

"As dark and twisted as it is tender and beautiful."
—SARAH UNDERWOOD, author of *Lies We Sing to the Sea*

GIRLS
of
DARK
DIVINE

E.V. WOODS

GIRLS
of
DARK
DIVINE

A pair of scissors is positioned horizontally, cutting through the word "DARK". The scissors are open, with the blades pointing towards the left. The handles are on the right. The scissors are dark and have a textured, possibly metallic or wood-grained appearance. The word "DARK" is in a bold, blocky, sans-serif font. The scissors are cutting through the letters "A" and "R". There are some faint, curved lines around the scissors, suggesting movement or a cut.

For Mum

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A pair of ornate, dark-colored scissors is positioned horizontally, cutting through the word "DARK". The scissors have a detailed, possibly engraved, pattern on the handles. The word "DARK" is rendered in large, blocky, metallic letters with a weathered texture. The scissors are positioned such that the blades are cutting through the letters "A" and "R".

E.V. WOODS

USBORNE

NEW KORA



PORT

8 DAYS BY SEA

TRAIN STATION

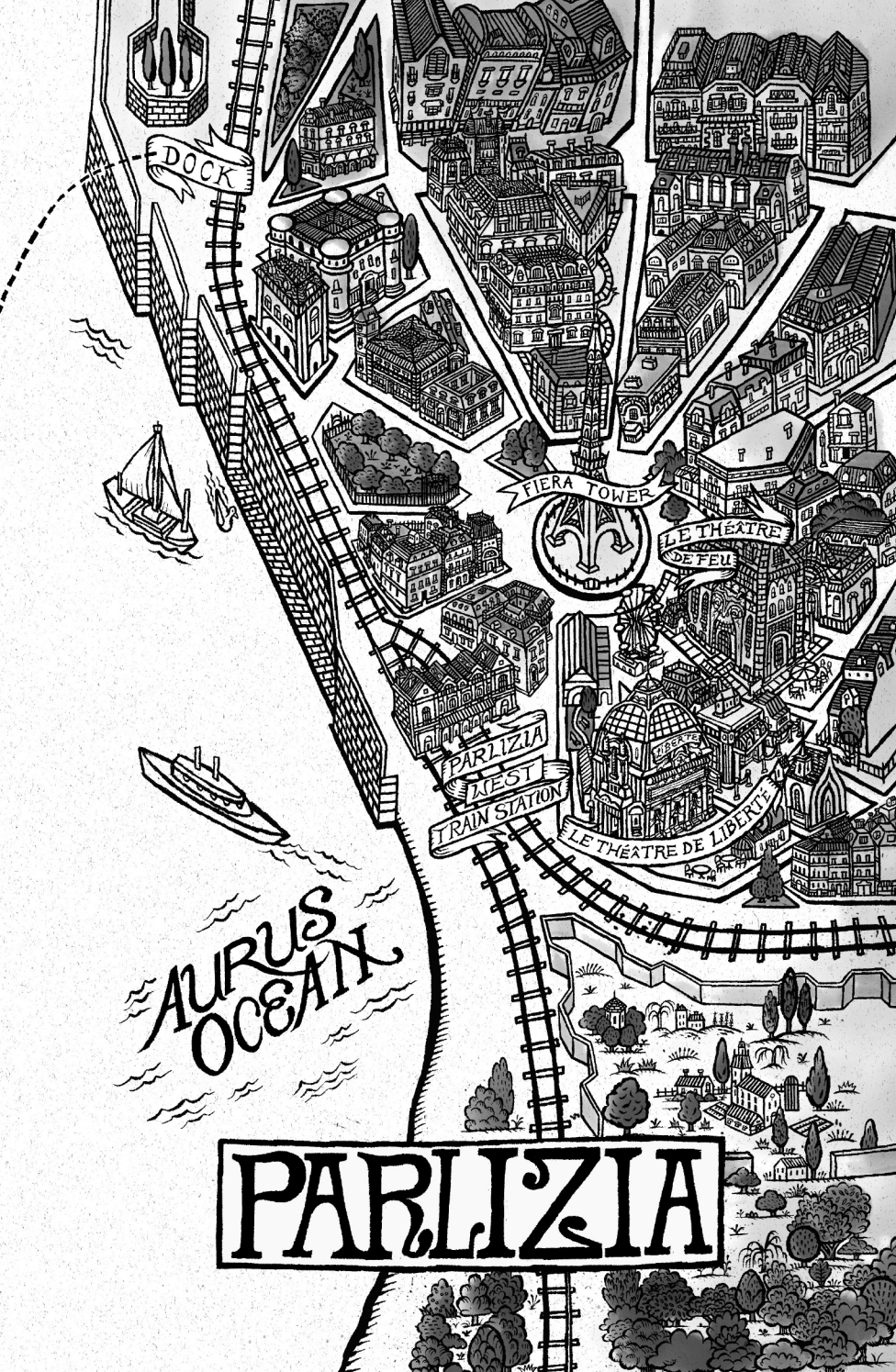
PARK

CHORD

MANOR THEATRE

THEATRE DISTRICT

HULLIVER RIVER



AURUS
OCEAN

DOCK

FIERA TOWER

LE THÉÂTRE
DE FEU

PARLIZIA
WEST
TRAIN STATION

LE THÉÂTRE DE LIBERTÉ

PARLIZIA

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In its essence, *Girls of Dark Divine* is a narrative about an abusive relationship, which means it does explore some very dark themes. Although there is no sexual violence, there are scenes depicting loss of bodily autonomy and uncomfortable moments in which the male villain asserts his belief in his ownership over the female characters through physical violence.

There are also scenes of manipulation and gaslighting throughout that may make some readers uncomfortable, as well as some instances of light gore. So, please remember to be kind to yourself as you read, and know that it is okay to walk away if you need to.

With that being said, I hope you enjoy getting lost in the darkness of Le Théâtre de Feu...and see you on the other side!

E.V. Woods, August 2025



ACT ONE

CHAPTER ONE

AN INCONVENIENT DEATH

A strange, held-breath hush had fallen through the dusty corridors beneath the theatre. Thick as the shadows that haunted this place, the silence had swollen until the solemn, watching walls could no longer contain it.

Until the screams began.

Emberlyn whipped her head up as the shrieks pierced the air, cutting apart the silence of the dormitory. She grabbed the pile of maps spread open on her bed and stuffed them beneath her mattress, leaping to her feet to tear open the door and peer out into the yawning corridor beyond. The low light emanating from the sconces shuddered as if disturbed by the noise, pirouetting through the dark. Emberlyn's blood thundered in her ears as the screams turned into echoing howls of agony.

Suddenly, there came the pounding of footsteps. Emberlyn stared as a pale figure in white appeared at the end of the corridor.

