

Playing the Game

By: A. M. Hosch

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This book is dedicated to my godmother. I love you. I miss you, and I'll see you on the other side.

The Cedarvale Saga:

Surviving the Dark: Book 1

Playing the Game: Book 2

Be on the lookout for the next half:

Losing All Hope: Book 3

Leading the Battle: Book 4

Trigger Warning

These writings may contain any or all of the following: mental abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, child abuse, rape, bullying, profanity, self-harm, violence, suicide, nudity, sex, death, PTSD, panic/anxiety attacks, addiction, kidnapping, and torture.

Please proceed with caution.

If you or anyone you know is suffering from a mental illness, depression, or suicidal thoughts, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

Likewise, if you or anyone you know is suffering at the hands of domestic violence, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

You are not alone, and there are people who can help.

Table of Contents

- Chapter 1: Returning to (Semi) Normal
- Chapter 2: A Favor and a Curse
- Chapter 3: Divinity and Disgrace
- Chapter 4: Won't Know Until You Try
- Chapter 5: Corspelich and the Garden
- Chapter 6: A Fancy Outing to Somewhere
- Chapter 7: A Ring and a Spring
- Chapter 8: Sneaking Suspicions
- Chapter 9: A New Danger Arises
- Chapter 10: A Lingering Threat
Materializes
- Chapter 11: A Plan and a Prayer
- Chapter 12: Power Move
- Chapter 13: A Two Front War
- Chapter 14: A Look into His World
- Chapter 15: Rare Gift or Another Target?
- Chapter 16: Not the Worst Case Scenario,
But Close
- Chapter 17: My Business, Not Yours
- Chapter 18: A Ransacking and a Lashing
- Chapter 19: Reconciliation and Divine
Intervention

Chapter 20: A Personal Encounter
Chapter 21: Briefly Without Protection
Chapter 22: Under A Watchful Eye
Chapter 23: Early Arrival
Chapter 24: I Thought I Declined
Chapter 25: In Leagues with the Enemy
Chapter 26: The Vote and the Aftermath
Chapter 27: Clear as Mud
Chapter 28: A Clash of Enemies
Chapter 29: Tyranny or Maintaining
Control?
Chapter 30: The Midwife and the Mayhem
Chapter 31: The Inevitable
Chapter 32: Impulsive Mistake
Chapter 33: Crushing Revenge
Chapter 34: Preparing His Body
Chapter 35: Blurred Reality
Chapter 36: Fallen Allies
Chapter 37: The Wedding
Chapter 38: Our Reception

Chapter 1: Returning to (Semi) Normal

The door creaked open, and light flooded the basement stairs. They descended, not yet illuminated, into the main room. Frozen at the top, mom continued blissfully down. My vision fluttered between her walking and lifelessly floating. Her head cocked to the side when she realized I hadn't followed. *Quit stalling.* My breathing lingered outside of my control, and the palms of my hands leaked my fear.

Halfway down the stairs, flashes of blood and torment stole my balance. The handrail saved me from tumbling forward. My legs weakened, and my insides liquefied. The pressure descended and settled like a lead vest on my shoulders. The steps swirled under my feet. *Get it together.* The horrific torture slept under the rug, never to be spoken of again. My words narrowly escaped without breakfast.

“How is it not affecting you?”

“My life has not been as easy as you think. My power returned with my magic.”

“Could we train outside today?”

“Baby, you can't avoid the basement.”

The pity in her eyes met my small and fragile voice. Her soft and understanding tone couldn't top the static in my head and made it difficult to concentrate on her words. Her aura wrapped me in a comforting embrace, but it didn't stop the film reel from playing in my mind's eye. *Evil witch.* The harsh critic rose inside, offering its whispers to keep replaying the past. *Monster.*

Natalie's piercing screams from the choking necklace filled my ears and blended with mom's tortured pleas of mercy. My racing mind refused to slow, dragging my body with it. Tremors spread up and down my limbs. My heart beat the rhythm of a war cry on my ribs, and my lungs refused to push oxygen to the rest of my body. Gray encroached on the edges of my sight as tears made it a blurry mess. *Everyone would be better off if I had died at my apartment.*

The words stayed locked in my head, but mom heard them anyway. A sturdy hand met my instability, and I descended to the wooden planks. *Pathetic disgrace.* Gentle fingertips moved my hair from my face and wiped my tears. Electricity buzzed along my skin. Avoiding eye contact, her search dove into my soul, and I clung to the energetic intrusion.

