

A dark, atmospheric forest scene. In the center, a queen wearing a crown and a dark, flowing cape sits on a throne, her back to the viewer. The forest floor is covered in purple flowers and vines. In the background, a large, ornate castle with multiple spires is visible through the trees, illuminated by a bright, ethereal light. The overall color palette is dominated by dark purples, blacks, and greys, with a strong contrast from the bright light behind the castle.

SHANE SHANON

*RULER
OF THE EARTH*



RULER OF THE EARTH

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WARNING

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All characters, places, and events depicted in this story are entirely coincidental and do not exist in reality.

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The story contains scenes of...

- ⚠ Ableism
- ⚠ Abuse
- ⚠ Blood
- ⚠ Classism
- ⚠ Dead
- ⚠ Dehumanization
- ⚠ Imprison
- ⚠ Massacre
- ⚠ Violence

The author has no intention of encouraging or inciting violence of any kind. Please exercise your own judgment while reading



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OF THE EARTH



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Prologue

The tables around the hall were covered up with perfectly white cloths for the 30th anniversary of the old people's home. Although the party had been the same every year, this year, the people were making a big deal out of it. With a full day of preparation in advance, the managers ordered their employees to clean the stinky old place up. The carpets were turned over, the bushes outside were trimmed, the service was filled with even more smiles than ever and everyone was happy.

They even pulled out their stashed-away money to buy a new flat-screen television just for us so we would spend the rest of our lives (which would not be very long) entertained by fake crap on the screen. Now that it was finally the grand lunchtime, the rest home was decorated with little colored balloons of red and black that floated against the ceiling.

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They looked pitiful since they were unable to go anywhere, and they drifted aimlessly a few inches at a time before they stopped and collided with other balloons.

“I can walk by myself,” I said to the young assistant.

“But ...madam,” he said, but I brushed him away. With my cane to support my weight, I did not need aid. Although the arthritis was getting worse every day, my pride did not allow me to be the one who needed help.

I sat down very slowly on a hard wooden chair which I had always despised. On the table laid a tray of hors d'oeuvres consisting of nuts, crackers, and dips of various sauces. I tried some but did not like them very much. My taste buds were fading quickly these days, such that I could not remember when was the last time I tasted anything good. My neighbor, whose room was opposite mine, sat down along with a few other old girls and boys I knew pretty well from our daytime socialisation.

I joined in their conversation just to be polite. It was again about family. It was always about family in this place: daughters getting married, sons getting married, granddaughters ran away from home, and grandsons going off to war. I could not blame them, since the young people were the ones making a difference while we, the broken objects from the past, were discarded by society.

When one of them was about to start another topic—this time it was about the past—the soup came. It was a slightly better version of

the usual tomato liquid we always had. There was even a basil leaf on top, which usually would not be there. Even the taste was a little better.

They've really put an effort into this, haven't they? I thought.

When the main course was served, I felt my appetite was already at rock bottom from the blandness of the food. When one of the assistants walked past us to serve the tables behind, my closest neighbor stopped him and asked what was in it.

"It's the grade-S meat." The young man showed us the plate. With a huge smile on his face, he pointed towards the half-raw chunk of meat still oozing red blood from its pores. He then continued, explaining the vegetables, saying what they were and what amazing techniques were used to cook them so beautifully.

Everything else on the dishes was irrelevant to me. All I could see was the meat, the big lump of muscle on white porcelain, and the past came back into my head. It was the ferrous smell of blood, the scream of people, and the redness covering the floor.

"Are you okay?"

I came back to reality when my acquaintance touched me. My hands were shaking uncontrollably. My breathing was heavy and rapid. I looked her in the eyes and tried to convince her to believe me.

"I'm fine," I lied, and she accepted my statement easily, since she immediately turned to stare at the meat from the other tables. All the old people's faces were the same: Their eyes brightened, their pupils

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dilated, and a big grin on their faces.

My neighbor was licking her lips. Her saliva was pouring out of her mouth messily. It was as if the eight-four-year-old woman had become a hungry wolf. The conversation had stopped completely by now and all focuses went to the main course. I kept telling myself that it was all reasonable. These people of my age were born during the Depression. It was natural that they so gravitated towards food.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” The same assistant came back to our table, bringing two platters, and decided to put one down in front of me.

“Someone else goes first.” I quickly pushed the platter to the middle of the table, where my other neighbor took it without delay. Apart from the two people who were now ravenously digging into their food, the rest were simply staring at the platters without making a noise.

Forks and knives made clicks and clacks. They banged each other with so much ferocity, the tables were shaking; it was a sound of desperation, resonating with our very first instinct that existed within this world: eat or be eaten.

