



DARK SKY SERIES  
BOOK 3  
**OBSIDIAN SKY**

**AMY BRAUN**

# Chapter 1

## *Sawyer*

The storm came out of nowhere. They always did.

I gritted my teeth and held up the crate lid, protecting my face from the fresh torrent of hail that came on the wind. The shards of ice pummeled the battered wood, then vanished completely when the wind changed. I tossed down my makeshift shield, grabbed the spokes of the helm, and fought the wind.

“Hard to port!” I bellowed. My throat was already burning from constantly shouting orders, and more yelling wasn’t helping.

*Good thing it’s raining,* I thought grimly.

I watched Nash sprint across the deck below, racing for the trap door to repeat my command to Gemma. We were in the air when the storm hit, and Nash refused to follow any order until Gemma was safely tucked away in the engine room, using the airship’s automated controls to alter our course instead of changing sails by dangling hundreds of feet in the air on a piece of rope.

I didn’t argue with him. I knew what it was like, to be so in love with someone that you couldn’t think about anything but protecting them.

*But you didn’t. You let her go. You weren’t strong enough to defend her. You weren’t strong enough to save her.*

Shoving the truth back down, I wrenched the wheel to the left. The *Dauntless Wanderer* pitched, pushed by the savage wind. I twisted the helm around and around, my biceps burning as the *Dauntless* struggled to obey me. I could feel the wooden slats of the quarterdeck vibrating under my feet as the generator struggled to turn the sails. I watched the masts twist and grind in their riveted sockets on the deck. If I pushed them too hard against the wind, they would bend and we would lose control. The top of the main mast was already swaying ominously in the punishing wind.

I mastered the ship. Not the weather.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Nash race up the deck steps and came to a halt next to me. All my focus was on the ink black clouds ahead. I was searching for darker ones.

“Sawyer, we have to go back,” Nash shouted in my ear.

“Not yet,” I yelled back. “We can hold another five minutes.”

As if hearing me, the wind shifted again. I grabbed the crate lid. Nash ducked down and covered his head with his hands. Chunky blocks of hail beat down on us, but I shielded Nash and myself from the worst of it.

As soon as the hail switched to rain, I dropped the crate lid. Nash rose to his feet and swung in front of me. He grabbed some empty spokes on the helm and kept me from turning the wheel.

“Sawyer, we can’t stay out here.”

I looked at my friend, the first person I recruited to my crew. He’d been with me for nearly four years. I trusted him more than anyone else in the world. He would never lead me astray, never abandon me, never tell me something I didn’t need to hear.

Right now, I wanted to punch his lights out.

“Let go,” I warned.

I tried to jerk the wheel out of his grasp, but even when my arms weren’t sore from maneuvering an airship in a rain-wind-hail storm, Nash was stronger than me. His muscles were almost twice the size

of mine. I knew how to fight with a blade. Nash earned his reputation with his fists. The dog-faced tattoo from his old marauder life— when he was forced to fight for survival against fiendish killers— snarled up at me from the dark skin of his arm. Cuts from sharp hail lined his cheeks and arms. He was bruised, exhausted, and worried. But he wouldn't back down.

"We won't find anything out here," he said. "The storm will get worse, and the *Dauntless* can't risk taking major hits. We don't have anyone to repair her if she does."

Anger and pain spiked in my chest. But Nash wasn't done.

"We have a little girl on board, Sawyer. Or did you forget about her?"

Abby. How could I forget her? Every time I looked at those blonde curls and bright green eyes, I saw them on an older, willowy young woman. I thought about her pale skin, soft lips, and aching sad eyes. I remembered how heartbroken she'd been when she walked away to save our lives.

To save my life.

Abby was a wreck, same as me. Her big sister would never forgive me if anything happened to her.

If that wasn't enough, Nash had one more nail to drive into my heart.

"Do you think Claire would want us risking ourselves like this to find her?"

He was asking a question that would hurt in more ways than one, because it was the only way I would listen. I knew the answer, of course.

She would be furious. In fact, she would probably try to punch me again. I would probably welcome it, if that meant I would see her and know she was safe.

Not a warrior, but a fighter at heart. That was my Claire.

My chest tightened. I closed my eyes and sighed. It hurt to breathe.

"The storm's coming from the north. Tell Gemma to keep turning south. We're heading back to the ports."

Nash checked my eyes, making sure I wouldn't break my word. It stung to know he doubted me now.

He let go of the wheel and raced down the stairs. I kept turning the helm, shifting toward the dull grey skies of Westraven. I steadied the wheel and waited a couple more minutes until I was sure Nash would be safe below deck with Gemma.

Then I took a deep breath, hit the accelerator, and left another hope behind.

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Now that the *Dauntless* sailed freely, I constantly expected an attack. Someone to ambush us and take my ship. I would be killed and my friends enslaved. I dreaded to think what would happen to Abby, who was little more than a scared child.

But even now, with the *Behemoth* destroyed, no one ventured into the ports. When the Hellions entered Aon and attacked Westraven a decade ago in The Storm, dozens of survivors fled to the expansive tarmac. It used to be the Westraven Trade Board's landing pad for other provincial airships to land with their goods, and it was assumed that the five hundred foot square air hangar in the middle of the concrete tarmac would be filled with enough supplies to outlast the Hellions.

But it didn't matter when the monsters landed in their raiding skiffs and burst into the building. They were always watching, always hunting, and always knowing where to strike.