Jia. The youngest of the Marionettes raced towards her with tears shining on her cheeks.

"Emberlyn!" Jia cried.

"What's wrong? Why are they screaming?"

"It's Heather."

The breath caught in Emberlyn's throat. Instantly, every semblance of frustration from the interruption evaporated. Her vision spun as she stepped into the corridor and allowed Jia to grab her hand.

"Take me to her," Emberlyn urged.

The scent of dust and melting wax felt thick in her throat as the pair ran through the darkness. When they neared the common room, she picked out the sounds of her sisters. The shrieks had faded to a scattered, bitter sobbing, punctuated with a low moan.

She could feel the absence of Heather's honeyed voice like a weight in her stomach.

Five pairs of eyes turned to blink at Emberlyn as she and Jia burst into the room. A group of her sisters, the Marionettes, stood in the common room around a figure curled into a fetal position at their feet. Heather's pale blue nightgown was splayed out around her, coated in a fine layer of silver dust from the floorboards. The fire in the hearth raged, but Emberlyn felt no warmth as she took in the other Marionettes' faces, twisted into grimaces of grief.

Rosalyn and Miriam stared at the floor, eyes averted from their dead sister. Anushka had her arms wrapped around Ida, who had buried herself inside Anushka's thick mane of dark hair, her shoulders heaving with unrestrained sobs.

Then the smell hit Emberlyn, and she staggered back.

The smell of a Marionette's curse – the rot that had destroyed the girl on the floor from the inside out, escaping her body. Acidic. Sour. Like old vegetables soaked in vinegar, with an undertone of something so much worse. A cold cemetery at night. A coffin opening after a hundred years nailed shut.

Emberlyn covered her mouth, her throat tightening and

protesting. Her mind spun as she fought the writhing in her stomach and steadied herself.

“She just dropped.” Anushka’s voice trembled, coming out husky and strangled. “She said she felt strange, stood up a-a-and just... dropped.” She shook her head as Ida let out another muffled cry into her neck.

Grief made a grab for Emberlyn’s heart, but it didn’t get far before it slammed into a wall of ice that doused the embers before they could take hold. She had to embody unwavering fortitude as her sisters fractured around her. As the longest-suffering Marionette, she had to be strong for them. But as she looked down at the crumpled, motionless body before her, Emberlyn couldn’t help herself.

She thought of Esme. The very first of the Marionettes, and the only one of them to die from their curse. Until now.

She remembered how Esme had also suddenly dropped, disintegrating before her eyes as the darkness stole the final breaths from a chest that silently stilled. She remembered the cavernous, gaping feeling of her fragile world splitting in two as she’d clutched the dying hand of the one who had guided her through this cruel existence. It had slowly grown colder in her own burning grasp.