Soon the server came back again with the rest of the plates for everyone on the table. Everyone took theirs eagerly, except me, excusing myself by saying that I was not hungry. The others kept insisting that I eat, even when their eyes told me otherwise. If I did not take mine, there would be more for them. They said how delicious the meat was; even the assistant was trying to make me eat it.

“I said I don’t want it!” I shouted and stormed off, suddenly ignoring my difficult mobility, and left the dining hall without looking back, knowing that people would be eyeing at me strangely. I did not care. The back door was right there in front of me, yet it seemed so far away.

Passing countless other tables with the meat and its devourers, my head spun, and I felt like vomiting. After limping across the hall for what seemed like forever, I eventually made it out alive.

There they were: the ray of sunlight, the fresh air, the gentle wind of the real outside world. I breathed in deeply once and the lingering scent of blood in my nose disappeared. As I kept walking, I left the noises of knives and forks behind as well, and soon I was better.

Sitting under a huge maple tree, I felt sunshine shine down on my face, gently touching the sunspots I had since I was a little girl. The birds were chirping the same old tune, the very same melody that remained unchanged for seventy years such that I could even sing along, and so I did until I was tired and decided to lie completely on my back. This time, I let the birds do their parts and I kept quiet.

“How can the world be this cruel when it is this beautiful?” I asked them.

No matter how much I tried, I could not forget the haunting nightmare of the past, even though I thought everything had changed. I realised that nothing had changed. I closed my eyes and drifted into the days of yore, to when I was still oblivious to the world around me.



Chapter 1

The Forest

Lying asleep beneath a tree, I felt something move across my face. When I stood up and wiped it away, a soft object landed with a thud and continued moving on the ground. My hair stood on end with disgust and the sweat poured out from my face. I stepped back—a little too far backward. To my side, staring with amused eyes and a big smile on her face, was Carla, laughing at me uncontrollably.

“What the hell is that thing?” I yelled, but there was no answer, because the laughter continued. It was no less than a minute before she could compose herself.

“You don’t know?”

“No, it’s so weird. What is it?”

“That’s a caterpillar.”

“A caterpillar? Oh! I’ve heard of it.” I recalled my mom telling me when I was younger but never actually seen one. As soon as I was lost in thought, Carla picked the creepy creature up and came at me again. After what felt like forever, she stopped chasing me and put it on a tree.

“Sorry, I’ll give you a hug,” she offered, but I pushed her away.

“I’m not touching you again. Where do those things even come from anyway?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

Carla smiled, and even without her looking back or saying anything to me, I understood her perfectly. Her caramel-colored legs stood squarely pointing towards the darkness of the forest. Her large brown eyes on her tanned, perfectly rounded face were mischievous.

“Have you ever wondered what is in the forest?” she said, knowing that I knew the answer. The caterpillar came from there. Devils, murderers, disasters, sicknesses, every strange thing come from there. We were told to stay away from the forest. It was a known fact that everyone adhered to.

“No.” I whispered it too quietly for Carla to hear.

“Then let’s go.” Carla patted me on the shoulder with her muscular right arm. I stood still in indecision.

“Come on, just for a little way and we can come back. There’s nothing dangerous about the forests. Come on, Cat.”

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“Fine, just a little way...” I agreed and decided to follow her.

Carla’s enthusiasm was unwavering and it was a little reassuring for me to have her by my side. Carla had never been afraid of anything since I had known her, and scary stories would not usually stop her from her adventure.

I looked back in the direction of Mister Sam’s house for the last time. It was the closest marker of civilisation that I would fall back to if anything happened. I prayed to my faraway mother to keep me safe from harm. Then realised that I was now disobeying her, so it was no use asking.

“Hurry up, Cat!” Carla yelled when I was hesitating for the final time before I stepped into the darkness of the forest.

As soon as we were in there, Carla was already hopping from one place to another on her light feet. I was struggling to take proper footing on the slippery ground where tree roots were entwined in irregular and inconsistent undulation. Looking down as I walked, I did not notice how far I had come until I caught up to Carla.

“Sorry to hold you back,” I said.

“That’s okay. You are not doing half bad yourself.” She just smiled at me, hinting at no impatience at all. The way we were heading was all dark. Even though it was in the middle of the day, the leaves were so thick they blocked out most of the sunlight. I looked back at where we just came from and it was nothing more than a small hole. It made me

scared.

“You’ll be okay.” Carla grabbed my left arm gently. “We’ll walk together.”

It was probably half an hour further before Carla did something strange. She stopped suddenly and put an arm in front of me, her eyes staring forward, her ears listening, and her body tense. She glanced at me and put a finger to her mouth. I remained as still as possible.

Even though I noticed nothing, my friend’s keen ears probably heard something. It was not until we started walking again that I noticed it. We stopped and it stopped. We listened and it made no sound, but when we walked again, it moved along with us. Carla broke off a branch of a tree and held it as a weapon.

