

More than a decade ago, the Dark Ones came. They came in the night like bad things always do, thieving and ransacking with their skeleton fingers. Mothers and fathers lay in their beds long after tucking in their children, blissfully unaware that instead of awaking to the smell of brewed coffee, they'd be waking to the terror of a life never the same.

The good people, the few that remained in the world, died first. They were sought out like animals and slaughtered in their homes. The corrupt, my brother calls them, created the Dark Ones with their fear and anger. Our parents managed an escape for my two brothers and I just before our small home was invaded. I still dream of the night my mother, in her pale blue nightgown and her dusty blonde hair a mess, flew into my room and clamored through my closet to find a thick jacket to throw around my arms. Her heavy breathing, interrupted by sobs, and the plastic hangers bumping into one another was all I could hear in the blackness. I sleepily called out to her, my heart slamming against my chest and reached out to the light on my dresser. Just as my slender fingers brushed the cold metal of the bedside lamp, she threw herself to her knees in front of me, pulling my hands into hers and stopping me from twisting the knob and illuminating the room.

"Meira, no!" She snapped out in a whisper, her tone urgent. I could feel her hot breath on my face. "It's time to stay in the dark now, okay? You have to trust me."

I could do nothing but nod my head against her cold hands. She leaned forward, kissed my forehead and sniffled before she wrapped my green puffer jacket

around me, the fur hood tickling at my neck. At this point, my father had brought in my two older brothers and the three of us sat quietly, hand in hand, on my bed as our parents whispered frantically in the dark corner across the room. Though they spoke softly, I could hear them. They spoke of evil and creatures and good people *dying*. They spoke of a future that would look entirely different from the peaceful world I'd been born into not even five years earlier. It was then that the smell of sulfur I'd become so familiar with over the years would begin to seep under the closed door to my bedroom, signaling that we'd run out of time. My father flew to the door, pressing his back against it with his feet planted at a ninety degree angle, as though he was sitting in an invisible chair with his arms spread wide at his sides. My mother ushered the three of us, still holding hands, to my closet and slid her shaky hands across the carpet until she felt what she needed, and yanked a portion of the floor out of place and a sharp icy draft blew past us. Warren, the tallest of us all, crawled into the hole first, followed closely by Wyatt. I clung to my mother and she held me close, but the sulfur smell grew so strong that I began to cough and gag against her. As she pushed me toward the hole, Warren's shaking hands pulling at my tiny limbs, I thought it was my fault that she was pushing me away, that if I were quieter she wouldn't make me leave.

"The darkness came from within them." My mother whispered as she slid the floor back into place above us.

Twelve years later, a drop of sewer water from the low-hanging ceiling splashes onto the top of my head and slides down my cheek and I don't bother to wipe at it. I sit with my back against the damp stone tunnel and my boots tapping

mindlessly into the ankle deep water. Wyatt sits quietly beside me, his black hair blending him in with black tunnel. I let out a groan and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and look at him. "He should be back by now."

"He's fine."

"He's not *fine*. It's almost dark." I wait for him to say I'm right, but he doesn't. "We shouldn't have let him go up there alone."

"Warren's a big boy, Meira. He'll be back."

Annoyed, I stand up, demanding his attention. "Well, I'm not waiting any longer. And if you're not going to help me find him, then stay in the sewer by yourself."

He's exasperated, I know. We all are. Running through the undergrounds of Pittsburgh for twelve years does that to a person. The upperworld is no longer a place for us, for the good people. We're hunted and used for the Dark Ones now. The corrupt are useless to them, pawns in a game they hadn't even known they'd created. Warren had been the one who figured it out, that the evil nature of human beings had somehow manifested into a physical creature. The hope of the good people was like an addiction for the Dark Ones. They *crave* us.

Wyatt stubbornly stares at me from his seat. I roll my eyes and take off to the drain exit. Just as my foot lifts to the ladder wrung, I hear his boots splashing through the water. I can't help but smirk.