The before and after. The girl who loved her and the first body she buried. She had so dearly hoped it would be the last.

Emberlyn scanned the room. She found Aleida curled up in the armchair beside the fireplace, arms wrapped around her knees, leaning away from the heap on the floor as the shimmer of flames gently kissed along her brown skin. Her thick, dark hair was thrown over one shoulder in a dishevelled braid that looked as if she had frantically run her hands through it. Her dark eyes flicked up to meet Emberlyn’s.

They were haunted with the same memories as history repeated itself in front of them.

Emberlyn broke her gaze from Aleida's and stepped forwards, dropping to her knees beside Heather. She braced herself against the smell, gritting her teeth against the images it dredged up from the back of her mind. The ones she'd spent every moment since pushing away, hopelessly and desperately trying to forget. She reached out and ran her fingers through the honey-gold hair that twisted across the floor like dead snakes. She pushed the locks away from Heather's face.

Miriam let out a scream and tore from the room, her howls echoing down the corridor. Emberlyn cringed but focused her attention on the body of her sister.

Heather looked as if she had been dead for a year rather than a minute. Her lips had peeled away, revealing bared teeth and a blackened, swollen tongue that lolled grotesquely out of the corner of her mouth. Crusted eyes stared up at nothing, all traces of their usual light gone. Her skin had stretched and was straining over protruding cheekbones, her veins a criss-cross of black inside her paper-thin, almost translucently white skin. Emberlyn picked up Heather's hand and squeezed the cold palm against her own.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor. Emberlyn leaped to her feet as the Marionettes scrambled into the spaces furthest away from the door, forming a strange mourning line behind the body of their sister. They brushed down their skirts, scrubbed the tears from their faces, and clasped their hands behind their backs, gazes cast to the floor. Emberlyn tipped up her chin and trained her glare on the shadowed doorway, listening with a thundering heart as the footsteps grew louder. Closer.

The Marionettes held their breath as the Puppet Master entered their common room.

“What’s all—? Oh, for goodness’ sake!”

Malcolm Manrow wrinkled his nose as he paused on the threshold, his commanding frame filling the space. His hand went to his breast pocket, from which he pulled a gold-embroidered handkerchief and pressed it to his nose, brows furrowing in frustration. When his eyes flicked to the lifeless figure on the floor, his mouth pursed under his neat moustache.

Some might think of Malcolm Manrow as handsome. Some desired to be on the receiving end of the disarming smile that often lit up his eyes, to bask in the gleam of his perfectly straight, pearly white teeth. It was true, he could be endlessly charming when he wanted to be. When he wanted people to believe things about him that were simply not true. But to Emberlyn – to the rest of the Marionettes – he was hideous. He was a monstrous Puppet Master who controlled their invisible strings.

Malcolm rested his thumb inside his ornately patterned cummerbund and sighed.

“Another one? This is incredibly inconvenient.” His voice was like ice: slippery, hard. Cold. Malcolm looked at Heather a moment longer, shaking his head in irritation before his eyes snapped up to the rest of the Marionettes. He regarded them steadily for a moment. Their shoulders drooped and breaths stilted as if they didn’t dare make a noise without his permission. He shook his head again, exasperated. “I’ll have to waste time looking for someone to take her place now.”

Emberlyn sucked in a breath at his words. Malcolm’s gaze fell to her at the sound. She froze but met his eyes with an ugly glare of her own.

He turned away, nonplussed, then strode towards the Marionettes as he replaced his handkerchief in his breast pocket, sniffing the air cautiously. They shrank back as he neared, including Emberlyn, despite the rage dancing in her blood. Malcolm stopped next to Heather, his frown deepening as his hands twitched over her, as if testing his connection to her. He cocked his head in consideration before he leaned down and grabbed her chin, aiming her slowly crumbling face towards himself.

“Don’t touch her!” Emberlyn cried in horror, taking several steps forwards before she knew what she was doing. Several of her sisters’ arms flung out to stop her. But when Malcolm looked up at her, fear shot through her heart and she stopped. As his gaze hardened, she bowed her head to stare at the floor, heat rushing to her face.

She could feel Malcolm’s unfaltering gaze still fixed on her. The dormitory filled with a stifled, silent kind of panic as the Marionettes stared between her and Malcolm. As they steeled themselves for what was to come.

Suddenly, he straightened and strode towards Emberlyn. A sharp coldness flooded her veins as she whipped her head up to meet narrowing, bloodshot eyes that spoke of countless nights wrapped in a haze of alcohol fumes. She stumbled away as the Marionettes clustered tightly to her, though they all knew that truly, they would be helpless to defend her.