"Cassidy Grace, you have been close to death too many times for my poor heart."

Acnos' garden took control in the chaos, and his peace echoed in my mind. *You are right where you need to be.* My body-wracking sobs slowed, easing the weight in my chest. Mom knocked my knee, pulling me firmly back to the present. She stood and led the way, guaranteeing no escape from the triggering walls.

She wouldn't give my breakdown another moment of her time. My attention needed to focus on her, and I didn't have another choice. *Fake it 'til you make it.* Pushing the ball of churning emotions deep under a concrete slab, I reluctantly followed and positioned myself in the middle of the wide circle.

"We will start with measuring your current abilities to deflect attacks."

"Are you implying that I haven't kept up my training?"

"Well, I know you haven't been training here. Deflect as many as you can in fifteen."

An old wooden chest squealed in protest. The barrier securing my unwanted feelings cracked under the pressure of the boiling mixture. She withdrew a long piece of cloth and tossed it to me. The soft fabric hugged the bridge of my nose. The projection of the room flashed in my mind but holding it steady proved an impossibility. It shuttered and glitched. My bones vibrated nervously, setting my muscles on edge.

"Begin."

Her voice clarified her place. My mental image calibrated with my empathy, and she appeared on my radar, circling me like a vulture. She and her footsteps grew silent, but she moved clearly through my third eye. Flashbacks from my apartment stole my concentration when the first energy ball clipped my right arm. Victor and mom morphed back and forth. *Victor isn't here. Focus!* My left thigh screamed in protest after I failed to avoid the attack. *Pathetic.*

A second signature appeared from the corner, but their identity hid under the stress. The ticking clock and new person clogged my sight, and my left shoulder blade sang in protest. My right knee fell next to her relentless power. Nipping my lower back and then my left arm, I struggled to maintain my composure. My mind exploded

chaotically when my right shoulder, collar bone, and neck took a direct hit. Stunned, I crumbled.

My back crashed into the floor, and the air rushed from my lungs. Gasping for air, I curled up into a ball. The alarm for fifteen minutes sounded, and I ripped the cloth down to my neck and rolled to my back. Terror gripped my spine as the trails and drops of blood decorated the floor. The pain struck me at once, and I flicked between past and present.

Xavier rushed to my side and carefully healed my wounds. The mental battle raged, and I couldn't meet his gaze or thank him. Once the pain disappeared, and no one circled me, my bearings righted themselves. The bile lowered from my throat, and breathing grew easier. Her disapproval flooded the floor as he helped me up. *She doesn't understand.*

“So, we haven't kept up with our training?”

“I haven't had a problem in seven years. Let me rest a minute. Damn.”

“Hold on, let me go phone Victor and let him know that whenever you get distracted, he's going to need to back off.”

When I whirled around, her expression ground my anger to a halt. Something broke inside of me under the darkness' influence. The whispers in my mind no longer retreated. I turned away, knowing I couldn't face her. The hurt buried itself in the whirlwind already wreaking havoc. Xavier stood off, silent as usual. His energy, uncomfortable in the conversation, reached to console

mine. A silvery wisp drifted from hers and swatted the comforting reach like a disciplined child.

“It’s not the same,” I said, quietly wishing to be okay and control myself enough to get her off my back.

“It’s not? Really? If you can force yourself to clear your mind and block yourself from distractions, then there is no way in for him. I’m going to go get something to drink while you pull yourself together.”