For a few months, smaller bands of survivors tried to sneak inside the ports during daylight and the rainy seasons, trying to get inside the hangar and assuming the Hellions wouldn't find them.

They always did.

It didn't take long for most of Westraven to decide that the ports were cursed, and nothing in them was worth the risk of being devoured. I suppose that even with the *Behemoth* gone, they wanted to keep thinking that. Maybe they would keep thinking that until the Breach was closed. If that was the case, the ports would stay cursed for a long time.

I had a bad habit of taking potentially suicidal risks. While the other survivors assumed the ports were cursed, I decided to take them over. It was a safe place for me to hide my ship— and myself.

I dropped the speed of the *Dauntless*, letting her glide over the concrete tarmac toward the hangar. I liked speed, but I understood the value of patience. It had taken me two years to find my ship and set up traps so it wouldn't be stolen. Another year to clean up the worst of the damage. Two more years to move the damn ship in the rainy seasons and daylight, constantly watching the skies to make sure the Hellions wouldn't blast it to pieces, and yet another year to do more thorough repairs in the hangar.

Not easy to do when you're a lonely, orphaned seventeen-year old—or was I eighteen now? I couldn't remember—with a family name that everyone hates.

Even with all those years of labor and fighting for survival against the people I stole from, it hadn't been enough. The generator had been damaged, and I hadn't gotten the *Dauntless* to fly no matter what experimental repairs I did. No one had been able to fix it.

Not until Claire came along.

Hiding the pain again, I eased the *Dauntless Wanderer* to a stop fifteen feet from the main building, where the concrete met sheets of metal plating that circled around the hangar. Hidden by the plates was a Pitfall, a trap that would react when it sensed any kind of vibration moving over it. A trap that would send a devastating electric pulse over and above the metal plates and shock whatever was standing on it.

Claire's way of protecting us.

Once the ship came to a stop, I let it idle and walked down the steps. I glimpsed Nash slipping on heavy electrical gloves, slinging a rope over the side of the *Dauntless*, and climbing down. Gemma stood at the railing, watching him with anxious eyes. I stood next to her while Nash knelt down by the metal plating and began to search for the wire that would disarm the Pitfall until we were inside.

"What the hell was that out there?" Gemma asked me, never taking her eyes from Nash.

I looked at her. Gemma was my master gunner, my ship's rigger, and my friend. She was tall, lithe, and beautiful. She wore a sleeveless leather jumpsuit, heavy black boots, and had her short brown hair tied in a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her pale skin was smeared with soot and grime, her dark brown eyes intense and focused on what mattered to her. Two knives and a flintlock pistol were strapped to her waist. When I met Gemma, she was a thief set on corrupting both Nash and me. But she saved our lives, and proved her loyalty a thousand times over. I valued her opinion.

I just wasn't looking forward to the barbs that would come with it.

"Nash already gave me an earful, Gemma," I muttered, resting my arms on the railing as Nash worked cautiously. "I'm not in the mood for another one."

Her hand curled on my shoulder and yanked me away from the railing. Sometimes I forgot how strong Gemma was. It was the mistake her enemies made, one that they paid for in the worst ways.

Then again, she'd never used that strength against me.

"Too bad," she said, dark eyes burning. "You need to hear it."

I glared. "I give the orders. Not you," I reminded.

As if that bit of truth would stop Gemma.

"You're not the only one who wants to find Claire," she snapped. "We all do. But did you forget why she gave herself up in the first place?"

I balled my fists, wishing I could crush my memories in them. They surged without my control.

The pain as the Vesper, King of the Hellions reached into my mind with his own, bent on demolishing me. The empty look of the man who'd betrayed us. The cruel smile of my enemy when he knew he'd won. The heart-wrenching pain on the face of the girl I loved as she was taken, even as I gave her my deepest promise.

*I'll save you.*

But that was what Claire did for us instead. She gave herself up to build a Palisade— a two towered device that could cut through the thin fabric of dimensions— in exchange for our lives. Claire was the

daughter of Westraven's most famous engineers, and easily as skilled as they were. She repaired the Palisade her mother and father created, and used it to fend off the Hellions that had swarmed us.

But it had been a rush job, nowhere near as destructive as the original Palisade was ten years ago when it created the Breach. Yet Claire claimed she could make another one, just as powerful.

If she did...

But Claire wouldn't do that. She was too good, and too smart. If she made a deal with the Vesper, she had another reason to do so. She had a plan.

Except I didn't know what it was, and I couldn't help her if-

Gemma punched me in the arm. She didn't hold back, either. I would feel that bruise for days.

"What the hell was that for?" I snarled.

"To prove a damn point," she shot back. "You're distracted, Sawyer. Claire is in every inch of your mind, and you can't think about anything else. You can't think like a *captain*."

I wanted to argue, but she was right. Claire was all I could think about, even before her surrender. She'd gotten under my skin, into my very soul, the way no one else had. I didn't think anyone could do that, because of who I was.

But she did. She didn't even have to try.

"You're not the only one who's in love, Sawyer."

I narrowed my eyes at Gemma. She just rolled her eyes. "Please. As if we all didn't see it." A sly grin crossed her lips before she turned her gaze to Nash. The smile fell from her face, but love continued to burn in her eyes.

"We've been with you for years. You made a choice, we followed it. You made enemies, we fought them. You made a stupid decision, we shrugged and went along with it."

A sardonic grin twisted my lips. Gemma wasn't one to mince words.