Malcolm didn’t stop marching forwards until his clothes grazed Emberlyn’s fingertips, her hands stretched out in defence, gaze darting as she sought an escape. Against her will, Emberlyn’s head snapped to face Malcolm. The thing that killed Heather – the curse that raced through the Marionettes’ veins and forced them to obey their Puppet Master – flared to life. She hissed but glued her eyes to

the ground, heart pounding as he reached out and wrapped his fingers around her face.

“Look at me,” he commanded. Emberlyn’s eyes instantly rose to meet his. “You know what to do, don’t you?” he asked, his voice calm.

Emberlyn swallowed, and the curse loosened just enough to allow her to nod, her body shaking in his grip. Malcolm considered her for a moment longer, watching the tears of fear budding in the corners of her eyes with a sick kind of pleasure. Finally, he smiled. That same smile he used to get his way in the world. The one that made ladies swoon and Emberlyn’s throat fill with bile.

She hated him. Hated the ugly beast beneath his surface. She wished the world could see him now. She wished they all knew who he really was.

“Good. I trust you to take care of this.”

He released Emberlyn’s chin, but before she could breathe a sigh of relief, he reached up and traced his thumb over the bump of her cheekbone, wiping away her tears.

“I’m glad it wasn’t my lead Marionette. My fiery Emberlyn.”

Emberlyn was sure he could feel the erratic thudding of her heart as he regarded her. She knew he could hear it and was revelling in the sound. Basking in her fear. The power of his control.

Suddenly, he turned, dropping his hand so quickly that Emberlyn flinched and let out a small whimper. Aleida instantly pressed against her side, grabbing her arm as Malcolm began to stride towards the doorway.

“I need time to work out the logistics of tomorrow’s performance,” he called over his shoulder. “It’s going to be a travesty with one Marionette down. Not to mention I have to start thinking about making audition arrangements now. You girls will be the death of

me, I swear. Oh.” Malcolm paused on the threshold, half his body bathed in the shadows of the corridor and half ablaze with the flickering light of the common room. He turned to shoot them all one last charming smile. “And, girls? Make sure you don’t get caught.”

The girls stood in silence in the wake of his exit with nothing but the hush of their breaths to break the quiet. Emberlyn screwed her hands into fists to stop the shaking.

She wondered if she would ever make it out of here alive, or if she, too, would one day be the girl lying in the dust at her sisters’ feet.

CHAPTER TWO

A MIDNIGHT BURIAL

“It’s time to go,” Emberlyn announced to the aching dormitory after hours of pretending Heather’s body wasn’t lying only steps from her feet.

She had waited for darkness to swallow the city before commanding the Marionettes to dress in their travel cloaks, hoods up so their faces became no more than mere suggestions within shadows. They were silent. The time for tears had passed as they settled into a numb shock. As they prepared for what they were about to do.

With a lantern clutched in her hand, Emberlyn led the Marionettes up the stone steps to the back door of Manrow Theatre, coaxing open the bolts so it swung silently inwards. She stepped into the night first, eyes darting up and down the alleyway for figures concealed in the shadows.

Even at midnight, New Kora wasn’t asleep. The faint growl of motor-car engines and the trundle of wheels against damp pavement rumbled through the city, tangling with the shouts and laughter of drunken voices. The electric glow of the Theatre District bled into the sky before giving way to a thick, starry night, where the shine of the moon took over. There was a bite in the air as the summer

warmth shrank back from the bared teeth of autumn.

Emberlyn gestured, and the Marionettes tiptoed out after her. Rosalyn and Miriam clutched their dead sister between them, supporting her so she appeared to be standing. They stared ahead, refusing to look at Heather, or each other, as if that might make the task easier.

Emberlyn took in the parts of her sisters' nervous expressions that weren't concealed in shadows – the glint of a watering eye, the tremble of a bottom lip. Her eyes went to Aleida, and she looked at her for a beat longer than the others, drawing strength from her steady gaze. The tension in Emberlyn's stomach uncoiled ever so slightly when Aleida gave her a slight nod.

"We're going to head for Chord Park," Emberlyn said firmly, looking at each of her six sisters in turn, refusing to allow her eyes to fall onto the limp seventh. They stood stoic and silent as they listened. "As soon as we leave this alley, we'll be on the Theatre District's main street, and we will be seen. So walk quickly, but don't run, and don't let them get a clear look at your face. Keep your hoods up and the spades concealed. Miriam, Rosalyn." They shifted uncomfortably under the weight of Heather's body. "Let me know if you need a break. She needs to remain upright."

Their hooded heads twitched as they nodded.

Emberlyn turned, gazing down the alleyway, out into the light of the Theatre District at its mouth. The soft crease where her neck met her collarbone shivered with her fluttering heartbeat. The cool night breeze mingling with the stale air of the alleyway tightened her throat. She swallowed, nodded, and glanced again at the Marionettes.

