

She growled and got to her feet. She refused to leave now, and he still had her switchblade. She might get another opportunity . . .

They passed no one in the streets, most likely because of the wet weather and late hour. Revelation led her into an old apartment building, and they climbed the rickety stairs lined in peeling wallpaper to the second story. Stopping at the door, he moved aside and gestured for her to go ahead. She resisted the urge to swallow nervously, and flinched when he reached past her to open the door and flip on the light. He’d had plenty of chances to kill her, so why was he waiting?

“Cozy, isn’t it?” he said, taking off his sodden coat and draping it over a chair. His skin seemed pale against his red shirt and black pants. “No one’s rented it yet, so I’m keeping it warm. For free, of course,” he added, grinning at her.

The apartment was tiny, nothing more than a sliver of kitchen, a couch with a small table, and an adjacent bedroom and bathroom. Revelation moved to the couch and stretched out his legs on the coffee table, crossing his arms behind his head.

“There are some towels in the bathroom. Get me one, if you would.”

Stiffly, she did as he asked. Snatching two towels off the rack, she glanced at the mirror over the cracked porcelain sink. Her sullen reflection glared back at her, her eyes dull and one ear bleeding from where she’d scraped it on the concrete. She went back into the other room and tossed a towel at Revelation, using the other to dry the dripping ends of her hair and clothes.
After a moment of silence, he dug out her switchblade and held it up. “A knife, Tilly? That’s a little primitive, isn’t it? The least you could’ve done is come at me with a gun.”

“I hate you,” she said, staring at the floor.

“Right here would’ve been good,” he continued, pointing at his own forehead. “More Winged should come at me with guns, really. Might do the job.”

“I hate you!” By the time her scream faded, she was breathing so heavily from the force of it that she thought she might pass out.

“I know,” he said. “No need to shout.”

“You killed him. Why? Why did you do it? He didn’t even know who you were!”

His face was unreadable. “Who are you talking about? Ah, yes. That task of yours, right? What was his name?”

Her heart felt like it was breaking. “Logia.”

“He was braver than most, I remember. Never screamed once.”

She could feel the tears now, hot under her lashes. “Why . . . ?” she asked again.

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” He leaned forward, steeping his fingers and pressing his chin to them. “The world is a circle, full and complete. It needs nothing else to sustain it. One oddity and the whole thing can come crashing down. Splat. A bloody mess.”

“So you’re the oddity? If that’s true, then you should’ve killed yourself long ago.”

His lips quirked, amused. “It all comes down to suicide with you, doesn’t it, Tilly?”

“Don’t call me that!” she snarled. He didn’t move when she snatched her knife from where he had laid it on the table.

“What else should I call you? Tiltmeter? That’s such a horrid name.”

Tilt brandished the sharp blade. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Actually, I did. You just weren’t listening.”

Baring her teeth, she crossed the last few feet between them and held the knife to his throat, cutting in enough to make him bleed.

He gazed up at her, voice pensive. “When did you change, Tilly?”

“When I met you,” she spat. “You defile everything you touch.”

“Even you?”

“Bastard.” Even now, he was playing with her, twisting her words around.
He sighed and broke their gazes, looking out the window. “If I’d met you only months later, I would have pushed you off that cliff.” Madness! Did he even hear what he was saying? “Don’t you think a quick death would’ve been better?”

“Than watching my loved ones die? Of course.”

“No.” He might have shaken his head if it wasn’t for the knife still at his throat. “I never wanted to be one of them,” he said darkly. “She didn’t tell me what it meant.” His eyes narrowed. “If you aren’t going to do it, then get off me.”

“Oh, I’m going to!” she snapped. Underneath his sudden anger she had caught a glimpse of something he had never revealed before: a resentment not aimed at her, an insecurity. He had never wanted to be a Winged? Then why—why—

He touched a finger to the blade and eased it away from his neck. “There are other ways of ending it, Tilly, and none of them involve blood.”

“I hate you.” Was she saying it for him or for herself? She growled and yanked the long length of his hair over one shoulder, curling it around a fist. “The youngest of us thought you were so great because of your hair, because you didn’t have to wait years to get that physical mark of being a Winged. If you didn’t want it,” she hissed near his ear, “then what about that little boy? The one they call Catharsis? You didn’t give him a chance!”