"But this is different. You're not asking us to cross into marauder territory and swipe a few goods. This isn't even like when we stormed the *Behemoth*. We only did that because we had armfuls of explosives and a crazy engineer." Gemma shook her head, sadness cutting out the love in her eyes. "You're asking us to go through the Breach. The heart of Hellion territory, where they will absolutely see us coming. If they don't, the Vesper will know. We don't know the terrain. We don't have the numbers or weapons to fight them. We'll be dead before we touch ground. If we're lucky."

*Luck*. She said that word like it existed in our situation. If the Hellions captured us, our lives would become nothing but torture and pain until they grew bored of us. I remembered the stories Riley told of his captivity on the *Behemoth*. The things he claimed to have seen and endure. I had no love for the man, especially after what he'd done to us, but I hadn't thought he was lying about the horrors he suffered.

My heart lurched at the thought of Claire enduring them now.

"I want to live, Sawyer," Gemma said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I have something good in my life, and I don't want to lose him."

I glanced at Nash. He stood up and began peeling off the thick electrical gloves used to handle the Pitfall. He glanced at Gemma and smiled. She returned the expression.

"If you don't slow down to think up a plan to get Claire safely, then we're going to leave."

I whirled my head so fast it almost wrenched off my neck. "You're not serious."

Gemma turned her sad eyes onto me, and gave me her answer. I would have rather she sucker-punched me again.

"We wouldn't want to, but you wouldn't give us a choice. Not if we wanted to live." The hardness returned to her eyes. "So sort yourself out. Act like a leader. At the very least, pretend to care."

I flinched. I couldn't help it, because I *did* care. I cared too much.

And that was the whole problem.

Gemma winced when she saw the slip of my composure. Her eyes were pained, and she took a breath to apologize.

"Tell Nash to guide us in," I said quietly. "You can open the door."

I walked away before she could say anything else. I was glad that she didn't call me back. I didn't trust myself not to say something I would regret.

At least this way I could try and get some sleep.

I walked to the cabin door, then hesitated. Ever since her rescue, Abby had been sleeping in the captain's cabin. The poor girl had been kidnapped by Hellions and turned into a blood donor for the monsters. As if standing for days on end, strapped to a cold table and having her blood drained from her ounce by ounce wasn't enough, Abby was plagued with a disease that slowly turned her into a Hellion. Seeing her sister tortured in such a way nearly shattered Claire, and part of her bargain with the Vesper was to relieve Abby from the disease.

Abby was cured, but she couldn't stop crying. I'd done my best to comfort her, but it had been a long time since I was an older brother. In the end, I failed at that, too.

Putting Micah in the back of my mind before memories of losing him could hurt me, I knocked on the door. There was no answer, but at least she would hear me. I twisted the doorknob and walked into the cabin.

It wasn't as extravagant as it had been when my father was captain. The windows were covered with black cloth. Crates were piled in every corner. Clothing and blankets lay tossed over leather trunks. Hurricane lanterns were tacked to the walls. The wide oak desk was covered with swords, knives, pistols, and rags to clean them with.

At the far side of the room was a wide couch that doubled as a bed. Sitting on top of it, surrounded in sprinkles of sugar and nibbled bread, dressed in a baggy shirt and pants shortened and hemmed to fit her small frame, was Abby.

Claire's baby sister reminded me of a cherub. Bouncy golden curls, pale skin, rosy cheeks, big green eyes filled with wonder. When she grew up, she would be a heartbreaker. She probably wouldn't even know it. Her sister hadn't, and Claire had caught my heart hook, line, and sinker.

Abby looked up from the book cradled in her lap. I smiled at her and crossed the hardwood floor to the bed.

"Hey, Stargazer," I said.

Abby smiled at the nickname. She loved the sky. Her happiest moments seemed to be when we hovered in the cloudless night sky. Abby used a periscope to chart the constellations, drawing lines to connect them and turning stars into smiling faces.

It had been a long month since she'd drawn anything.

"Hi, Sawyer," she said, scooting over so I could sit on the bed. She looked at the tiny crystals of sugar spotting the blanket and gasped lightly. She quickly brushed them away with her tiny hands.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make a mess."

I smiled. "Don't worry about it." I wasn't the least bit irritated. Abby was eating again, no longer looking pale and fragile. It hadn't taken long for us to realize that Abby was obsessive about putting sugar on any and all foods. Even meats.

Moira, the caretaker who'd joined the crew a few months ago, had tried a few times to tempt Abby into eating by coating her food in sugar when she was sick, but the poor girl had been so plagued by the Vesper's control and disease that it hadn't worked. Moira would have been so happy to see that Abby was getting better, looking more like a little girl and less like a hollowed child. But she had died trying to defend Abby from Davin when he raided our home at the ports.

Moira had become another victim of my brother.

I kept the smile on my face and pushed the rage and hurt down, storing it for whenever I faced Davin next. He didn't matter right now. This bright-eyed, curly haired girl did.

"How are you doing?" I asked, settling down next to her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Abby told me. She closed the notebook and clutched it to her chest.

"Are you sure? I was sailing pretty wildly."

"It's okay," she assured. "It was kinda fun."

I grinned. "Glad to hear it. Maybe I'll do it on purpose next time."

Abby giggled, summer green eyes sparkling. Claire's did the same when she was consumed by a project, or was intensely arguing a point.

I turned away from Abby and rubbed my chest, wishing I could shift the pain from it.

"You didn't find it, did you?"

I dropped my hand. There was no point in trying to soothe the ache. Abby's crushed voice just made it worse.