"Let's go," Emberlyn said, and the Marionettes hurried off into the night.

Three Marionettes dug as the others stood over Heather's body, keeping a strange vigil with the glow of a kerosene lamp flickering between them. The trees were cast into gnarled shadows with reaching claws where the light didn't reach.

Emberlyn didn't know what they would do if they were discovered, but she kept a silent watch while her sisters worked, because it was better to watch doom approaching than let it sneak up behind them. Jia cried silently, pearlescent tears on her pale cheeks.

Chord Park was a green belt nestled several streets over from the Theatre District like a mouldy wound slashed into the city. They had reached it without attracting problematic attention. Raised eyebrows had been shot in their direction, and one or two people had stopped to stare at the curious group of hooded figures walking with enough speed to make their cloaks billow out behind them, but nobody approached. If anybody thought the hunched figure was unusual, its feet dragging along the pavement and clutched in the arms of two cloaked forms, they didn't call out to say so.

But away from prying eyes, in the depths of Chord Park, it felt like the trees, too, were watching the Marionettes. Miriam, Ida and Rosalyn huffed and puffed as they attacked the soil, while Anushka, Jia and Aleida kept watch too. The whistle of the wind through the trees sounded like conspiratorial whispers, the leaves seeming to shake with fury, as if forced against their will to stand witness to the midnight burial.

Emberlyn turned to glance back at Heather's body, half expecting to find Esme lying there in her place. The similarities of the nights were uncanny, and each memory attacked her chest, coaxing it open.

She forced the memories away, shoving them into the recesses of her mind as she stared at the next sister stolen from her.

They'd left Heather uncovered, and even in the thick of night with nothing but the flicker of Emberlyn's weak lantern and the sliver of moonlight through the canopy of branches above, she could see how much the curse had claimed her. Could see how it had already shaped the girl with the honeyed voice.

Her eyes had sunk into two dark caverns, her eyelids shrivelled away. The blackness that had swollen her tongue had seeped out as they made their way to Chord Park, etching itself into the cracks of her lips and spilling down her chin like she had swallowed ink. Her body had begun to crumble, a thin sheen of dust coating her skin, shimmering in the moonlight. It would get worse, Emberlyn knew. The decay would consume Heather until her skin disintegrated altogether and left exposed muscle and bone. They needed to get her buried so they didn't have to see that – if they did, her sisters would never shake the memory. She turned away, nausea roiling in her stomach. Something else, something dark and familiar, stirred inside her too. But she pushed it down.

As always, she ignored the presence of her curse inside her, the disease that wrapped her organs in a vice grip – that danced through her blood and oozed into every pore. When Malcolm was not calling to it, it lay dormant, something she could ignore if she tried. But when he called for his dolls to dance, it took over until her limbs became phantoms she had no control over. No way of choosing how she moved, no way to refuse what he demanded of them.

“Emberlyn?” Miriam called, her voice weak with exhaustion.

Emberlyn turned her gaze from the tree line, allowing it to drift over to the hollow grave. The gaping hole they had dug for their sister.

“More,” she told Miriam. Rosalyn’s expression tightened, but she and Miriam continued their silent dig under Emberlyn’s watchful guidance, until she held up her hand and nodded.

Emberlyn pulled Heather’s hood back up to cover her face, bidding her a silent farewell as the material enveloped her. Then, together, the Marionettes lowered Heather into the earth by the edges of her cloak, straining as they guided her into her last resting place. They couldn’t close her eyes so she could sleep, for there was so little of her eyelids left.

With the smell of the damp soil and curling leaves biting at the stench of the curse that stole Heather’s life away, Emberlyn took the spade from Ida and began to return the earth into the grave herself. Aleida took a spade from Rosalyn, who slumped to the ground. The rest of the Marionettes collapsed, too, while Aleida and Emberlyn, together, buried another of their sisters.

Once Heather was gone, the earth tapped flat and the undergrowth pulled over to cover the churned ground, the Marionettes stared at each other with heaving chests. The wisps of their breath mingled as they clasped hands, closing their eyes and whispering a prayer above Heather’s grave together.

Let her find peace in the afterlife, find freedom from the curse, somewhere better than here. Let her find her way back to the home she had always longed to return to, free of the strings that tied her to the Puppet Master and his endless, violent dance.

Then, silently, the Marionettes departed. They followed their own paths through the trees back to the Theatre District, where MALCOLM MANROW’S MARVELLOUS MARIONETTES would be stamped on a sign in thick black letters.

As the Marionettes drifted away, only Emberlyn and Aleida were

left standing over the grave, looking at each other from the depths of their shadowed hoods.

They read the expressions on each other's faces.