His face twisted into a snarl. “Good! I’m glad for it!”

She slid the knife against the nape of his neck and jerked the blade up and through his hair. She was shoved away violently, banging her head on the floor. Black sparks shot before her eyes. She heard Revelation get up from the couch, his feet padding across the carpet, and he leaned over her. His now short hair curled around his ears; she had sheared it all off.

Two fingers reached out and touched the yellow strands still caught in her fist. “Your friends are planning something, something I don’t think you’ll want to be part of. After three days, go to Colonia, Tilly. Go back home to the few that will still be alive.”

He wrapped his hand around her neck, and everything went black.

***

Tilt carefully opened her eyes and noticed it was daylight outside, the fresh sunbeams streaming across her through the window. The rain must have stopped sometime during the night.

She was still lying on the floor of the apartment. Feeling along her neck, she noticed she had bruises there, but none had broken the skin; Revelation had left her alive. She sat up gingerly, rather stiff and uncomfortable from sleeping on the carpet. The place was quiet. He had probably left hours
ago. Her knife lay closed on the floor next to her. The long strands of his shorn hair were also still there, and she couldn’t bring herself to touch them.

Now that the rain had ceased, the town had come alive. People milled about the streets, heading to work or to get breakfast. She slipped out the door and into the woods before any of them noticed her. Humans and Winged just weren’t meant to mingle.

What would she do now? Her dreams had ended long ago, perhaps trapped inside a house once called home. She wondered what became of that place on stilts and its old wooden porch, the house she had once shared with her parents. Maybe someone had bought it from those lawyers, moved in with all their own furniture, and changed the color of the walls. Maybe it still sat there all alone, looking the way it had when she had followed Revelation. The porch might have rotted away and fallen to smash against the rocks. She kind of hoped the house had remained untouched, though she knew she would never go back there to see.

“You aren’t who you were.”

Had she really changed so much? The sixteen-year-old girl, Tiltmeter, Tilt, Tilly – they were all the same person, weren’t they?

She leaned her head back, and the sunshine bathed her face in warmth. She remembered Revelation’s final words to her, and she feared what might be about to happened. He had warned her not to return just yet, but he should’ve known better than to tell her. Colonia was her home now, and she would do everything to protect it.

Her wings unfurled from her back, the glistening feathers purple with golden highlights in the sun, and she stretched them wide. She had a long flight ahead of her.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The three of them stood on the library balcony high above the ground. Ana stood closest to the railing, and the wind caught his cloak and lifted it to fan behind him. Casi leaned against the wall to his left, her eyes bright with excitement. Further back, Scio sat in a chair by the glass door, his head bent and face in shadow. He had said little since the Winged had decided to mount a full attack against Revelation. Ana wondered what their undeclared leader must be thinking. Nothing like this had ever been attempted among the Winged before.

Below them, the others were beginning to fly over the wall that surrounded Colonia in twos and threes. Some of them carried knives they had stolen from the humans; Scio had forbid them the use of guns, saying that the risk they might accidentally shoot each other was too great. These Winged were mainly the younger ones, the generation not quite as settled into a life without weapons. Others brandished tools used for construction or gardening – hammers, rusted saws, shovels. But most of them raised empty fists into the air and flapped their wings in building anger. Over one hundred pairs of feet kicked up dust as they marched to the wall.

Ana bent over the railing and glimpsed two Winged sharpening the edges of their blades against the side of the library. He frowned and wanted to tell them to stop, but they were too far away to hear him. “She wouldn’t agree to this,” he said.

“Tiltmeter isn’t here,” Casi said, folding her muscular arms over her chest. Her long black hair had been tied back in a high ponytail and braided to keep it out of the way. Unlike most of the other Winged’s weapons, the knife strapped to her thigh had come from a human store where she had lifted it long ago. Two others like it had been given to Philologus, one of Casi’s older tasks, and Tilt before she had left Colonia. “And even if she was, why do you think she would object? Hasn’t Revelation taken someone that she cared for? Isn’t this why she left Colonia to begin with – to seek revenge?”