"No," I told her honestly.

Abby and I sat in heavy silence. She sniffled quietly beside me. I gripped my kneecaps and stared at the floor.

"I'm trying to remember what Riley showed me," Abby said after a long, long time.

When I looked at her again, she was shuffling closer and opening her book of constellations. But I wasn't seeing stars. Dark, uneven circles were scrawled on the page. A jagged black shape spread across the middle of the pages, as if sketched by an angry fist.

"That's what it looks like," Abby continued. "The Breach."

I stared at the drawing, wishing it would tell me where it was. How I could find it. Which direction to turn the ship. How to rescue the girl I loved without losing my crew in the process.

All I saw were scribbles.

"Did he tell you where it was?" I hedged, though I knew the answer. "Did he tell you exactly where the Breach was?"

Abby sucked in her lower lip. I could see her struggling to find an answer, to lie and keep up the search for her sister. Like me, she would rather scour the skies day and night, looking for any trace of the Breach or Claire. But Abby was a scared little girl. She wasn't a fighter. She didn't know how to operate an airship or work on the engines. She just wanted her big sister back.

The Vesper probably implanted the image of the Breach into Abby's mind to scare her. He'd tortured her with nightmares of what she would become unless Claire surrendered, likely showing her the Breach to let her know the bleakness that waited for her in another world.

Now she was cured of the Vesper, and trapped in a different nightmare.

Abby made a choked, hiccupping sound. A hopeless noise.

I gently pried the notebook from her little fingers and set it on the blanket. I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her to my side. Abby didn't need further invitation, throwing her arms around my ribs and squeezing with all her strength. Her tears soaked my shirt. I rubbed her back, like I'd done for Micah so many times whenever Davin scared him. My older brother took pleasure in tormenting anyone he thought below him.

And now he had Claire. She was tough, but Davin's greatest joy came from breaking someone strong.

"I'm scared, Sawyer," Abby sobbed into my chest. Her tiny fists balled my shirt. She trembled violently. "I'm scared she won't come home. He... he's going to hurt her, I know it, worse than he hurt me, he's going to—"

I pushed back from Abby. I couldn't handle the details right now.

But I wasn't going to lie.

"Claire is tough, Stargazer. Tougher than me. Smarter, too. She'll survive. And I'm going to get her back. I swear it, Abigail."

Tears stained the little girl's cheeks and still brimmed in her eyes, yet her sobs had quieted. She stopped shaking. She believed me.

I just wished I believed in myself.

*Sort yourself out. Act like a leader.*

Gemma's words vibrated through my skull, and as Abby cuddled next to me for comfort, I knew she was right. If I was going go through with this crazy mission and save the stubborn, feisty engineer that captured my heart, I had to stop moping. I had to think of a way to outsmart my enemies.

Riley, my newest and traitorous former crewmate. Davin, the cruel man-turned-Hellion who shared my blood. The Vesper, a nightmare King with harrowing power.  
I had to outsmart them. Then I had to kill them.



# Chapter 2

## *Claire*

The Vesper did his best to gild my cage.

My chambers in the Dark Spire stretched at least one hundred feet in each direction. In the right of the room was an open bedroom with a canopied four-poster bed made of cold iron and draped with thin black curtains. Sheets that looked like puddles of oil shimmered on a mattress big enough to drown me. Next to it was a marble sink and black clawfoot tub. Behind it was a towering dresser filled with black work suits. I didn't know where the Vesper got the items—it wasn't like Hellions cared about hygiene—and I wasn't going to ask. I'd been here for a month, pretending to be their obedient little slave. At least I wasn't naked and stuck in the dungeons.

Yet. I was mostly safe, as long as I played by the rules and did my job.

On the left side of the room was my workstation. Metal crates, flat steel tables, and tool cabinets circled the two half constructed towers of the Palisade the Vesper wanted me to create for him. Right now, they were skeletal structures of thin piping, wire, and electric couplings. A sleek generator hummed quietly in the corner, powering the construction lights and dim lamps of the room.

I stared at the Palisade towers, which I'd been creating from memory. The only Palisade I'd ever come across was the one my parents created to open the rift between my world and this one. A tool they later used to fight the Hellions, and nearly kill them all.

Nearly, since the Vesper and some of his ships had survived, and crossed the Breach for revenge.

The last I saw, the original Palisade was lying half broken in the remnants of an old warship, too damaged to be of use again. I could have fixed it—my mother's journal would have helped provide clues about the Palisade's construction and how it could be used to close the Breach—but I left the journal in my coat. With my sister.

Whoops.

No doubt she'd found it by now, and would be working with Sawyer, Gemma, and Nash to do... something. I sighed and scrubbed a hand over my face. The foot long chains around my shackled wrists rattled annoyingly. I glared at them.

They were the reason I couldn't attempt a daring escape. A constant reminder that despite the haunting, gothic beauty of my lodgings, I was a prisoner. I would remain that way, until the Vesper was finished using me.

I swallowed, rubbing the bruises on my neck. They were fading, but it was just a matter of time before I completed my *other* job for him.

A flash of light came from my right. I tried not to follow its path, but I couldn't help it.

Between the bedroom and the workstation was a window made of thick, pristine glass. Beyond it was a jarring landscape of tall mountains that stabbed the sky like upturned claws. Thunderclouds rolled in violent passion with smoke from erupting volcanoes. Lighting burst behind the clouds in subdued gunfire flashes. Ash drifted and swirled in the air in a wild, black snowstorm.