Mom left with her right-hand man on her heels, leaving me alone with her disappointment. A miracle would have to happen before he took my side. Her circling, his words, and the suppressed hurt bombarded me. The massive hurricane boiled up, sending debris across my mind. *Resist it.* The strong pull hypnotized me. *I don’t know how.*

Acnos’ garden appeared in my mind, blocking the storm. The peace and serenity flooded the dysfunction and drowned the aggression. The birds chirped by the water. *It’s so real.* Acnos remained unseen. The benefits remained despite being alone. *Don’t forget.* The whisper drifted softly on the gentle breeze.

The sun warmed the cold crevices in my heart. Breathing in, the calm serenity permeated my mind. The distant yet distinct shutting of the door and her approaching footsteps tethered me to the present. After taking one more deep breath, my eyes opened to her shock. She hid the surprise behind a smile and continued.

“You may not have kept up with your training, but I’m impressed with the meditation.”

“Thank you.”

With all of my willpower, I held onto the feeling from the garden, my safe place. Pulling the cloth back over my eyes, I tightened it. The timer beeped down from five telling me the starting moment. The mental image held stable and clear. Mom and Xavier were distinctive blips on my radar. My muscles tensed in anticipation, but clarity filled my head.

The whitish-yellow ball darted in my direction, and I braced myself for impact, expecting to fail. The deflection worked effortlessly. As long as my soul sat by the pond, the hurricane couldn't tear me away. Four more buzzed my way, and four more were diverted and sent crashing into various items. Kian's energy burst into existence, temporarily blinding me. Two more attempts were successfully avoided as he joined us.

Mom flared brightly before she disappeared behind a cloak. My instinct wanted to shift to panic, but I refused to give up control. Quickly thinking, I scanned for the void, the spot in space I couldn't detect. When I found her, the first energy ball sliced open my left thigh. *Damn it.* The next three averted with ease. My muscles screamed at me for a break, and my head pounded. *Hold on.*

Several bolted towards me at once. Two made it past my defenses, ripping open my arm and stomach. Blood trickled down my arm. The pain brought my mind into hyper focus. The control to stay in the peaceful oasis slipped, and the haunting images flashed into my mind. The hurricane broke through the stability, and I grabbed for control, momentarily successful.

"Not so cocky now, are we?"

The next three were spaced out, but more intense. It took more concentration to gain control of the powerful spheres. As more memories surfaced and battled my hold on the present, the last energy ball knocked me on my ass. With a grunt, I landed on the floor and begged the timer to beep. The dried blood on various parts of my body cracked uncomfortably with each movement. Disorientation sent me stumbling like a drunkard, fighting to right myself.

The last four were brutal, but only one got through my defense. Out of breath and still bleeding, my legs gave way, and I crumbled. The alarm sounded. *Thank the gods.* A bottle of water dropped next to me. Pulling the blindfold off my head, I didn't look at her; I couldn't look at her. Terror would be the only thing she would find there.

"We are done for today. He and I have a few appointments, but as usual, dinner will be at six."

Emotionless stones stood in her place, boring holes in my skull. Xavier regretfully bowed before following her up the stairs. Laying down and catching my breath, Kian hurried to my side. The warmth of his hands pulled me into safety and healed each wound. The firm hold on my mind returned stronger with each breath.

"Helplessness is not my forte."

"You are supposed to protect me from Victor, not my mother's training."

Chapter 2: A Favor and a Curse

The shower spewed to life, and I turned the knob to Satan's heat. The steam bellowed over the top of the glass door before I had a chance to undress. My brush snagged on my matted hair, refusing to go through it. *Fuck it.* I tossed the brush onto the counter and climbed into hot enough water to wash the feelings from my soul. Tears mixed with the cascading fire. It wasn't hot enough to burn the memories and prevent them from consuming me. *At least you smell better.*

Fully washed, no remnants of training remained on me. The fogged over mirror betrayed my senses. Fresh cotton pajamas soothed my skin, but my tortured mind spun wildly towards chaos. Divine bird's tweeted peace and calm, but my hands shakily lingered above my hips. *My baby.* Breaking the spell on myself, I wandered to the kitchen to fix us a light lunch.