“Which is why Tilt wouldn’t agree.” Ana turned away from watching outside and focused on his task-sister. “She preferred to find him on her own, without endangering anyone else. Attacking Rev like this will only provoke him.”

“Revelation,” Casi said, “has been allowed to go unprovoked for long enough. It has been months since Tiltmeter vanished, and no one has heard from her since. Perhaps she is dead.”

Ana shook his head. “No, I would know it.”

Scio stirred, lifting a hand to brush back his hood. His dark eyes were narrow. “Revelation has not killed Tiltmeter,” he said. “Of that I am certain. However, I must take Castigalia’s stance on this issue. We must take the offensive if we are ever to stop him.”
“Could we not at least wait for her?”
“Over a year has passed since Revelation first turned against us. I believe we have waited long enough.”

Casi pushed away from the wall and moved to the other side of the balcony. With her back turned to the sky, she released her wings without a grimace, letting the dark yellow feathers fan out behind her. “I must go. The others need me to lead them to the appointed place.”

“What is where?” Ana asked. “I haven’t been told.”

Casi exchanged a glance with Scio, then answered, “The park where Epiphany was slain.”

Ana stared hard into her face, but her expression was masked. Neither did Scio offer any kind of explanation. Or sympathy. He forced his suddenly thick tongue to work. “Why there?”

“As you have mentioned before,” Scio said. “Epiphany’s murder meant more to Revelation than he would ever admit. If we attack at the place where she fell, he may become distracted by those memories.”

“And our people? Won’t that knowledge distract them as well?”

“That is why they haven’t been told the purpose behind the location,” Casi said. “The villain will be taken off guard and we will destroy him there.”

Ana looked at Scio. “What about the humans? The park isn’t in a highly public area, but a prolonged fight is bound to attract their attention.”

“They will forget what they have seen, and pose no major concern.”

“Ana,” Casi said. “Whether or not you join us is your choice. I only hope you can face the resulting consequences.” She gave a quick nod to Scio. With a few flaps of her great wings, Casi lifted herself off the balcony and joined the crowd below. After a few moments Ana lost sight of her as she flew over the stone wall.

Behind him, Scio had risen from his seat. A bony hand clasped Ana’s shoulder and the fingers were strong. “How might I ease your heart?” the old man asked.

“Call them back.”

“You know I cannot do that.”

Ana sighed. A throbbing ache had formed behind his eyes. “I have felt Revelation’s strength, and I know he has somehow become more powerful than any of them realize. Many will surely die.”

The fingers clutching Ana’s shoulder seemed to spasm and grip harder. “By doing this, many more will be saved.”

Ana turned, and the hand slipped back to Scio’s side. “I want to trust you.”
“Then do so.” Scio pulled his hood back over his head, hiding his white hair and wrinkled face. “Stay here, my son, and guard Colonia while it is empty. I must now record what has happened and what will happen. I will emerge once they return home victorious.” He disappeared further into the library, heading, no doubt, to the top floor where his private books were held.

Ana hesitated alone there on the balcony for a moment, unsure as to what he should do next. After everything that Revelation had done, after every sorrow he had inflicted, Ana still felt that this attack, this arranged battle, was deadly wrong. He felt it was Tilt’s right to finish her mission, and until they heard back from her, they should’ve waited. After Arduous’ death, Revelation hadn’t killed any of them unless first provoked.

He heard Kep’s quick footsteps before he saw the younger Winged emerge on the balcony. Kep caught his breath, bending over with his hands resting on his knees. “I thought you might’ve already gone,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Tilt just got back.” Kep took a deep breath, released it, and straightened. “She’s looking for you.” No sooner had he said those words, Tilt flew onto the balcony. She didn’t bother to tuck her wings back inside. It was obvious from her quick movements and the knife strapped to her waist that she didn’t intend on staying.

“Told you so,” Kep said, shrugging.

Tilt stared long and hard at Ana. “You should’ve stopped them.”

Ana nodded. “I tried.”

“You have to make them,” Tilt insisted. “Or this is all going to blow up in their faces.”

“I did my best, but they will not listen to me anymore.”

“No, no.” She shook her head. “You don’t get it. Revelation knows they’re coming.”