“The curse is real, Carla. We shouldn’t have come here,” I whispered to her.

“No, it’s not a curse. I know it’s not and I’m going to find out what it is,” She walked in the direction the sound came from. Without saying any more, she started sprinting and vanished behind the thick bushes. In an instant, Carla was gone and I was completely alone.

The forest remained unmoving. The ground was still. The wind was no longer blowing. Everything became completely silent and devoid of life. My eyes began to dart on their own from left to right, then above and below, then to the left and right again. I was not sure what to do.

Scared stiff and speechless, I felt my brain was devoid of any

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useful thought.

So I crouched down and waited, listening for danger and tried to control my breathing. Faintness came to me, and I had to resist. Just a moment ago, Carla had been right there, but now there was not even a sound of her in any direction.

“She knows where I am, so I will wait,” I told myself.

But as time passed, I began to grow more afraid. I waited nervously in that spot for a long while—maybe it was ten minutes—but there was still no sign of her. I feared that she had been injured somewhere in the forest and could not come back on her own.

“She needs me!” I stood up. “If I do nothing, she will die.”

Despite my nervousness getting worse, I kept walking to the direction Carla had gone while shouting her name.

The forest was getting thicker. The creeping plants and bushes were obstructing my path so much that I had to use my hands to tear them apart at times. Some of them were trampled on, so I figured out that they were the path that Carla had taken. Her footprints were everywhere; I followed them, one by one, making sure not to miss until I eventually came to a large opening where they disappeared.

There was a large amount of water on the ground flowing in one direction. The strange thing was that the liquid was constantly flowing down from the top of the hill. It was as if someone was pouring it down from a cup twenty times the size of me. The sound it made was loud,

yet surprisingly calming. I expected the water to run out, but it would not stop no matter how long I waited. I simply stood there and watched it in astonishment. After all, it was the first time I had seen a waterfall. I lost myself in the moment and forgot that I had to rescue my best friend until I saw someone coming out of a hole behind the wall of a vertical torrent.

An old man with a scruffy brown beard in a cautious manner started to scan the surrounding so carefully before coming out as if he was hiding something. His face was crossed, his brows curved down in a frown, and his lips shut tight. He was angry and his massive body made him look even more dangerous. I hated to think about what he was going to do with his captive.

Anyhow, I was too far away and he had not seen me. But not soon after, the man started walking towards my direction, so I slowly concealed into the thicker part of the bush and went into a prone position.

Holding my breath and pinching my eyelids shut, I prayed to my mother. “Do not see me, do not see me, please, do not see me.” His footsteps came closer and closer, and after some time that seemed like forever, he finally went past me and disappeared into the other direction. He did not notice, but it was another thirty seconds that I kept myself hidden before emerging.

There was something behind that curtain of water, I knew from the way that man had come out before. After jumping from one slippery rock to another to avoid getting my shoes wet, I finally came to a hole

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where the water did not fall.

The grotto was so dark I could barely see the outline of the walls. The light cast at my back gave rise to a large looming shadow of myself on the wet floor. Even though I knew it was nothing more than a mere silhouette, a terrifying thought came into my mind: This was the place where the monsters hid, and I was stepping right into their lair. Their fangs and claws were already waiting for me. And maybe that outline of my body was not so harmless after all.

“Carla!” I shouted to snap out of my stupidity. I breathed in harder and used my voice to give me courage. There was still no response, so I moved inside a little further. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the outline of something big was blocking the path in front of me.

Two cuboidal structures, interconnected with a common passageway, with a chimney at the top that opened up to a small hole in the ceiling of the cave. I guessed it was some sort of a hut from the appearance. When I tried its wooden door, it opened easily into a room where the only source of light was from an oil lamp on a wooden table.

Taking it in as though I owned it, I started exploring. The first room was a kitchen with two wooden chairs and a table. A clay pot, still steaming hot from recent cooking, contained some food that smelt good.

When I looked closer, another disturbing thought came into my mind. I saw in there, in pieces, fingers, toes, ears, eyes, torn to bits—my body parts, chopped up by the monsters and put inside this pot, to be

cooked slowly for several hours until the monsters could simply suck the meat from my bones.

It was one of many tales my mother had told me when I was naughty. Unlikely to be true, but I still hated to think that Carla could be in there. I hurriedly left the kitchen before more negative thoughts came to me. I passed through a tiny corridor to the other room.

“Carla!” I shouted, again using my voice to keep my fear at bay.

The next enclosure was just as gloomy as the first. After looking around the space, it seemed to be a bedroom. The small messy wooden bed in the center of the room had nothing underneath its smelly old blanket. The other side of the room housed a wardrobe with its doors shut tight.

When I tried to pull it open properly, something else shocked me: One of the double doors appeared to be out of place. It was shaggy, old and a much deeper brown compared to the rest of the armoire.