The streets of the upperworld are neglected, trash blowing in the wind like tumbleweeds. There are no birds here, no rats. Even the cockroaches have forsaken their homes. Wyatt and I keep to the sides of buildings, walking in the shadows. We

walk the perimeter for fifteen minutes before hitting an invisible wall of sulfur in the air. And I know we've found them.

Wyatt sidesteps in front of me and leads us into a dark building, the stench so strong that I pull the collar of my shirt over my nose to keep from vomiting. I hear the rumblings of a person moaning down the hall and it takes everything in me to keep from sprinting. *It's Warren. It has to be.* Wyatt knows it too because he tenses, his hand balling into a fist around mine as we move.

We reach the doorframe, Wyatt one side and I on the other. Warren is crumpled against a wall, covered in sweat and his head hanging low as if it were no longer joined to his spine. Dark Ones hover over and around him, their skeletal bodies covered in black smog. Little tendrils of black steam off their vapor figures, like a ghost evaporating into thin air. A Dark One crouches down and touches Warren's face with tentacle like bones and the scream that comes out of him is unnatural. Warren's skin begins to boil and singe, melting under the acidic grasp of the Dark One. My skin crawls and I jump out of myself, suddenly sprinting through the herd of ghouls and to the side of my oldest brother, my protector for so many years.

I stand with my back against his chest and my arms spread wide. I can't help but picture my father doing exactly this to protect his children as they escaped the Dark Ones on that fateful night. Never have I seen the face of a Dark One so close, never have I wanted to. But never would I stand idly by and watch the torture of Warren, one of the last remaining good people. A haunting chuckle echoes around me, escaping the bellows of the ghostlike skeletons. They move closer and I can no

longer see Wyatt. I can no longer see Warren. All I see are the black eyeless pits of the Dark Ones.

With closed eyes, I reach down and find Warren's limp hand. I squeeze it and am overwhelmed with relief when he squeezes back. He's alive. And if nothing else, at least he will not die alone. But the thought of death brings a righteous anger in me, like a fire in the hollows of my stomach. Warren is too good to die. We all are.

*The Dark Ones come from within us.*

My eyes fly open at the revelation. I stare into the emptiness of our attackers, my jaw clenched and my eyes ablaze with sudden courage. I squeeze Warren's hand and spit in the face of the Dark Ones. "You can't have him."

A blinding light consumes the room and the Dark Ones are thrown back, their skeleton arms shielding their empty eyes. I sink into Warren, wrapping my arms around him as protection. My eyes adjust and I see a giant white figure standing over us, illuminated in white armor and wings the entire length of its body, long white hair cascades down his back and there are no eyes to be seen, only white light pouring out of their openings. His fists are balled tightly at his sides. The Dark Ones make another advance and I turn around quickly, this time standing in front of Warren, no longer crouching. The glowing figure stands like Goliath beside me, several feet taller and wider than any human I've ever seen. I step forward, not willing to back down, and the glowing figure moves with me. I understand what's happening here, even if the Dark Ones don't. Evil comes from within us, but so does good.

“You,” I smirk with narrowed eyes, more certain than I’ve ever been. “*Cannot* have him!”

I scream, my fists thrown out to my sides and my muscles tense like I’m holding together the pillars of a building with the mere strength in my arms. The light surges and builds around us until there is nothing but white, like I’m the only painting on a brand new canvas. Exhausted, I fall to my knees and pant, held up by my arms. Too tired to look, I feel Warren’s weak hand on my foot. Wyatt runs to me and falls to the ground, his hands on either side of my face, forcing me to look at him.

“What did you just do?!” His eyes are alive with shock and awe, an expression that would be my own if I didn’t feel closet to passing out. There isn’t enough room in me to feel so many emotions, so I focus only on one: *relief*. It floods over us all. I let out a weak laugh and lean into him, my hand holding onto Warren’s.

“I know how to beat them now.” And I smile to myself, knowing that this is where our new life begins.