Kep’s eyes widened. “How the heck does he know that? Tilt, you didn’t--”


Ana, our people are walking into a trap. They’ll be slaughtered.”

Ana looked back outside. Few Winged were still left, and most of them were already heading toward to the designated meeting area. “It is too late.”

“No, it’s not.” Tilt stepped between him and the balcony railing, forcing him to look at her. “Please don’t ask me how I know, but I know that Revelation doesn’t want me to show up at the battle. If I go, I might have a chance of stopping all of this.”

“You can’t possibly do it alone,” Ana said softly.

“Then come with me. Help me.”
“Scio has instructed me to stay here.”

“What for?” Tilt swept a hand to indicate their surroundings. “No one is here, and if Revelation is supposed to be somewhere else, then it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“And of Cath? Should I leave him here alone?” Ana hated the bitterness that had crept into his voice, but he couldn’t push it aside. He was grasping at straws and he knew it, anything that would give him a reason to stay at Colonia. Even after the time that had passed, he was not ready to go back to the place where Epi had died.

Kep stepped forward. “I can stay with him, if you want. I’d likely just be a bother anyway if I went.”

Their two pairs of young eyes were focused on Ana, waiting for his answer. No matter what he said, the result would be the same. “Very well,” he conceded.

Nodding, Tilt stretched out her wings again. “Let’s go.”

Revelation’s upper lip curled with disgust as he stood on the rooftop of a high-rise office building and glared at the city below. The humans were just beginning to wake from their necessary sleep, to stretch their limbs, to flip on their automatic coffee makers. Soon they would stick their keys into their vehicles with their My Child is an Honor Student bumper stickers and continue as normal, more convinced than ever that life meant being born, aging, and finally dying.

They had no idea that in less than an hour, a group of strangers – strangers who used to be human, who used to drink coffee – would rage war in their backyard. The few humans who managed to hear snippets of rumors about it would lose the information as quickly as they heard it, none the wiser.

Their ignorance of the upcoming battle made him laugh. Their ignorance of life outside human confines enraged him.

The playground was mostly abandoned this early in the morning. The various monkey bars and slides seemed ridiculous in the wide expanses of grass, looking like grazing cattle. A swing creaked on its hinges as a brief gust of wind pushed it back and forth.

A lone figure sat motionless on a bench near the middle of the small park. Revelation grinned and scratched at the blue short-sleeved shirt he wore. He pulled the blue cap snuggly over his head, his shorter hair curling out from under it. As soon as this was over he’d find a clothing store and lift clothes that were more suited to his style, but for now the change suited his purposes.
Once Rev started to strongly feel the presences of his fellow Winged, he knew they were close enough to feel him too. He sucks his wings back into his body. As long as they were sure he was here, that was enough. He didn't want them to know his exact location just yet.

He saw their dark figures in the sky before they landed in the middle of the playground. They really had all come, the bastards. He didn't recognize most of them; he hadn't stayed at Colonia long enough to make friends, not that he had cared to anyway. Sedatus' dark green wings were easy to distinguish among the crowd, and he thought one of the black women looked familiar.

No matter.

He adjusted the cap on his head and made his way down to the park.

***

Castigalia landed first and instructed the other Winged to pull their wings back in. There were many trees here to block most of their presence from the humans, but they didn't need to draw any unnecessary attention to their arrival. Revelation had to know they were here by now, but at least he couldn't pinpoint their exact location.

The sun was beginning to fully raise, its beams streaming through buildings and tree branches. A fine mist hovered in the air, but it had not rained in days and the leaves gave off a scratchy rustle in the breeze. It was shaping up to be a windy morning.

Casi pulled her knife free. "Do not stray off alone," she said, keeping her voice low. "He must nearby."

"How close?" Sedatus wondered. He nervously scanned the sky as though expecting an attack at any moment.

"Close enough," she replied. She motioned to Philologus and one of his own tasks. "Search the perimeter of this place. If he's not in the immediate area, then we will have yet another advantage."

Phil nodded and the two of them hurried off.

"This does not feel right," Sedatus said. "Everything feels too quiet, and I smell something I do not recognize."

"Stay strong," Casi said, "and spread the word that our fear of this murderer ends here."