That particular piece of wood presented a line of letters carved into its surface. The carving was sketchy, barely done properly, as if the writer was in the biggest hurry. To top it off, they were not just any letters, but ones I recognised straight away, because it was the very same sentence written on my most precious item: the locket that my mother had given me on the last day I saw her.

Suddenly, the front door of the house opened with a creak so loud my hair stood up. The man was back. I froze briefly but managed to hide in time. I went under the bed and lay still. The man’s footsteps were clear

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as he walked around the house and talked to someone in the other room.

So, there are at least two of them in the house, I thought. As soon as I thought I could wait for them to leave, the talking stopped and something rushed in my direction. Then I realised what it was; its footsteps were light and did not sound like any living being.

I held my breath as the monster approached. It came straight to me as if it knew where I was. It made a strange loud noise that only a monster could ever make and I began to cry.

The man eventually caught up after the monster then ordered it to quiet down. He moved the bed and dragged me out. Too terrified to move even an inch, I closed my eyes so that I did not have to look at his face or the monster.

Like a prisoner truly guilty of her crime, I let myself be carried away without struggling. I never opened my eyes during the transportation but I felt the coarse hairs of his arms prick into my skin. When he put me down on the cold wet floor of the cave, I still had my eyes shut tight, and the next thing I felt was the monster sniffing me.

“Don’t hurt me,” I prayed. “Please...”

However, the smelling continued as the monster readied its appetite. The man shouted something I did not understand, but it immediately responded to his command by stopping and left.

“Who are you?” he asked, sounding too calm for a man who just had his house invaded. I opened my eyes. In front of me was a man

with a lot of fur on his face. His skin was dark, barely contrasting to his brown beard but distinct from his blue eyes.

“I’m Cattleya,” I answered honestly.

“No! Who are you exactly?” He asked again.

“My name is Cat,” I answered but he was already asking me another question.

“How did you find your way in here?” His voice was getting annoyed, I could tell.

“I got lost.”

“That might be right. There was another girl who looked like she was lost too. I assume you two are with each other?”

“Carla! Where did you take her? What did you do to her?” I was desperate for an answer, so I forgot my position and raised my voice.

“Nothing. She did not see me, so I let her go. She must have gone back the way she came already,” he said and held his hand out. “And so should you. You have to get out of here too.”

I looked at the hand and then his face, not confident that I could trust him. His hands suddenly grabbed mine and pulled me up. His palm was three times as big as mine and rough as tree bark. He dragged me with him out of the cave until we came to the space in front of the waterfall, where he released my hands.

“So you are letting me go?” I asked him, unsure.

“Yes, but you must forget about me and this place. You have to

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understand that you cannot come back here again,” he said, staring off into the distance.

“Why?”

“Just keep going in that direction.” Without acknowledging my question, he simply pointed. Not believing him fully, I looked him in the eyes for guidance, but they were expressionless. His lips were unsmiling, his brow gave no frown, and his eyes betrayed no emotion. I guessed I had to trust him after all.

“But why, sir?” I asked him again politely.

“Stop asking questions, little girl. You must forget about me. Go! And never come back.” His stares were coming straight at me and his voice had that commanding tone, just like a trainer’s voice, that I could never resist. So my legs began walking on their own. I kept going without looking back.

This might be a game to him. Maybe he will send his monster after me to hunt, I thought.

But the creature never came, and eventually I found myself back at the special place at the back of Mister Sam’s property.

Every week when I came back to our special spot, the memory of this day would pop up in my mind. I would stare into the forest for hours. It was not a place of curses and death anymore, but a land of mystery. Although I did not want to go inside again, the experience had already been engraved into my brain, and there was no way I could ever

forget about it.

However, it was not the same for Carla. After that day, she never came with me to our special place again, even though she said she came back safely a long time before me and did not even encounter the monster. It was as if she was hiding something. But whenever I asked her, she never answered, so I kept my story to myself as well. Maybe, on that day, something had changed us so much that we could not be the same ever again.



Chapter 2

Routine

I always woke up by my internal clock before the mechanical alarm even went off every morning. It was a fact that I was proud of, yet I was never too keen to get out of bed. Although I was conscious, my eyelids would often sit there lazily, and my body would lie still in bed until the actual alarm.

I waited and wondered what the day had in store for me. The hall bell finally rang loudly, its vibration was so intense that I could feel my bed move with it.

I jumped off my bed in one swoop to psych myself up. My small body made no sound as my soft feet landed on the cold stone floor.

Once again, I decided to wake my best friend who was still sleeping soundly in the middle of the earth-shaking vibration of the alarm.

I had to wake her up nearly every single day ever since she became such a heavier sleeper. I was not free of fault either because I was spoiling her by helping every morning. I pulled at her feet several times and shook her shoulders violently until she opened her eyes. Then she dragged her half-conscious body to the bathroom as soon as she could walk. We started brushing our teeth first.