They weren't ready to go back.

"Heather didn't deserve this," Aleida said, staring out over Hulliver River, the main artery that ran through New Kora. She and Emberlyn sat on the edge of the walkway, legs dangling above the depths of the water. It lapped gently against the bank, the sound surrounding the girls as they shivered, cloaks pulled tightly around themselves and their hoods up to conceal their faces. "I had hoped that what happened to Esme was...was just that. That it wouldn't happen to anyone else."

"It was worth hoping, but we know the truth now. Exactly what we suspected – that this damned curse will kill us all in the end," Emberlyn replied bitterly.

Aleida nodded forlornly as the reality of what they had discovered wrapped around them – their guess that the curse was destroying them one by one etched itself as truth into the stone of their hearts. But Emberlyn remained stoic and straight-faced. If she thought about it for too long, thought about the fact that whatever traces of hope she'd had that she might survive this, that *Aleida* might survive this, had been strangled, it would break her.

It was cold to the point where Emberlyn was sure ice crystals could cling to the hairs on her arm, but she didn't want to go. She wasn't ready to go back to the theatre, where the absence of Heather would be crushing. Where the absence of Esme would feel new and heavy once more. The shock of losing another – the agony of watching a

sister crumble – was more than anyone could bear.

Out here, in the open air, side by side with her best friend, she could almost forget her pain. Out here, she could almost forget that the gaping hole carved out in her chest, where Esme had once lived, was stretching open once more.

Emberlyn stared at the water. The faint spots of light on the other side of the river seemed to dance on the surface in shimmering ribbons of silk, at odds with the endless darkness beneath.

“I miss her. So much. I spend half my time refusing to think about her, but losing Heather has brought it all back.”

“I know. Without her, I...I don’t know if...” Aleida trailed off.

Esme’s firm yet gentle guidance had helped them both acclimatize to their fates of becoming Marionettes. To accept it. She held them while the memories of their lives before they were Malcolm’s slowly disintegrated, and helped stave off their nightmares, holding them tighter when she couldn’t chase them away completely. Emberlyn had managed to retain some of her memories – even if they were hazy – but the others hadn’t been so lucky.

Even as the other girls arrived over the years, it was the three of them – the triangle at the centre of the chaos, holding the incredible weight that was teaching others how to adapt to a life they despised. No matter how heavy it got, they held fast. They stood strong, because they had each other.

Esme was the very first of Malcolm’s Marionettes. And the first of them to die, leaving the triangle without one of its sharp corners.

Emberlyn stared at her shoes dangling just over the river as her thoughts spiralled. Those first few days without Esme, as the reality of their loss sank in, felt like a dream. A nightmare Emberlyn wished she could wake up screaming from. But at least Aleida had been right

there with her. Always there to pull her focus away from the darkest parts of her own mind. No matter how much the grief consumed Aleida, her focus had always been Emberlyn, her own despair pushed down as she tried to lessen her sister's.

Emberlyn felt a rush of gratitude for Aleida, for those desperate moments made easier by her best friend's love, before it was swallowed once more by her sadness.

"I didn't want to believe it was happening again. I recognized the signs. The slowly stooping posture, the exhaustion in her eyes...I hoped it wasn't what I feared. Heather's symptoms were like Esme's, but she didn't deteriorate in the same way. After a while I thought perhaps she had beaten it, or it was something else entirely. Some kind of illness that she would recover from." Emberlyn shook her head, her breath stolen with the wind as the grief she tried to keep at bay prickled along her throat. "I guess that was naive of me to hope. The curse must work differently through each of us. Kill us all in its own time."

"Why?" Aleida asked mournfully. "Why does it kill us?"

Emberlyn had wondered the same. Malcolm told them so little about the curse, only that they were his to perform as he pleased, to get rich off their talents and skill. He had wanted to be a troupe manager when he was younger, he told them one night when the alcohol loosened his tongue. Had found a way to ensure his success and wealth, to ensure his dreams would come true, and if only he was careful, coy about how far he went, how famed and renowned he allowed himself to be, he knew he would get away with what he was doing. *Had* been getting away with it for years now.

Emberlyn didn't know how exactly he came to control this curse, but she knew that his power was one he improved upon. He had

managed to push its boundaries to ensure that the Marionettes were not able to talk about their curse, Malcolm, or what was happening to anyone who didn't already know about it. He had also insisted that to run would be a fool's errand. That he'd made their curse so strong, he would know if they attempted to run and would pull them straight back. That he would feel it through the invisible strings that bound them to him. That there would be punishment. She wasn't sure if he was telling the truth or if it was simply a tactic to keep them here. She could only hope his influence couldn't extend as far as he claimed, that, like with her sisters' deaths, it was something he didn't truly have control over.