My thoughts swam in the storm surge of the swirling and churning hurricane, held off only because of a god's mercy. The steps shifted and morphed as I descended. *What is your problem?* The kitchen tile on my bare feet shocked me back to reality. My hands trembled as I stacked ham on a slide of bread. *Quit whining, and get it together.* *Damn.* I stacked our sandwiches and grabbed a couple of bags of chips. Opening the kitchen door, I nearly ran into mom.

"Mailman dropped this off for you this morning."

"I wasn't expecting anything."

Mom held out a large brown envelope with my name scribbled on the front. No return address. *I'm surprised she didn't open it.* She placed it underneath my raised arm, eyeing me curiously. My brow furrowed as I shrugged and continued to the stairs. The whirlwind broke through my defenses and rushed to the forefront of my mind. *Who's next?* An itch in my inner palm dove deeper into my hand. It triggered panic to slither up my legs. My lungs struggled to expand with each breath.

The walls closed in. The windows mocked my false freedom, denying me the space. The hallway elongated. My racing heart begged me to run. *There's nothing there. Such a pussy.* By the time I made it back to my room, the haunting ghosts from my past were hot on my heels. Shutting and locking the door in a swift motion, I turned to Kian exiting the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel.

“Everything ok?”

He vigorously dried his hair. Droplets fell onto his bare chest, dragging my attention from the package eating at me. Pulling myself from my panic-induced trance, I nodded and held up the mail. He grabbed a sandwich from my hands, and I laid mine on the desk, dropping the chips. The brown paper ripped easily, exposing a stack of papers. The binder clip trembled under my shaking hand. I pulled it from its pouch. A folded piece of lined paper slid onto the floor. Glancing at the author, an audible, relieving laugh popped out of my mouth.

“Oh, dear gods. This is from the mayor's wife. I thought it was from... him.”

“Deeds to a new house?”

“Architect plans. I told her I’d help her. The main project is still months away.”

He pushed them aside and collected me in his arms. The warmth of his soap chased away the fear in my bones. The safety of his embrace held my pieces together. *Why did I agree to help her?* A regretful sigh sent tingles down my limbs. The stack of papers pissed me off, and my stomach turned. A raging pit opened inside, and I stifled a scream. *What is happening to me?* My fists clenched. Kian sounded underwater. *Did he call my name?*

“Are you okay?”

“Maybe I... no, I don’t think so.”

He pulled me close and lifted me off the ground. Walking to the chair by the window, he sat with me curled up. He wrapped me in his love even though angry tears poured down my face. The storm ripped through the barrier and sent me mentally scrambling. My body tensed against him while my mind waged war. Tremors washed over me after each explosion.

The call of the oasis interrupted the screaming wind. Reaching for the tiny thread of peace, the downpour pelted harder. *Remember.* Acnos’ deep voice rode on reverberating thunder. My chest opened to allow more oxygen, and my back relaxed against his arms. The flood of tears slowed to a trickle before stopping. Exhaustion pulsed through my muscles, and I relaxed against his warm skin. Heavy weights kept my eyelids from opening, and I drifted off to sleep.

~*~*~

The light clung to the edges of the sky when I rolled over and stretched. The whirlpool of chaos retreated far off the coast while I rested. *Thank you, Acnos.* Kian sat facing away from me, and he tapped away on his laptop. Throwing my legs over the edge, the bed creaked, and he whipped around. The deep wrinkles in his forehead relaxed as he smiled.

“What time is it?”

“Quarter to six.”

“We better get down to dinner before mom sends a search party.”

Humming a soft tune, we rounded the corner, and I skidded to a halt. He barely stopped before knocking into me and tensed with his hand on my lower back. *Victor. In my house.* His visage no longer frightened me, and for the second time in a decade, we were in each other’s presence. Glaring down the hallway like an old west showdown, the hostility palpated. His arrogance clouded him, choking the air like pungent cologne. My magic rose within me.

“You have thirty seconds to get out of this house.”

“I’m not leaving until I accomplish what I started.”