“We are going to the mines today,” I said to her, trying to be enthusiastic about life.

“I don’t care.” Carla did not even look at me; her eyes were half-closed with her hands automatically brushing the teeth. She just looked too tired and always seemed like she hated life. I was glad that at least she could go to shower and brush her teeth by herself—that was enough for me—and I smiled in response.

When we were done, we went back to the locker room and stripped down to nothing. I had been using a shared shower for my entire life, but still felt awkward. Even though there were only girls, everybody was changing rapidly. Their chests were getting bigger every day, while mine did not look like it was even budding. I also had no hair growth in the pubic area like everyone else, including Carla, and I didn’t have a period like everyone else either. I was the only one who had not had my turn. Other girls frequently made fun of my body and it made me

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very self-conscious.

We came to the bathing room. It had a huge tub of water situated exactly in the middle. Every girl was given a bowl of their own to take water out of the tub and pour it on themselves. I let the cold liquid ran down my head, which reminded me of the waterfall, so I smiled. A girl named Sowie across the room weirdly looked at me, like I was crazy, but I ignored her. I quickly washed and finished in five minutes and went out. Then I dried myself with my towel on the way out.

I dressed myself up in my T-shirt uniform—if I could call it that, because it was more like a rag. Although I remembered them being a shirt a long time ago, this particular garment was full of holes, one of them hanging around my neck where the left shoulder was split in half. I still kept it, because I often had an insufficient number of shirts to wear in the winter when they were so slow to dry. I was a clean freak who could not stand wearing the same sweaty shirt for two days in a row like some other girls. My other two shirts could not keep up, so I needed the third one. It was good that they could be cleaned fairly easily, and the grey colour hid the stains very well.

“Wash your shirt, Carla,” I said when I saw her putting yesterday’s shirt on without washing, even though it was summer when everybody sweated a lot.

Carla sniffed at her shirt and looked at me, puzzled.

“It smells fine to me,” she said.

“That’s because I washed them for you yesterday!”

“Oh! Thank you, that’s nice of you.”

“That’s because I can’t stand having you walking around the whole day with that stinky shirt last time. But you have to do it yourself next time, okay?”

“Sorry. I’ll do it today.”

“Don’t just put it in the sun when you take it off. You need to wash it.” That was what she had done yesterday.

“Hmm...sure,” she promised me, but I had a feeling that she was going to forget again.

The alarm sounded once more, signaling the time to assemble for the morning in front of our building. Everyone, including me, ran outside. Some were not done dressing themselves, so they were putting their clothes on while running. Being late was not an option; it would result in punishment.

Our tall and golden-haired trainer Emmeline stood still in a perfectly squared stance. She looked at us one by one as we ran past her to form a line.

“Stop!” she shouted. We put our hands at our sides, our feet together, and stood very still. She walked in her black gumboots from the head of the line to the tail while stomping her feet each step as if to show her authority.

Her skin was reddened by sunburn, just like the rest of us, although

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hers was more patchy and full of freckles in every place on her skin. I could tell that she had naturally white skin like me. A pair of slanted blue eyes below the thick forehead scrutinised every one of us, looking tired but intimidating nevertheless.

We called people who were above us “Superiors,” and we had to listen to everything they say. Emmeline was one of them, but she was also our trainer. A trainer’s job was to make plans for our daily work along with making sure we do our jobs. I would never dare to cross her, since it had been established for the past five years that she had no mercy—only one mistake and we would be punished hard.

She stopped at me, the last girl on the line, after checking my ragged uniform. She gazed into my eyes without any expression. I needed to stand perfectly still and look in a straight line no matter what she did to me. “She’s not there,” I kept telling myself. Her eyes fixated on mine far too long, what felt like an eternity passed between she left me alone again.

Every girl here, including me, had an identification number that we needed to remember so that we could respond correctly to our trainer calling. Emmeline pulled out her notebook from a jacket pocket and began reading.

“Number 30, front yard, pick fruits,” she said with the heavy accent of the Superior’s language.

“Number 19, house kitchen, cleaning.”

“Number 13, house parking, sweeping.” Number 13—Carla—walked away towards her workplace and waved at me, smiling. I just smiled back.

Finally, my number showed up. “54, go to the back hill, weeding.” But before I could even walk away, I heard the number after me.

“Number 1, back hill, weeding.”

It was my bad luck that I had to go with Number 1. She was none other than our top bully named Beasty. The hair on my body stood up nervously at the mere thought of her. It looked like today was not a good day after all.

In the past, I had always been one of her favourite targets. There was no doubt that I was the strangest girl here. I gently grabbed some strands of my hair and looked at it. Although the roots were already lighter in brown colour than any other girls, but to make it worse, the tips were yellow. I was the only girl who had it; all the others had the uniformly thick, dark brown hair.