***

Revelation found the large transfer truck with the fuel tank in an adjacent parking lot, where he had left it an hour ago. Whistling, he unscrewed the fuel caps and siphoned the gas to get it leaking out. Then he hopped into the cabin of the truck. He fished the keys out of his breast pocket and the engine roared to life.
A couple of the Winged glanced in his direction at the sound of the truck, but they were more focused on other problems.

By now, they should've found his little surprise waiting for them by one of the trees. They would've seen the human slumped over on the bench, the dead man wearing Rev's old clothes. They would've called over others to come take a look at the guy that used to be a truck driver. A group of them would be standing by one of the two large oak trees that the swing set sat between. She had died by that swing set.

It seemed fitting, somehow.

Rev gunned the engine to a healthy speed, so fast that he bounced up and down on the rickety seat like he was riding a feisty horse that wanted him off its back. He sped across the grass in a roaring mass of metal and leaky gasoline, his foot pressing the gas pedal to the floorboard.

Most of the Winged had noticed him now, but they seemed frozen in place. Likely they thought he was just a human doing his human job, just passing through, no harm done. He cackled and blew the truck's horn. Some of the Winged on the outskirts of the crowd stumbled back a few paces. A few others panicked and let loose their wings. Rev caught sight of Castigalia yelling and jumping into the sky, but for most of them it was too late.

Rev spun the wheel, causing the truck to tip to the side. The tank caught several Winged and dragged them along. Rev threw open the driver's side door and leapt from the truck, wings unfurling, seconds before it crashed sideways into the tree. The explosion singed the edges of his wings, but he was in the air fast enough to escape the surge of fire. The ground he had previously saturated with gasoline carried the fire swiftly in all directions. The dry leaves of the trees began to burn almost instantly. Dozens of Winged went up in flames.

Landing on the roof of a nearby building, Rev pulled a box of cigarettes out of his pocket and thumped out one of the white cylinders. He hadn't smoked one since that first time atop the electricity tower before killing the piano-playing task, but the moment practically begged for it. He lit the smoke, took a long drag, and watched the center of the park burn.

Once the surviving Winged began to stir, he snuffed out the cigarette with the toe of his shoes and picked up the rifle he had left on the roof. The old weapon was heavy, but it would accomplish its purpose easily enough. He balanced it against his shoulder, took aim, and began to pick off the survivors one by one.

***

Cath sat alone on the wall that surrounded Colonia, the stone cold under his legs. His chest felt cold, too, but it wasn't from the brisk wind that tugged at his clothing. He faced the direction
where everyone had headed, but he could see only endless trees. He heard the rustling of feathers, and then Kep alighted next to him. Cath looked up at the other Winged, at the older boy’s outstretched orange-red wings, and said nothing. Kep rubbed at the ache in his chest. They could both feel the emptiness that came when Winged died.

“You can see better from the roof of the library,” Kep said after a while. “If you want to see it, I can take you there.”

Cath stood. The two of them stared at each other for a long moment. Then Cath stepped closer and wound his arms around Kep’s neck. Kep flew the two of them to the rooftop and set them down gently.

Smoke was rising at the line of the horizon, thick like a swarm of flies spreading into the lighter clouds.

They stood there in silence for a long time.

***

Ana hadn’t done a lot of things since Epi’s death, since he had brought Cath back with him. He hadn’t been outside the enclosing Colonia walls. He hadn’t read anymore books from the library. He hadn’t used his wings, and now they fought against him with each flap, the muscles stiff and already tired.

He also hadn’t been back to this park. He had never wanted to go back to this park.

“How much longer?” Tilt asked at one point, and he had said, “Soon” without even looking around to actually see. Tilt didn’t know the exact location of the playground, so Ana had taken the lead. He could feel her eyes on him, questioning, but his tongue refused to tell her why this particular location had been picked.

About halfway through the flight, they felt the deaths begin.

The first one was a stabbing pain that both Ana and Tilt felt, though Ana felt it stronger. A list of names filed through his mind of Winged in his line of tasking – it could have been any of them. Several deaths at once followed and turned the pain into a dull coldness that numbed his chest.