His hands were up, and surprisingly in surrender. Time slowed down as his shoe left the floor. A few steps closer, I resisted the urge to tackle him. His ice-blue eyes pierced a hidden part of me inside. They called to a deep, unknown place within. Kian pulsed behind me, ready to protect and defend. The wall glimmered where my shield connected, severing the nauseating connection. His focus never left the countdown.

“Ten, nine.”

His body froze mid-step with a wave of my hand. His eyes widened and his jaws tensed. Standing beyond my protective wall, he fought my hold like a puppy battling at the end of a leash. He uselessly wasted energy. *Kill him.* The words slithered over my mind. His darting wisps floated and flew, fighting to find an escape for their master. Retribution bloomed inside, and satisfaction spread across my face. Finally, our eyes met, and my control continued to his gaze.

"Mitto tibi in profundum inferni."

The Latin rolled off my tongue with ease. He struggled to shift his eyes. I calmly repeated as beads of sweat popped up on his forehead. His pleading eyes reached for me. *Finish it.* When I said it a third, final time, it sealed the curse. My hold on him vanished, and he collapsed to his knees engulfed in blue-green flames.

Agonizing and torturous screams filled the hall until he disappeared, leaving nothing but scorch marks behind. I stared at the ashy remains. *Something doesn't add up.* A myriad of emotions pounded against the weak boundary. It wasn't the right time to deal with them.

"Come on."

We took off in a jog towards the kitchen. My mind raced at how easy it had been to banish him. *Is it over?* Flying into the kitchen, mom shrieked in surprise, narrowly losing her grip on the plate of roasted duck. The excitement and power welled up, stealing my voice. She set the food on the table and turned, wiping her hands together.

"Well? What is it?"

“Victor met us in the hall.”

“Where is he now?”

“In hell? Maybe? I’m not entirely sure.”

She smiled and opened her arms. Unease spread from my midsection, but I pushed it down and willfully embraced her. We took our seats at the table while she brought over the browned rice and baked asparagus. A feast for a victory. *Then why do I feel so guilty?*

Chapter 3: Divinity and Disgrace

Days melted into weeks without the ever-present danger of death breathing down my neck. Normalcy inched its way into life, and I threw myself into projects. Finishing the architect's plans connected me to the human world. The closest I had been since Sean died. Each meeting poured excitement into my bones and simultaneously terrified me to accidentally involve them. My mind alternated between paranoid apprehension to engage and craving the engagement.

My magic intensified with each passing day. Whether from the darkness or the pregnancy, we weren't certain. Visions captured my consciousness regularly. Not knowing my strength, we lost a few curtains, two end tables, and four rugs to my inaccuracies. Mom's entertainment of my frustrations healed a few of the gaping wounds left in my memory.

The frozen whips of winter turned authority over to the warming sun and blooming flowers. Bright blades of grass sprouted from softened soil. Each day the sun inched higher in the sky. The warming temperatures lured critters from their burrows and birds from their nests. The bugs returned to the sky, and ducks splashed away in the middle of the pond. Leaf buds dotted the branches of the deciduous trees.

As the sun peeked over the trees and glittered off the morning dew, a cup of tea heated my palms. Leafing through the pages of new detailed drawings, I wrestled with completion. Lynda Edwards asked for my advice on

two other projects after seeing the completed sketches. *Is this the best it can be?* Not finding any obvious errors, I closed the folder and drifted away with the birdsong on the wind. Mom pulled the kitchen door shut, sending shivers down my skin. Shaking off the past panic, I smiled as she joined me.

“Ah, the sun rises on another calm day.”

“Calmness is a hope. I’ll enjoy it while it lasts.”

She inhaled a deep morning breath and stirred her coffee. The spring sun warmed everything it touched. Nighttime lows dropped enough for dew to settle, but the morning beams stole the chill. My soul followed suit, burying the past under a new layer of growth and sealing it away in a mental tomb. Finishing my tea, I set my cup on the end table and stretched.

“I came out to do some morning meditating, would you like to join?”

“No, thank you.”

“Your loss.”