I quickly ran towards the area in the estate called the Back Hill, which was quite far away from the main building we lived in. I ran there to avoid Beasty as long as possible, but I knew that it was inevitable. When I arrived, I found the work that people from yesterday morning had left off and immediately resumed the task. I just hoped Beasty would not see me and would leave me alone.

“Pull! Cattleya, Pull!” It was not long before I heard the voice of

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the Beast.

“Hi, how are you, Beasty?” I said with a polite smile.

“You little shit. You think you are getting away by talking nice to me, huh?” The tall and muscular brown-haired girl with the build of a giant snarled at me. Her lips curved upwards in a slick smile that I saw from the corner of my eyes.

I kept on working and avoid facing her directly but keeping an eye on her arms in case she decided to physically hurt me. I steadied my breathing and smiled to show that I was not shaken by her. Even though she was my most disliked person, I never wanted to fight her. Conflict was not my cup of tea.

“So what do you want me to do, Beasty?”

“You are a smart girl, Cattleya.” She said and pushed me on my shoulder to unbalance me. I fell with my face onto the ground, and it knocked the breath out of me.

“Oops, sorry,” Beasty said teasingly with a happy smile, barely able to keep her laughter away.

I ignored her and stood up. I could tell that it was her intention all along to push me into the dirt. A chunk of dirt was stuck to my skin and it dripped down to my mouth so I had to wipe it away. Unable to keep her face straight anymore, Beasty laughed with her ugly voice.

“I knew it. Because your friend Carla is not here, right?”

“Yes?” I felt my face go red, and I kept quiet and went back to

work. She was right. If Carla were with me this morning, she would not allow Beasty to bully me like this. I felt weak. I hated myself for being unable to stand up to her, but I did not want any trouble, so it was probably for the best.

“As you know, I have a toilet duty tonight,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll do it for you,” I said without hesitation.

“Good,” she said, and left for her work.

After our work period around the estate, the alarm sounded again to signal us to assemble at the front of our building. We were allowed to go back inside and eat some breakfast: soft potatoes mixed with a type of meat ingredients were served with various greens. All of them would be mashed together to form half-liquid, half-solid chunks.

Our trainer Emmeline had to rotate girls on kitchen duty in the morning to help her mix up the food, so I knew that the ingredients usually came in big bags that required two to three girls to lift it. We mixed the dry powder potatoes into a pot with hot water then stirred it, and simply called it a “potatoes meal.”

I never ate a lot, but even I could feel the change in our breakfast. The meat had significantly decreased in the past year, as well as any fresh greens. Right now, we were only eating bulky, unchewable vegetable matter with dead insects appearing frequently within the food. It had also gotten thinner and thinner as time went by, and right now it hardly filled me up. This morning, Emmeline told us again that we were too lazy and

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did not work hard enough, so the estate had no food to feed us.

The long wooden bench that ran the whole table length creaked loudly when I sat down. When I looked at Carla, who was sitting opposite me, and smiled, she started a conversation before I could.

“Do they expect us to live on this much food?” She started complaining and ravenously put a spoonful into her mouth in hunger.

I responded, “You can take some of mine,” and pushed my bowl over to her side of the table. Although what I had was nowhere near enough for myself either, I felt bad looking at Carla’s face. I never ate much anyway, and Carla never had enough.

“No, you need to grow too, Cat.” She pushed the bowl back to me. She had never accepted my food despite almost certainly being very hungry herself.

“Thanks,” I said quietly and looked down to continue with my food.

“What do you think our job is today?” Jenny, another girl who usually sat at our table, asked.

“I think we are going to the mine today,” I said, knowing full well that we were going there. It was day one of the week. I knew because the cycle always repeated every seven days: day one mining, day two mining, day three orchard, day four orchard, day five bridge, day six city, and day seven Mister Sam’s.

The schedule changed from time to time, but mostly stayed

the same. I usually hated it the most at the mining site, because it was the type of work I was not good at. It required pure strength to lift stuff, so it was my least favourite time of the week.

Day seven was always the best since there was hardly any work to do. It was also a big bonus that the heartless and commanding dictator Emmeline had her day off then. Instead, we had Mister Sam, who usually gave us simple tasks around his house and garden. Most of the time, he fell asleep right after assigning them, so we could just work at our own pace until he woke up again. His place was a place of comfort for me. It was also where the forest was.

Carla waited after she finished her meal since I was always the last one to be done. From the corner of my eye, I saw Beasty staring at me, and winked. I looked down to avoid her gaze altogether. Even though I tried to hide it, Carla picked it up and looked behind her after she saw my submissive expression.

“What the hell was that?” she asked in a loud voice. She knew.

I swallowed my food and answered timidly, “Nothing.” My body language was something I could not fake properly.