I didn't think many people had seen Hell before. They should count themselves lucky. Compared to this, the cracked white stone and tumbling ruin of Westraven was paradise.

It was also home, a place I would do anything to see again.

The door rumbled open behind me. Another problem with my escape— the door was heavy, bolted graphium that only opened one way. I didn't have the lock-picking skills that Gemma had, and whenever I said I had to use a blowtorch, Hellion guards surrounded me.

The door opened, and their general stalked toward me.

Davin Kendric had been a nightmare when he was human. I was a child when he was at the height of his bloodthirsty escapades, but I heard the stories. A man who smiled as he flayed other men alive. Who wouldn't stop raping a woman until she literally begged for death. Who would set entire merchant crews on fire just to mock them as they burned.

Davin had been the one to suggest the Wanderer Clan follow the expedition to search for new lands to occupy. He was probably the one who fired the first shot that started the brutal battle in Hellnore a decade ago.

But Davin didn't die. He was twisted by the Vesper into a creature far more monstrous.

Davin Kendric stood tall in the black jumpsuit all Hellions wore, the buttons on the left breast of the uniform shining like blood drops. A heavy cutlass was strapped to his waist next to a wickedly serrated knife. Black claws curled around the hilts of each. I suppose he thought it made him look more respectable.

There was little humanity left on Davin's face. His flesh was pale and thin, dark veins visible beneath his skin. Greasy black hair was tied at the nape of his neck. The lecherous grin on his face revealed sharp teeth, matching the cruelty in his solid crimson eyes.

But even with his monstrous traits, I recognized the shape of his face. The slight bend in his nose. The shape of his eyes. Traits that reminded me of Sawyer.

I hated him for it. But I was too afraid of Davin to fight him. It would be just what he wanted.

"Morning, darling," he crooned, sauntering in my direction.

I forced myself not to move. Beneath my chest, my heart raced with fear. I balled my fists so they wouldn't shake.

"Hope you're not lazing around."

I narrowed my eyes. "It's not easy to work with these," I snapped, jerking the chains up.

Davin chuckled. He didn't stop walking. I wouldn't move, but I wanted to scream. Davin's gory eyes flicked to the chains, then went lower to my chest. The work suit was buttoned up to my collar, but I felt exposed under his gaze.

"Guess you haven't been working up a sweat yet." He raised his eyes and showed me his teeth. "We can change that later, you know."

I grimaced, then replayed his words. "Later?"

"Yeah," Davin said. He raised his hand and curled a strand of my blonde hair around his claw. The edges of his finger brushed my jaw. He was cold as death.

"Boss says it's feeding time."

I'd already been given my rations—brick-hard bread, watery broth, and a strip of meat I didn't want to think about—so he wasn't talking about feeding me. He was talking about...

My breath hitched and my already rapid pulse kicked up a notch. Davin smiled. I knew he could smell my fear.

"Relax, darling," he taunted. His eyes found the bruises on my neck. "You're getting used to it. You probably like it by now."

A sharp bite of pain crossed my jaw. I gasped, unprepared for the cut. I stepped back, swiping my hand along my chin. It came away bloody.

Davin chuckled and licked my blood from his claw. He held my gaze and moaned with pleasure. A chill swept down my spine.

"You taste good, Claire. Bet my brother is jealous he can't taste your sweetness."

I shuddered. "Leave Sawyer out of this," I warned, in a pathetically weak voice.

“Oh, I plan to,” Davin said, moving for me again. “I’m not good at sharing. But I’m not worried about my little brother. Because I know he won’t be able to find you. Even if he could, he wouldn’t live long enough to rescue you. I won’t let him.”

I tried to keep my emotions in control. I had seen Davin fight Sawyer before. It never ended well for Sawyer.

“But don’t waste time worrying about him,” the twisted Hellion droned on. “You’ll get used to it here. And if you don’t,” he shrugged, “at least I’ll have something to amuse myself with.”

Davin’s hand shot out like lightning. He grabbed the chain between my bonds and yanked me close. I pushed against him, but it was like trying to move a fortress with my bare hands. As fast as he grabbed me, Davin unlocked my shackles. I didn’t even see him use a key. He shoved me hard, knocking me back until my spine hit the cold glass window.

“Time to get changed, darling.” Davin strolled to the bed and flopped onto it. He reclined casually and folded his hands over his stomach. “Hope you don’t mind me watching.”

I turned for the cabinet, praying he didn’t see the embarrassment flushing to my cheeks. He’d done this every day since I’d been given clothes. Stayed with me in my room to make sure I didn’t attempt escape, and to watch me change.

I picked out a new tunic then hid behind the cabinet door to block his view. From where I stood now, he would only be able to see my elbow and part of my hip. I hoped.

I lifted off my tunic glanced down. I could see the bones of my ribs now. I’d lost too much weight.

“Tease,” Davin taunted. “That’s okay, though. I’ll wait. Probably.”

I quickly put on the new tunic. This one was tighter around my too thin torso, wide around the shoulders, and low in the chest. It gave perfect access to my entire neck.

When I turned out from behind the cabinet, Davin was in front of me. I jumped and his blood-red gaze was fixated on my chest. Instinctively, I moved my arms up to block his view. Davin snorted and grabbed my wrists. He kept them down as he re-clasped the shackles to my wrists. It forced him to press against me. I turned away, scared by the way he leered.

Once my wrists were tightly locked into place, Davin roughly gripped my elbow and pushed me across the room.