Then Ana’s wings spasmed and collapsed under the weight of so much pain, and he made a rough landing on a slanted rooftop. His shoes skidded a few feet down the brown shingles before he finally caught himself. Epi landed next to him, her eyes wide.

“A-Ana.” Her voice was frightened, but he knew there was nothing he could say to comfort her then.

“The battle has begun.” His breath wheezed, and he swallowed down rising bile. “We must hurry.”
She grasped his arm. “Can you fly?”

“Yes.” He would have to. They were still many miles away. They took off again as Ana clutched at his chest with one hand, his wings aching.

The smell caught them first, a burning stench that choked their nostrils. Then they saw the smoke rising above the trees. Soon they cleared the buildings and saw the battlefield. Most of the grass had been burned away, leaving behind only blackness and dust. Flames still licked at the tops of the trees, and some of the plastic pieces of playground equipment were curling under the heat, twisting out of shape and recognition.

Below, they caught sight of Revelation’s blonde head and wide gray wings, noticeable among all the burnt grass. He was crouched over someone with a gun slung across his back. His arms raised—a knife flashed—then jerked down to the ground. Ana felt another stab go through him. Tilt was sobbing. He was about to land somewhere further away, some place where Rev wouldn’t automatically notice them, but Tilt tore past him and Ana had no choice but to follow.

“Stop it, you bastard!” she cried.

Rev’s head jerked up, and Ana registered the fact that his hair barely reached past his ears anymore. Rev caught sight of the two of them as they landed only a few yards away. “Tilly,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “You don’t listen very well.”

Tilt swiped an arm fiercely over her face to clear her tears. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Oh, but I do. It’s mainly self-defense anyway.” Rev got to his feet. Philologus lay still on the ground, his chest torn open.

“Self-defense?” she spat. “You had everything set up from the start, didn’t you? You knew they were coming here. You knew all along.”

“How is that possible?” Ana cupped a hand over his face to block out some of the stench. Winged bodies were strewn about the park, some still intact, others just pieces. He turned back to Revelation. “How could you have known?”

“If you can’t figure it out on your own, then you don’t deserve to know.” Revelation glared at him, swinging the rifle around to aim it at Ana. “You just had to show up, didn’t you? Big hero ready to save the day.”

The wind picked up speed, stinging Ana’s eyes. “Put down that gun, give me a knife, and I will fight you fairly.”

“You wish it could be that simple, don’t you? So you could finally join your forbidden love in death.” He snarled. “I wouldn’t want to give you the satisfaction.” He tossed the rifle to the
ground where it bounced once before landing near Ana. “Take this back to Scio – I think he’ll be missing it from his private collection.”

Ana looked down at the gun. “You are lying.”

Revelation shrugged. “Ask him yourself. You know, your precious task-sister was going to be my last kill. If you hurry, you might still save her.” He flapped his wings and darted into the sky. He paused once, almost as an afterthought. “I don’t think you’ll want to come after me again, Tilly. Next time you won’t be so lucky.”

And then he was gone, a fading dot in the sky.

Tilt sank to a spot near Ana’s feet, her face blank, her eyes staring at the burnt grass. “The bastard,” she said. “The bastard.”

Ana heard a groan and turned around to see Sedatus stirring on the nearest edge of the park. The man had a gash across his forehead and another on his shoulder, but otherwise seemed unhurt. Ana knelt beside him.

“What is Castigalia?”

“I’m not sure,” Sea said, coughing. “I lost track of her in all the confusion.”

Ana helped him into a sitting position. “How many have we lost?”

Sea grimaced. “Many of us died in the initial explosion, and many others in the fires that consumed this place. After that he began to pick us off one by one with the gun, and then with the knife when he ran out of bullets. If you had not come, I would’ve been next.” His face scrunched up in pain.

“Stay here,” Ana told him.

They found Casi on the other side of the ruins of the park. Her legs were broken so she could not walk, and one of her wings was badly burnt. Other burn marks laced up her arms and shoulders. Her eyes had faded to a dull brown. Ana knew her body would heal, in time, but he feared the lasting effects this might have on her. She had now lost everyone connected to her tasking line.

Ana, Tilt, Casi, and Sea were the only ones left. All the others had perished.