“I thought we have gone through this?” Carla’s eyes locked into mine which made my guilt rise up. She knew full well what was going on.

“How can you be so weak, Cattleya? I said I will protect you no matter what. Don't you trust me? Do you even know that I'm hurt that you don't trust me?” she uttered in annoyance.

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Before I could even reply, the alarm rang. The time to move out was now, and we were to assemble in front of the building.

Carla said nothing more and dragged me out of the mess hall, an angry look on her face but still grabbing my arm so gently. I knew that the tiger was about to meet the lion.



Chapter 3

The Mines

Emmeline counted our heads again before we departed, but all she said was, “We are going to the mine,” and “get on the truck.” When we were prepared to go, I could still feel Carla’s anger radiating from her even though she was standing on the other side of our line. It was not the time to quarrel, she knew. But when the chance presented itself, I knew she would go for it.

When we arrived at the worksite, Carla was the first one to jump off. Her long and nimble legs dexterously landed on hard ground in one swift motion. Her cheeks bright red, her drops of sweats were pouring down from her forehead, she stood squarely with her arms crossed to wait

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for her enemy.

From how confident she looked, she had to be thinking that nobody could hurt her, not even Emmeline. Although she was only thirteen years old then, she was the strongest person I had ever known my whole life. None of the other girls could stand her stare and soon scampered past as soon as possible, but I could tell that they were curious about what was going on.

“It's not the time, Carla,” I said to my best friend.

“Shut up, Cat.” She dismissed me with a stroke of the arm.

“No, we will get into trouble,” I cried, my voice desperate. If Carla were to fight with Beasty now, we would get into big trouble with Emmeline.

“I don't care.”

“You have to stop!” I yelled. I grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the spot, but we struggled against each other and one of her hands ended up pushing me to the ground. Dust flew up from the dry sandy floor of a hot summer.

I saw the apologetic look on Carla's face. “I'm so sorry, Cat,” she uttered before pulling me up.

“That's okay,” I replied with a smile to make her feel better.

“I'm so sorry,” she said again. I took this chance to hurry and pulled her away from the truck to avoid conflict. She gave in to me easily due to her guilt for hurting me.

The mines were called Devanta mines. The site comprised several digging grounds that ranged on six mountains. At that time, as a girl, I knew nothing about the purpose of the place, only that it was my least favourite place to work in. The precious mineral the massive operation was extracting was called “gold.” With five thousand active workers in service who worked days and nights for seven days a week, the place was very important to this region. However, there were hardly any females except for some kitchen ladies in the dining hall.

Our work mainly consisted of filling wheelbarrows with dirt and rocks, pushing them forward, then dumping them into the trucks. Then we would walk back to do it all over again. Despite the simplicity, it was hard to work in such conditions, since we spent most of our time in the strong sun, with dust flowing everywhere—into our nostrils and our eyes—constantly.

Emmeline shouted “Line up!” and we arranged ourselves again into a single-file line.

“We are going to mine number 6. You know the rules—no touching the males,” she directed us in her harsh, commanding tone. Everyone turned to the right at once, and suddenly I became the head of the train. Behind me were girls in reverse height order, with the freakishly tall Emmeline following after everyone else. In this way, they could always see the person in front while our trainer oversaw everyone.

It was often that I had to lead the way, yet the feeling of nervousness

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never went away since there was always a possibility that I could mess up the line. If I went the wrong way, or lead us down a hole, I would be punished.

“I know mine number 6,” I thought. Emmeline kept shouting left or right whenever there was an intersection, but I did not need her direction. I had discovered a while ago my ability to recognise some symbols on directional signs.

Normally, girls such as us were not meant to read the language of the Superior, but I could not help but have gotten a little curious, so I figured a few things on my own. Number symbols were easy, and I’d even taught Carla to read some of them. Six was a big curly thing, two was monstrously ugly and the seven was very lanky, to name a few. Once I could read them, I just followed the directional signs, and we reached our destination (mine number 6) in no time.

Our trainer strode off to have a chat with the manager of the mine. They talked in the Superior language, which I could not understand at all. Instead of listening in, I looked around and noticed a lot of brown-skinned males digging attentively nearby. Their arms were strong like steel, with sweat running down their shiny reddish-brown bodies like oil. I knew that they had no other purpose but to act as tireless machines, servicing the Superiors until the last day of their lives. They were mindless animals who knew nothing except to work, and we were told not to touch them because it would disturb their jobs.

Emmeline soon came back and led us to our worksite. As soon as we tried to get past the male workers, a lot of them turned their heads towards us. There was nothing in their completely dark eyes. Even though I expected savagery and inferno in them (as we had been told), there was not even so much as a sparkle. Those were the eyes of those whose life purpose had been forsaken long ago in favour of more simple things.