“It’s a shame about the new clothes, darling,” he purred in my ear.

When he didn’t elaborate, I threw him a look over my shoulder. His grin was wicked.

“His Majesty isn’t happy. I have a feeling that shirt will be a lot redder by the time he’s done.”

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Dark Spire was as alien to me as everything else in Hellnore. It was a floating fortress in the heart of Hellnore that looked like a slice of jagged obsidian. The craggy castle was made up of a sixteen levels, each one narrower than the one below it. The dungeons were at the very bottom, buried under the boiling soil. Above them were the boiler rooms. Supply rooms and hangars for skiffs layered the next dozen. Over the highest one was my room, which took up half the level. The rest of the floor was nothing more than polished black obsidian, a dark, slick stone that matched the walls. Braziers covered in thick, steel nets sent shudders of light along the black rock. The only sound was the tiny click of my boots and Davin’s heavy stomp behind me.

In the right corner of the room was a spiraling staircase made of black glass. My heart pounded as I got closer to it. I swallowed my fear and gripped the icy railing. I held my head high and stalked up the steps, telling myself that I’d done this over thirty times now. It was part of my arrangement with the Vesper. It might not hurt as much.

My sweaty palms slicked the railing.

At the top of the stairs was a massive set of dual doors. Closed, they looked like some sort of demonic mural. Violent slashes and zigzagging lines wove together in a torn spider web. Some of the lines were painted red, and almost looked like streams of fresh blood when light shone on them. The light

came from the braziers set on either side of the thirty foot doors. In front of the flames were two grim-faced Hellion guards.

They were dressed in the same jumpsuit that Davin wore and didn't have their needle-tipped masks on. They held no weapons. Their claws and teeth were as powerful and deadly as any blade.

Despite looking like him, these Hellions weren't semi-human creations like Davin. They were created by the Vesper and could only speak their own barbarous tongue. Davin used his brutality and wiles to ascend their ranks, and spoke their harsh language fluently.

The two guards hissed at me as I approached. I froze in place, but didn't cringe away. It wasn't the first time they snapped at me. It pained me to admit, but Davin was right. In a strange sort of way, I was getting used to it here.

The monsters kept baring their teeth, their bloody eyes fixed on the pulse in my throat. Their narrow nostrils flared as they smelled my fear. I balled my fists and looked at the door.

Davin snapped something at them in Hellion-tongue, and the guards turned away. They reached for black levers hidden by the shadows on the wall and pushed them down. After a thundering click that reminded me of a prison cell locking forever, the doors began to groan and swing inward. Davin put his hand on the small of my back, then slid it lower. I balled my fists and wished I were Gemma. My best friend would never have allowed any man but Nash to touch her this way. If they did, she would swing around and rocket a punch into their jaw. She would pounce on them and beat them until they cried. Depending on how angry she was, she might keep going.

I missed her terribly.

I stepped away from Davin's hands rather than fight back. I knew it would be useless. I only had a month's worth of combat training. I could defend myself enough to get away, but not to properly battle an enemy.

Even if I could achieve my current dream and knock the sinister lights from Davin's eyes, it would be pointless. If the Hellion guards didn't catch me, the Vesper would. He would do it himself, invading my mind and torturing me into submission.

Or he would send his puppet to do it for him.

An eternity seemed to pass before the doors were open enough for me to slip through. I couldn't get away from Davin fast enough. I ignored his quiet laugh as I stepped into the throne room, the pinnacle of the Dark Spire.

Every level I'd seen on the Spire was big, but this room was *enormous*. The walls slanted up to a sharp peaked roof. Strung along the ceiling were drooping, spider-like chandeliers. Each dangling "leg" was tipped with a dim candle. Tattered red fabric hung below the base of each chandelier like flayed skin. I shuddered, and hoped that was just my morbid imagination talking.

Dropping my gaze, I walked along a silky, dark crimson carpet that stretched from the doors to the throne. Bony columns arched over my head, interweaving with the spider-chandeliers. At the farthest end of the hall was a seven foot tall dais made of shining black glass. A single high-backed chair sat on top of it, the edges of it stabbing up like dozens of sharp spikes. Though the throne room was mostly dark, all the candlelight above me seemed to fixate on the two beings waiting on the dais.

Seated on the cold throne was a slim Hellion in a heavy red cloak that looked like it had been soaked in blood before it covered his shoulders. Thick, immaculate black hair dripped down the sides of his face to his chest and cascaded the length of his torso until it nearly touched the ground. Hooked claws curled around the armrests of the throne. On his head was a crown of pale, broken bones. Eyes that were dark red from lid to lid fixed on me, the dilated pupils yawning like black holes intent on sucking the life from my body.

The Vesper, King of the Hellions, always sent a spear of terror into my heart when I saw him. I could never hold his unblinking gaze for long.

But he wasn't as thin anymore. His skin wasn't as withered. He didn't look weak.

The reason was standing beside him.

My heart shouldn't have ached at the sight of Riley, the former rigger of the *Dauntless Wanderer* and son of a Sky Guard soldier. My one time friend, until the moment he revealed his true nature. His purpose.

To act as a pawn to the Vesper, to get close to the Palisade and me.

It obviously worked.

I couldn't even bring myself to narrow my eyes at him. He looked terrible. Once young and handsome with tousled blond hair and lively blue eyes, Riley had been there for me when no one else had. He'd suffered unfathomable torture at the hands of the Hellions for two years, until Sawyer and I rescued him.