She leaned back with her eyes closed. A grassy spot a few feet beyond the concrete slab flattened nicely. Spreading out a blanket, I crawled to the middle and aligned my body. Desperately, I recalled the serenity of his oasis and the brush of the divine wind. Acnos’ garden sprung up into reality, stealing me away to his personal space. To my surprise, he waited patiently at the edge of his spring. My pounding heart slowed, and serenity spread over me.

“You’re glowing.”

“Thank you. It’s the baby.”

“We didn’t have anything to do with the new bundle of joy. It was nature.”

Acnos motioned to the rock next to him with a welcoming smile. A blush toasted my cheeks as I joined him. The crystal clear water perfectly displayed the odd fish. They turned their attention to me, but quickly lost interest and resumed their normal fish activities. Several pairs chased each other, and I smiled as they darted back and forth. A blue lizard with yellow splats crept along the edge of the pond.

“Times aren’t going to be easy, and sharing this place is the least I can do.” His reflective expression softened. “He is not trapped. It won’t be long before he escapes. He’s not meant to be there.”

The ball of doom dropped in my stomach. Acnos’ presence caught the cannonball before it unleashed what I worked so hard to put to rest. Repeating his words in my mind didn’t help process them. We quietly existed. Keeping my gaze at the water, he gently laid his hand on my shoulder. Tears welled up at the depth of comfort he offered.

“There are many things I wish to tell you, but it’s never certain. It would spell danger if I am wrong.”

“But you’re a god.”

“We are gods of magic, not the creatures who wield it. The only thing I dare say with certainty is this: Kian is the only safety we can give you.”

His cryptic message rocked the foundation of stability his oasis gave me. Staring into the waters and watching the light glint and dance off the rocks, his vague confession

pieced itself together. Meaning existed from the words he chose not to use. *I'm not even safe with him gone.* The threats reached for me, but his realm existed beyond their capacity.

“Thank you again for sharing your garden. I should get back.”

“It is my pleasure to share it with you. Until again.”

Breathing in the deep tranquility one more time, I smiled and nodded to him. He returned the goodbye, and I pulled myself back to my body. The vibrant colors faded and shifted. They blurred until they disappeared into the tiny pinprick in the distance. The field and tree line I expected turned red and dusty.

The pull of a vision delayed my return. Cursing the added detour, Victor rose from the terrain in a bloody hellscape. *Fuck.* The ground under him visibly shuddered, throwing him off balance. He quickly reacted, darting away from the open wasteland and taking cover behind giant rock faces jutting from the sand. His darting eyes searched for the perfect escape route. Ethereally, the environment choked me. It lacked sufficient oxygen and minuscule particles filled the air.

He dove behind another boulder, using the safety as his shield. Another man scrambled to his feet, only to be knocked back down. Mouth open with long sharp teeth, it devoured the poor sap. Another one neglected to find protection. The powerful jaws crushed their bodies. Blood spurted over the sand, pooling in non-absorbent droplets. Victor's attention analyzed the barren landscape, judging if he could make it to a more stable hiding place.

Three more individuals tumbled through a portal not far in front of him. Their screams echoed through the void; their bodies plummeted towards us. The only light burst from random fire pits and broke through in crevices like steam vents. Rubble and steam exploded upwards followed by flames licking halfway up the bedrock. Two stared at the towering creature in frozen shock when the third ushered a warning and clambered directly to his hiding place.

"Hurry! Get down! It can't get you if it can't see you!"

"Watch where you're going. You're not the only one trying to hide."

Victor berated him as he slammed into him. The stranger pushed him lower, pointing to the larger outcropping. He got the hint and leaped with all his strength while the monster focused on the easy prey. His new friend flew over the top seconds later, determination flaring in his irises. He brought a thin finger to his lips. They turned to peer over the rest of the escaping blob of bodies.

The snake-like beast towered over the flailing, screaming men. The rumbling, vibrating combination churned and tossed sand and pebbles, partially trapping one's arm and the other's leg. The serpent's long tongue licked the air with a tormenting hiss. It plucked its victims one by one like flowers from a garden. It let out another long hiss before disappearing back underground.

"What kind of creature?"