Simply the workers' pausing briefly to look at us caused one of their masters to slap his whip on the floor. Suddenly, all of them turned back towards their work, and they did not dare look at us again.

All we would do for the whole day was shove the busted rocks onto the back of the trucks while we bathed in the hot bright sun. The constant flow of dust in the air caused many of us to sneeze and our eyes to water. Even though we were getting very good at working in the intensely hot conditions at that point, days one and two were still the worst two days of the week. The males, however, did not look like they minded it at all, as if they had been born to do this job. They worked about four times as fast as we did and seemed to have no limit on how much they could work. Sometimes I wondered why they even bothered hiring little teenage girls to come at all.

I remembered our first day ever at the mine. Someone fainted quickly as soon as we arrived. It was the girl named Hinda, one of the smallest girls back then. I could picture Emmeline on that day, very angry about our inability to stay conscious. She shouted that

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she would punish anyone who fainted.

I lost my consciousness too that day, but nobody was punished, because there were too many girls who did the same—even if some of them were fake. However, Mister Larrington, the real boss of the estate, insisted on our working at the mine.

After the incident, they put a movable shelter at our worksite and they made us stay near the nearby small pond all the time. After that day, the work became somewhat bearable. We started jumping into the pond and applying mud on ourselves, letting it dry to act as an excellent protection against the sun. Emmeline had no problem with our action and only called us “filthy pigs,” whatever that meant to her, so everyone kept doing it. Today, as I walked toward the pond to get some mud, Jenny approached me.

“Hey! Was Carla going to have a scrap with Beasty again?” she whispered when Emmeline was far away. To be honest, Jenny looked kind of like Beasty herself, as most girls in our estate looked vaguely similar to each other. Only I was very different in almost every category. Carla was dissimilar because of her facial features, but she was still a typical brown-haired, brown-eyed, and muscular girl.

“No,” I denied. Jenny was one of the girls who hated Beasty, but it was better to have nobody know about it.

“No? I don’t believe you. She was trying to protect you again.”

“No, she was just... just... Not doing well.”

“What do you mean? She is sick?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing. She just felt sick from the truck.” I cooked up a terrible lie.

“Is that all?” Jenny said, clearly disbelieving me.

All of a sudden, I heard the strong confident voice of Carla from across the area, talking directly to us. She had to be listening in on our conversation from somewhere.

“Yep! That bitch is going down.”

I turned away from Jenny in embarrassment.

“I thought you said she wasn’t,” Jenny said to me.

“Sorry, I lied. I don’t want them to fight. It’s better just to forget about it.” I had nothing better to say.

“Then are you going let her bully you for the rest of your life?”

Carla pointed a finger at me and looked me in the eye. I could never turn away when she did that, so I had to answer her about something.

“Carla... just forget about it, okay?” I said weakly.

“No, I will never let anyone do that to you again!”

“Calm down, girl,” Jenny suddenly responded and grabbed ahold of her arm. Carla looked back at her in confusion for her involvement. It was as if she had forgotten that there were other people around us. After Carla calmed herself down, Jenny whispered in her ear, which made her nod. Both of them walked away from me without looking back.

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Then I had a feeling of being left out. I knew that Carla would not give up so easily.

What had Jenny said that could convince even her?



Chapter 4

The girl Who Left Home

To understand my story, I had to tell them from the very beginning. If the forest was where it changed me, the place called Larrington's Estate would be where it had shaped me to who I was in the first place.

I remembered my mother hanging on to me until the last moment. Was she crying or not, I could not clearly remember, but I could tell that she was in an agonizing state of sadness. She said not to worry and that everything would be fine, but I knew it would not be, because I would never see her again.

A massive truck was there along with other girls in a small

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confinement. A few at a time, the girls walked inside the dark and cramped space of the back. The massive metal door then shut from behind, and there was no escape. We did not question why they were sending us away, knowing only that we would never see our mothers again.

No matter how much I used my nails to scratch on its hard surface, the bar remained unmoved. The only thing that moved was the truck itself as it was going further and further from my homeland.

Three full days I was in the back of the vehicle. The room was full of children similar to me: abandoned and hopeless. Most of them were dropped off here and there but at the end of the journey, I was the only one who was left.

Finally, the journey came to an end, and I stepped out onto Larrington's Estate for the first time. I felt a chill. It was not just the weather but the atmosphere, windy with a dreary grey sky that looked like it was always going to rain. Cold gusts licked my bare skin and sent shivers through my body instantly. It was nothing like the mild, relatively unchanging warm climate of my homeland.

The first person I met was old Emmeline, who was rumoured to have been the sole trainer of Larrington's for the previous two hundred years—not because she appeared young, but because she looked old, and she constantly looked angry. Her face was the same no matter what day of the week you looked at her, always grumpy, always blaming, always punishing you.