But it was all a ruse. The Riley I knew was dead. He may never have existed. What was left of him was being slowly, and literally, drained away.

A tube stuck out of Riley's neck, just above the high collar of his black tunic. Clear red blood flowed out of the tube, winding through the creases of the Vesper's robe and lodging in his chest. A direct blood transfer that gave the Vesper life, and turned Riley into a rail-thin man with empty, glazed eyes.

I didn't know how Riley was still alive. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. The Vesper was a dark, dangerous mystery that haunted me at every waking moment. I barely slept as it was.

"You have displeased me, Claire."

I shivered at the sound of the Vesper's voice, no longer a strained rasp, but a husky, formidable growl that reminded me of rocks crashing down a mountain in a landslide.

I concentrated all my efforts on maintaining eye contact with him. I tightened my hands into fists so they wouldn't shake. I bit my tongue so I wouldn't scream. My heart and brain weren't so restrained. All I could think about was trying to run and escape, and hope for the best.

Only there was no "best" here.

"You have failed to progress with both machines," the Vesper went on. If he noticed my anxiety, he didn't let it show. Riley stood beside him, gazing blankly over my head.

I crushed my tongue between my teeth. Any harder and I would make myself bleed.

"Have you nothing to say?"

*Oh, I have a million things to say.* I immediately cursed myself for the thought. The Vesper had unfathomable powers, and I wouldn't know about them until it was too late and he used them on me. He read my mind with ease.

"Then speak."

"I... It's not easy—"

Davin scoffed behind me. "If you're not gonna speak up, you might as well move closer so he can actually hear you."

His hand swatted my backside, hard. I stumbled forward, whirling around to give him a furious glare. Davin only crossed his arms over his chest and smiled.

Fabric rustled in front of me. I whirled around, and gasped as the Vesper stood just inches away from me. The Vesper towered over me, black hair curtaining the sides of his face as he bent to look at me. I shivered at the void-like darkness in his pupils, and gagged on the thick smell of blood emanating from him.

"You are the daughter of Deanna and Joel Abernathy," the Vesper said. His breath smelled sour and rotten. Combined with the scent of blood from his clothes, he smelled like a freshly murdered body. "It would not have taken them so long to progress with my storm-maker and the Palisade."

"There were two of them," I pointed out, amazed I was able to speak at all. "I'm the only engineer you have."

"And I have repeatedly explained that you can be assisted should you require it. My children make many trips to Westraven for you. As you can see by the clothes you wear now."

He wasn't looking at me with the lewd intent that Davin did, but I nonetheless felt uncomfortable and exposed in front of him.

“It would only take longer,” I insisted. “I would have to train them. They would need more tools, and even then, I don’t know if—”

“You are making excuses.”

I hesitated, realizing my mistake too late. “I don’t have enough materials for the Palisade, and I’m still trying to understand the storm-maker,” I reasoned. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. The conducting towers are propelling the wind from the mountains, but there isn’t enough moisture in the air. Anything that is being made is getting lost in the tunnel leading out to—”

“The storm-maker will be placed under the control and monitoring of my children. Your focus shall now become the Palisade, and nothing more.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. My agreement to make a Palisade for the Vesper meant that when I was finished, he would be able to use it to destroy what little was left of Westraven. Combined with the storm-maker, he would invade Aon again. He would capture anyone he or his Hellions could get his claws into, and carry them to a fate worse than any death I could imagine.

With his storm-maker, he would keep Westraven under a constant black cloud, forever erasing our chances of closing the Breach and seeing the sunlight again. If anyone were bold enough to resist him, the Vesper would break him or her down piece by piece.

I glanced at Riley, and shuddered to think about Sawyer standing in his place.

*He wouldn’t let that happen, I knew. He would rather die.*

I cursed myself again.

“I will not tolerate delays, Claire,” the Vesper rasped. “I have waited ten long years to regain my strength, feeding off the stragglers brought to me by my children.”

He leaned in close. I tried to step back, but his hand curled around the small of my back. Dagger sharp claws poked through my thin shirt, taunting my skin.

“I have seen your mind, Claire,” continued the Vesper. He hadn’t blinked once since the start of our conversation. “You know what it is like to be weak. To be desperate. Imagine that weakness and desperation, combined with pain. Every second of your existence consumed with an ache that burns like acid in your stomach. Constant hunger, giving up your own blood to feed your own.”

The Vesper’s grip tightened. The fabric of the tunic ripped, but my skin remained intact. For now. He bent closer. I choked on bile and the smell of blood and rot as he swarmed me.

“You have endured hardships, Claire. But you know little of true pain.”

He didn’t give me any warning. I didn’t see his jaw open or his mouth move for my neck.

But I did feel dozens of sharp claws plunge into my throat. And I did scream.

The Vesper sucked hard on my neck, pulling my blood from the fresh wounds. Every one felt like a prodded, throbbing bruise. My eyes found Riley, begging for help.

He stared straight ahead, a statue focused on nothing.

I gritted my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut. My nails stabbed into my palms.

Then the Vesper increased the torture.

I felt him stab into my mind, and gasped at the spike of pain. *No, no, no!*

But the images were already flashing. Helping my mother and father as they worked. Always asking questions and studying what they were creating. Watching the parades and festivals in Westraven as a girl. Staring in wonder at my baby sister when she was born. Holding Abby close when she was scared and promising to protect her. Meeting the crew of the *Dauntless Wanderer*. The jokes and laughs with Gemma and Nash. Sawyer’s wry smile and stubborn attitude. Rescuing Abby. Destroying the *Behemoth*.