"His name is Corpselich. He devours the soul of any unfortunate enough to be banished here. If you can avoid

him, you can survive. I've made it out once before, but it looks like I've found my way back."

He and the stranger turned and climbed up the crumbled, unstable boulders. The glow from distant blow vents dimly lit their features. The closer vents discharged, and it briefly illuminated them. Sweat crowned their heads. Mixed with the ruddy dirt, streaks of mud decorated their cheeks. The hell veteran glanced nervously from behind the rock before knocking Victor's leg and motioning at the mountainous boulders behind him. He dusted himself off and stared at Victor, dumbstruck.

"We need to keep moving."

"Why should I follow you?"

"I'm your only way out."

My soul flung into my body, and I gasped for clean air. The rancid atmosphere clung to my aura. Gasping the fresh air, I choked and coughed the suffocation from my chest. Glancing around with stars in my vision, I was alone. The pressure to escape the danger crushed my ribs. It restricted my breathing until Acnos' peace burst the growing bubble.

Chapter 4: Won't Know Until You Try

Cedarvale existed in our family for seven generations. Long before electricity and indoor plumbing made their mark, my ancestors cleared a walking trail. It started to the left of the patio and wound through the forest to the outskirts of the property. Large, flat rocks dotted the grass from the concrete to a small opening in the trees several feet away. Throughout the years, several paths sprouted from the original. All of them looped back to start and end at the same entrance. The trees created natural archways, protecting anyone underneath.

As a kid, I ran through the various combinations of routes with passion. My breath dropped into rhythm with my steps. My feet crunched leaves, pine needles, and gravel. The first time Kian joined me, I resisted the urge to take off. He added to the comfort of my safe place, so it became routine to take a walk after lunch. Not a sprint. Not even a jog. A leisurely stroll through nature with the person with whom I loved.

During our post-lunch stroll, the familiar glass enclosure solidified and encompassed my mind, making it impossible to reach out to Kian. Even Acnos' serenity could only leak through the cracks. Having yet to disclose my vision, speaking the words out loud shifted a potential possibility into an uncomfortable certainty. The path drifted from me. He stuck close to my side, but he didn't pressure any conversation. The time disappeared into the canopy, and we emerged out of the tree line.

A flurry of color in front of me rapidly pulled me back to my body, back to my consciousness. When I jumped back ready to fight, I stepped on Kian's foot and knocked myself off balance. My momentum halted when Kian's arms enclosed around my body. A nervous giggle jumped from my throat.

"Oh, hey mom. You scared me."

"We need to see how your telekinesis has been affected by recent events."

My stomach dropped. Irrational rage bubbled up my legs. *You're nothing more than a tool for her to use.* The backyard disappeared, replaced by my apartment. *You're her little puppet, her protégé.* My heart pounded as the carpet threads dug into my knees. *Where am I?* The present drifted light-years away, leaving me behind. Sharp, stinging pain erupted on my arm. *Not again.* The scene dissolved into the oasis. Tears stung my eyes when my name whispered into my ear from a distance. I snapped back to everyone's waiting gaze.

"Sure. Why not?"

Using my aura, I hid my burning anger and suffocating anxiety. Joining her beyond the patio, I pushed the nagging memories deep into my mind. Xavier stood off to the side, quiet as usual. Kian stayed close by, sensing I wasn't as stable as I appeared. Wiping my palms on my pants, I forced a smile.

"Let's see how far you can go. What was your distance before?"

“You ask like I would know,” I admitted with a shrug as I situated myself in the thick grass. “What do I do? Try to move the limbs?”

“Well, kind of. Can you reach the tree line?”

“I can barely see the tree line.” Squinting, the branches came into focus.

“Try anyway.”

She backed away and folded her arms in judgmental observation. Kian stooped down inspecting something at his feet while Xavier stood behind me like her personal statue. Facing the field, I focused on the blurry line of trees off in the distance. The details were too small to hold clearly for long. The earlier suppressed fury twisted and beat against its holdings, but I remained in control. The blades of grass waved and danced a few feet from us. Although no wind tickled the trees, the path pushed further to my goal.