However, it appeared he didn't yet know how to prevent this power from running away from *him*. Didn't know how to stop it from burning up his precious Marionettes, from *consuming* them with its sheer violence.

Before Emberlyn could answer Aleida's question, the two Marionettes tensed as the sound of wheels shuddered through the ground beneath them, the unwelcome growl of an engine twisting through the air. They looked at each other, shrinking as far back into their hoods as possible, until the motor car rolled past and the noise faded away again.

"We shouldn't be out here so late," Aleida said, glancing over her shoulder and blowing out a breath when the motor car disappeared from sight. "I don't want to risk Malcolm's anger if we're gone for too long."

"When else are we going to get the chance to be away from the theatre? Besides, he's bound to be passed out drunk by now. It's good just to...breathe. To not be a Marionette for a few moments." As if to hammer her point home, Emberlyn took in a lungful of the crisp air.

It tasted fuller here by Hulliver River. Shot through with salt rather than dust.

Aleida turned away from the road. After a few moments with nothing but the river lapping at the concrete wall to fill the quiet, she spoke.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” she whispered, her dark eyes wide and urgent as they turned to Emberlyn.

Pain stretched her mouth into a morbid smile.

“The curse kills us, and it’s not doing it in the order we joined. Any of us could be next.” She swallowed the fear that rose up in her throat. “But that could mean we still have years left, you and I. We simply don’t know.”

For a moment, the girls lapsed into silence. Until Aleida said her next words so quietly, Emberlyn almost didn’t catch them. “Maybe it will take me next.”

“Please don’t say that.” Emberlyn’s voice broke. Aleida let out a strangled noise and jumped to her feet. Emberlyn stood, too, as Aleida began to pace.

“I’m so, so tired of this, Ember.” Aleida’s voice trembled. “I’m tired of dancing for Malcolm, of not being able to eat what I want, of only ever going where he allows me to go and nowhere else. I’m tired of feeling like my body doesn’t belong to me, of this...this...*rot* inside me. Tired of being scared, tired of the theatre, of being able to do nothing but put on a brave face for our sisters. I want something to change. I can’t bear it here any longer.”

Emberlyn rushed to wrap her arms around Aleida as she dissolved into tears. She sobbed into the heavy material of Emberlyn’s cloak, her form shuddering as grief overwhelmed her. Aleida had held *her* up enough times – it was Emberlyn’s turn to keep her friend from shattering.

"I know, I know," Emberlyn murmured over the sound of Aleida breaking.

"I can't bear it," Aleida repeated. Her voice was tight and withdrawn. Heavy, like she'd given up.

Emberlyn nudged her away so she could look at her, but Aleida bowed her head, her sobs fading to sniffs. Emberlyn placed her hand on Aleida's chin and forced her to meet her gaze. Her stomach twisted at the sight of Aleida's bloodshot eyes.

"We can try to escape this," Emberlyn murmured. "We can try to reclaim our lives."

Aleida stared at her for a moment before she let out a sharp bark of laughter that made Emberlyn jump. She pulled away, shaking her head.

"Oh, Ember." She took a step back. "I love you like a true sister, but I can't help but laugh at your naivety sometimes."

"No, listen, I've been looking at the maps to find the best route out—"

"Come on," Aleida interrupted. "Let's go back. There's no point mourning in the cold."

Emberlyn bit her tongue but allowed herself to be led away from the edge of the river. Together, they began their slow wander back to Manrow Theatre, through empty streets swollen with darkness.

They were silent for a few minutes, eyes fixed on the scintillating starlight beyond the towering reaches of the surrounding buildings, before Emberlyn tried once more.

"We don't know the depths of this curse; I accept that." Aleida shook her head again but stayed silent. "Maybe Malcolm is telling the truth and is somehow able to trace us, wherever we go, and pull us back if we get too far from him." Emberlyn's hands curled into fists

in her pockets. "I've accepted that we have no idea what will happen if we run because no one has, too afraid of Malcolm's threats to try. No one has ever got far enough out of Malcolm's clutches to know if they *can* break out of his strings."

Aleida stared at her feet, jaw tensed. Emberlyn took her silence as encouragement and continued.

"But I refuse to believe there isn't a way out of this. If we get far enough away before Malcolm realizes we're gone, he might not have any control over us. The curse might fail. And maybe one day, it might just fade into nothing." It was the theory she rested every single one of her tentative hopes on. She reached out to grip Aleida's elbow as they walked. "We might have our lives back, Aleida. Isn't that worth the risk of Malcolm's wrath?"

"Do you honestly think Malcolm would allow us to walk through New Kora as we are now, if we could all simply...walk away?" She shook Emberlyn's arm off as she spoke.