Feeling the wind on my skin as I flew on a ship for the first time in a decade. Watching my sister study the constellations. Returning home and finding my mother’s journal. Being held by Riley. Finding the Palisade. Arguing with Sawyer. Kissing him.

Abby’s primal scream as she attacked Nash. Gemma’s anger at my parents when she learned what they’d done. Riley’s terrifying story about the girl he killed on the *Behemoth*. Sawyer’s horrified eyes as I

was taken away from him. He tried to tell me something, screamed it, but I couldn't remember what it was—

The images spun and swirled through my head like a tornado. My vision blurred. The ache in my skull became a heavy weight. Each of my limbs sagged as weakness flooded my body.

The Vesper's mouth was still on my neck, sharply tugging the blood from my veins.

My lips formed the words, but I couldn't speak. I tried again, but it was useless.

*Please...* I whispered in my mind. *Please stop.*

I didn't think he heard me. He was too invested in the taste of my blood and inflicting mental torture to break me. I begged again, over and over, my thoughts becoming a drunken haze. I struggled to find my mantra, the single ray of hope I had left.

*Gentle smiles, smart mouths, blonde curls, tawny eyes. Gentle smiles, smart mouths, blonde curls, tawny eyes. Gentle smiles, smart mouths, blonde curls, tawny...*

Darkness crept into the edges of my vision. The faces swimming in my head became incoherent smears of color. I slumped forward.

The Vesper stepped back, yanking his fangs from my throat with one more rough tug. I expected to smack hard onto the floor, but I was caught. I lifted my head, aggravating the wounds on my throat, and found myself looking at the blurry image of Riley's face.

I waited for him to recognize me, to nod or wink and let me know he was still in there. The Riley I knew was strong, a survivor with a gentle heart who persevered against his past.

Blank eyes stared at me, stripped of the bright lights I'd adored. Replaced by the eyes of a dead man.

A puppet's eyes.

Riley lowered me onto the floor. There was no need to physically damage my mind. Not until the Vesper decided on it.

My neck felt ravaged, my mind scrubbed raw. I was cold and weak. Broken. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. The Vesper had taken even those from me.

"Take her back to her room," the Vesper commanded.

"With pleasure," I heard Davin sneer over my head. His boots clomped toward me.

Then he dropped to his knees and cried out in pain.

I turned my head just enough to see him hunched over with his hands on his head. His claws gripped his hair so tightly I saw them scrape the flesh off his scalp. His jaw was so tight it looked like he might shatter his teeth.

I felt a perverse sense of satisfaction knowing that Davin could suffer with me.

"You will not touch her," commanded the Vesper. "She is not to be physically broken until her purpose has been served."

*So much for satisfaction*, I thought quickly. The Vesper didn't seem to have heard me. Or if he did, he didn't care.

But his bloody, black eyes turned to me. "And once she has these materials she needs, she shall not delay."

I cringed and looked away. Davin's breathing relaxed. He grunted and grabbed my arm with bruising force. He yanked me to my feet so abruptly I stumbled. Davin didn't look back or slow down as he dragged me to the stairs.

I risked a glance over my shoulder as we reached the door.

Riley's vacant expression didn't change. Tears pricked my eyes. I couldn't save him. There was nothing left to save. Nothing left for him to lose.

For a split second, I envied him.

\*\*\*

Davin's fury hadn't dissipated when he took me back to my room. The Vesper's command forbid him from violating me the way he wanted, but it didn't keep me safe.

Especially since Davin was the type of marauder who thrived on breaking the rules.

His fist collided with my jaw. I was still too weak to stand, so I landed on the floor in a heap. Two kicks to my ribs kept me there.

I curled on the icy floor, clinging to my mantra like the lifeline it was.

*Gentle smiles, smart mouths, blonde curls, tawny eyes.*

Davin knelt down and grabbed a fistful of my hair. I winced when he pulled my head up, but didn't cry out. Hatred sparked in his bloody eyes.

"You'd better get to work, bitch," he snarled. "We're going back to your world soon. I might not be able to have you yet, but Sawyer's brunette friend? Your sister? They're fair game."

My eyes widened in horror, and Davin didn't take pleasure in it. That's how furious he was.

He tightened his grip and jerked me closer until our noses almost touched.

"And don't even get me started on what I'll do to my brother."

Davin dropped my head and stormed away. The door slammed with an echoing thud.

I lay alone and in pain on the freezing floor, shaking and holding back my tears. I repeated my mantra over and over in my mind. The painful images that Vesper drew from me came with it. But I kept going, searching through the dark images to find the lighter ones. The ones that made me smile as they broke my heart. The ones I gave up and fought to keep.

Nash's rumbling laugh. Gemma's half-hearted eye rolls. Abby's curious questions. Sawyer's warm, cedar scent. The whisper of his voice when he told me he loved me.

I pushed myself to my feet and lurched to the window. I wrapped my hand around my stomach and pressed my forehead against the cool glass. I stared down at the wretched wasteland before me. I imagined the darkness of Hellnore spreading over Westraven. Raiding skiffs circling the skies and dropping down to hunt. Endless screams and gunshots. Blood staining the white bricks.

I imagined my friends and loved ones dead at my feet.

It was my motivation. The future I would never let unfold.

I would build the Vesper the Palisade he wanted.

Then I would use it against him.



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