The debris at the base of the trees whirled and spun. Lifting my power higher, the branches closest to the ground fluttered and jumped in response. Moving from branch to branch, I meandered along the perimeter before trying deeper into the coverage. Squirrels and birds scattered at the invisible visitor. A bigger, sentient creature pinged my radar, but it withdrew before I could track it. Catching my breath, I pulled back to myself.

“I can make it.”

“How far did you make it before you couldn’t push further?”

“I didn’t pay attention.”

She motioned back to the trees, and I sighed. The stalking creature returned with my attention. Stretching beyond the last point, it followed my energy but kept its distance. *Try and lure it back.* The chaos battered at the barrier. *Are you crazy? I'm barely maintaining it.* My focus split between maintaining control over the churning internal storm and following mom's orders. *Too late. They're coming.*

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, sending goosebumps down my spine. Mom stepped up to my shoulder, sensing the eyes peering at us. At least two people lurked in the natural cover. She whispered power into the wards surrounding the house. The boundary a few feet into the field from the tree line briefly flared with white light. A high pitch replaced my hearing. Opening my mouth to question, I left my body, and it crumpled to the grass.

My feet carried me away from the gurgling screams. Once out of sight, my socks slid on the wooden floor as I skidded to a halt. My instructions were to go to my room and wait there, but I couldn't leave them. I couldn't leave her. My organs turned to ice as I peeked back into the room. Natalie writhed on the couch clawing at the black band choking her neck.

Her tear-stained face gasped for air, turning a deep purple. Mom stood off to the side, shaking in her helplessness. Tears poured down her face. Blood vessels burst, flooding her eyes with bright red. Dad refused to admit his failure. He moved erratically trying every spell he knew. Then, the band loosened. Natalie coughed and

gasped for air. The color returned to her cheeks, but her eyes remained bloodshot. Dad didn't respond as tears slowly fell from his eyes. Mom screamed in protest as he ushered Natalie out of the room.

My heart hung in my chest, helpless. Turning from the horror, I followed my directions and hurried to my room. Leaving the door ajar, I crawled onto my bed. The nearest pillow became my comforter. Wrapping my arms around it, the floodgates fully opened. Its stuffing absorbed my angry, terrified screams. Time ceased to exist. It could have been five minutes or five hours when mom's hand on my back reeled me back to the world. Her body replaced the pillow. Mom's grief shook her body as she wrapped me in her arms and gathered me in a cocoon.

"It's just the two of us now, baby."

My memories unlocked with blazing tears, sending me plummeting back into my body, back to the backyard. The grass poked through my shirt. The heaviness of gravity settled in my muscles. Kian's warm energy surrounded me, and I groaned, rolling over. Several hands supported me as I got to my feet. Mom punched the tears from her face to properly scan me for magic.

"Oh, thank the gods. What happened?"

"The rest of the night is unlocked. The curse is broken."

She briefly lit up with joy before the dangers purred at her back. "We have to get inside. We have company." She ushered us back to the safety of our spelled walls and protective wards. Then, she glared out the kitchen window, mumbling to herself and challenging them to face

her. Xavier cast his magic to surround the house, snaking green coils over every window. The fury itched in my bones and clambered to take over. Nodding to Kian, we silently retreated upstairs.

Throwing open my bedroom door and rushing to the window, the abnormally quivering branches gave away their position. Gathering all the bubbling rage, I aimed at the threats. A roaring wind ripped from the house, tearing across the field. Whipping up small vortices, the powerful push slammed into the trees and the unsuspecting spies. I released several waves in a row fueled by my pent-up rage. Then, we waited. The limbs returned calm and remained silent.

Their watchful gaze lingered, but nothing indicated their presence. *They think we have my brother.* The impulse to hunt them down lurched in my chest. *It's too dangerous.* Impulse, desire, and responsibility clashed in a mental flashbang. On edge and indecisive, I paced in front of the bed. Kian's gentle aura wisps attempted to calm my darting cobra-like energy. My eyebrows raised towards him after his plan worked. Relief spread through me like netting.

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