Emberlyn let out a huff of breath, leaping ahead and turning to halt Aleida in her tracks. "He controls us through fear just as much he does his curse. Look at us right now. Look at where we are. What's to stop us going *now*?"

Aleida shook her head sadly as she came to an abrupt stop. "Nothing has happened to us, Emberlyn, because we *aren't* going to run," she said in a voice thick with mourning. Her eyes went past Emberlyn, gazing into the distance at nothing. "There's a reason he allows us to leave the theatre to bury our sisters. I think he's telling the truth, that he will be able to claim us back, that he'll know the moment we try and punish us for it. God knows what he might do to us then. I for one don't want to find out."

Emberlyn felt her shoulders sag. She understood that fear.

She *really* did – that unknown terror that lay just inches beyond an escape attempt. She had danced with that fear night after night, in the moments she felt sure she could run, but then in the next, the fear of what Malcolm might do had pinned its claws through muscle and flesh and held her where she lay curled in her bed, frozen. Helpless to save herself.

The Marionettes' curse kept them in one piece at all times. It kept them conscious through any pain, healed every bruise or cut only moments after it manifested itself on the surface, so the Marionettes never looked less than perfect. So their bodies never revealed the mark of the rotten core hidden beneath Malcolm's charming surface. It sickened Emberlyn to think about what Malcolm might do to them if he caught them trying to escape. How he could torture them without the promise of the release of death.

That terror had wound its way through her bones already, to the point where she felt almost numb to it. To the point where she was ready to face it. Because, what if they did manage to escape? What if Emberlyn was right and it was the fear of what *could* be, not of what actually *was*, that was standing between them and their lives?

"Is it not worth risking? I mean, *think* about it. We could get out of New Kora, find the help we need, and bring it back to save the rest of our sisters. Then we could go to Itzak, find your family—"

Aleida held up her hand, her eyes pleading with Emberlyn to stop.

"Please, don't. You know I don't remember my family. I have nothing left, not a single memory. The curse stole them a long time ago."

Emberlyn swallowed and shuffled on the spot, falling silent.

"Besides," Aleida continued, "they have no idea anything is wrong thanks to those letters Malcolm makes us write. Do you really think

if we found them and showed up with all these wild claims, they won't think we're out of our minds?"

"Perhaps not! Anything is possible," Emberlyn burst out, gesturing passionately with her hands. "I'm prepared to go, but I'm waiting for *you*, Aleida. I won't leave unless it's together. We just have to be brave."

Aleida stared at her, pain rolling through her features. Emberlyn grinned back, excitement and possibility pounding against her chest, tearing through her like fire.

Hope. Escape.

A life without Malcolm.

"Let's do it," Emberlyn whispered. "Let's run. Just you and me."

But Aleida's brows furrowed. "How could you even think about leaving our sisters?"

Emberlyn's chest tightened.

She didn't *want* to leave them. She'd protected each of them as they were yanked into this life. Wrapped her arms around them every night they woke screaming for their families, their lost lives. Esme had done the same – held them until the faces had faded from their minds and the Marionettes could barely remember who they were crying for. She'd loved them all dearly.

Emberlyn looked down at her wrist. A thin bronze bracelet was pressed against her veins, letters engraved into the metal spelling out a name she didn't know. *Florisa*. A belonging of someone she was sure she had once loved, but could no longer remember. Someone she perhaps might find, if only she was brave enough to go. She rubbed her thumb over it, feeling the indents of the name. Strength flooded through her.

"If we all tried to leave together, I can guarantee you we'd all be back in his clutches being tortured into oblivion within six hours. If

it's just us, if it's just you and me, we stand a better chance. One day when we know we're safe, we will come back for them. We could raise the alarm and send *someone* to save them. But to make that happen, abandoning them now is something I can live with."

Aleida blinked at her, before a sad smile crept onto her face. She stepped around Emberlyn.

"Well, I can't. I *won't* leave them with him for even a moment," she breathed. "It's not worth how Malcolm might punish *them* for our escape."

Emberlyn spun on her heel to watch as Aleida moved away from her, the gaping wound in her chest left behind by Esme pulsing. Aleida walked into the darkness like a spectre, the shadows of the night swallowing her as she followed the streets back to the theatre. Back to Malcolm and the endless dancing – the life they had no choice but to belong to. Emberlyn took a deep breath.

Eventually, she followed, one reluctant footstep after the next.

It wasn't the end of this. It couldn't be, not when they now knew they were slowly being pushed into the endless night of death. She needed to persuade Aleida to leave with her before the curse devoured them both whole. Before it destroyed their minds, their bodies, their souls – everything Malcolm was taking from them. Put enough space between themselves and him, where his curse could no longer control them.

If they didn't run, there was little more to do than wait to see who would be the next sister to fall.

Little to do but wait for death to claim them.