

Prologue

One Year Ago

“Would you rather have a third arm or a third eye?” asked Lissy.

Annie dangled her legs over the side of their hammock and snuggled closer to her baby sister. “Can I choose where it’s placed?”

Lissy’s brows drew together, her light brown eyes drifting to the side for a silent moment before nodding.

The hammock swayed with the wind, rocking with each gust while the treetops shimmied around them. Annie couldn’t stand the thought of leaving it. School was important and all, but with the medley of insects, birds, and monkeys echoing through the jungle, Annie had a hard time remembering why. A shaft of light broke through the thick ceiling of leaves, and Annie sighed, closing her eyes and turning her face upwards to soak it in while she could.

Lissy poked Annie in the ribs. “Which would you rather have?”

Giving a non-committal grunt, Annie took out a pocket knife and sliced into a mango she’d picked from a nearby tree. With a few cuts, she peeled away the skin and offered Lissy a sliver before eating one of her own. The girl smiled around the mouthful of fruit, juices dripping out the corner of her mouth; Annie wiped it away before running a hand across her own chin while she thought through her answer.

Lissy twisted the edge of her tunic around her finger, winding and unwinding it while she rattled on about the different and rather creative places you could put an extra appendage. But then she froze mid-word, straightened, and stared out into the jungle.

“Did you feel that?” she asked.

“Feel what?” mumbled Annie through a mouthful of mango. Cleaning the last bit from the pit, she chucked it over the side, letting it fall to the ground below, and tucked the knife into her pocket.

“That.”

Annie’s eyebrows rose. “That?”

“Yes, that.”

“It’s called swaying,” said Annie with a teasing smirk. “We’re in a hammock, and there’s a decent breeze.”

Lissy leaned in close until her nose nearly touched Annie’s and scowled, but it faded into a smile when she grabbed a strand of Annie’s black hair and tickled her sister’s nose.

“Aren’t you excited for the dancing?” asked Lissy as she settled back into the hammock. “Mom got me the most beautiful saryn. It’s dark green with these yellow stripey-thingys along the edge, and she’s going to let me borrow her extra special tazhos.”

“I used those, too, at my first—” but Annie stopped short when a rumble shook the forest.

“That!” snapped Lissy, shooting upright again.

Swinging her legs over the edge of the hammock, Annie glanced towards the sound. “I’m sure it’s nothing...”

But Lissy leapt out of the hammock and scurried up the banyan tree with an agility that would make a monkey jealous. Annie flopped back with a sigh and shake of her head. Pumping her legs, she gave the hammock’s sway an extra push and closed her eyes.

“Annie!” screamed Lissy.

Bursting from the hammock, Annie scrambled up the trunk and through the foliage. “What’s the matter?”

Lissy pointed towards the village, and Annie followed her finger to see a plume of smoke billowing up from the trees.

Annie let out a slow breath, gripping a branch to keep her hands from shaking. “It’s just smoke, Lissy. What are you freaking out for?”

“But where’s the smoke coming from?”

“A bonfire,” guessed Annie.

With the look Lissy gave her, the extra eye roll was completely unnecessary. “It’s too big for a bonfire. Besides, there shouldn’t be any yet. The May Day festival doesn’t start for a few more hours.”

The ground shook again, reverberating through the tree trunk, and a ball of fire exploded near the edge of the village. Birds and monkeys burst out of the foliage, the branches and leaves shuddering; one word echoed around them, carried in the squawking cries of the animals.

“Lampads?” squeaked Lissy. “How could they have found us?”

Annie wrapped an arm around her and gave a squeeze. “Don’t worry. The guards will stop them faster than a bwbach can steal a stool.”

But a tingle ran down Annie’s spine, making her feet and hands itch to do something. There really wasn’t anything to be done. The village guards would take care of Lampads, but Annie couldn’t shake that niggling bit of unease resting in her stomach. Lissy leaned into her sister, and Annie squeezed her shoulder.

It would be fine. Of course it would.

“Why’s it still burning?” whispered Lissy, but Annie had no answer. “Something doesn’t feel right. We need to find Mom.”

“Lissy...” groaned Annie, but stopped when her sister dropped from her perch, catching a branch ten feet down and leaping to another before plunging to the forest floor below. Shaking her head, Annie let go of the branch and followed her.

Annie landed at her sister’s side, and Lissy took her sister’s hand, giving it a squeeze before jumping into another description of anything and everything to do with her outfit and the May Day festivities. Annie chuckled to herself; the girl may be concerned, but she still had her priorities.

A man stepped from behind a tree, coming over to stand in their path. He was lanky with a crooked grin and brown hair that was meticulously styled to look effortless, and Annie was sure she had met him before, but she couldn’t think where or what his name was. Not that it mattered because he wasn’t supposed to be there. Only two Wizards knew the location of their village (three, if you counted her Wizard half), and neither of them were him.

“Zhiana Morgan, I’m Porter. It’s so good to see you again,” he said, pulling one of his hands from his pocket and extending it to Annie. It took a moment for her to understand the English words; they felt as out-of-place here as the finely cut suit he wore while standing among the tangled roots of a banyan tree.

Lissy yanked on Annie’s arm and whispered, “What’s he saying? Who is he?”

Annie blinked at Lissy, but a whiff of something on the wind pulled her gaze towards the village. Unmistakable smoke clung to the air, and the smell of it punched Annie in the gut—the fire was still burning in the village.

“You speak English, don’t you? It seems like something you would’ve learned when you lived on the Island,” said Porter, his hand hanging in the air between them. A wide smile cut across his face, digging into his cheeks in a way most would consider charmingly boyish though he’d passed

the age of boyishness years ago. To Annie, his smile felt pointier and more uncomfortable than his oversized nose.

“I speak English. But not in long time,” said Annie, affecting a thick accent while shaking his proffered hand. If he didn’t know the extent of her language skills, Annie wasn’t about to enlighten him. “I sorry, but we must go. Something not right in village.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.” He released her hand and stuck it back in his pockets like he was just hanging around on a lazy afternoon. “I have a proposal for you.”

“What’s going on?” hissed Lissy, leaning around to get a better look at the guy. “I don’t understand.”

Porter turned his smile to the little girl and greeted her in mangled Nymphish.

“What proposal?” asked Annie, shoving Lissy behind her.

“You give me what I want, and I’ll give you what you want.”

“I know what proposal mean.” She struggled not to let her annoyance show. “What your proposal?”

Porter gave a chagrined smile and rocked back on his heels. “I want the Drogue. Give it to me and I’ll leave you and your village alone.”

Annie stared at the man; she couldn’t have been more shocked if he’d asked her to sprout wings and dance a Highland reel. “I know not.”

“I think you do.”

A high, keening shriek ripped through the air. Whipping her gaze towards the village, Annie’s heart stopped.

“I sorry. Something wrong. Must go.” Keeping herself between Lissy and Porter, Annie turned them around but stopped when two more Wizards blocked the way.

Annie glanced back at Porter, and he smiled, his eyes crinkling while he pulled out a palm-sized mirror. “I’m sure living with the Nymphs has kept you pretty isolated from the latest gadgets...”

Annie stared at the spact and a perverse part of her wanted to laugh at that outdated piece of junk; she knew for a fact that Simone Barker’s kid sister had gotten a similar one for her birthday last semester, and Simone couldn’t stop spouting off about how she wouldn’t be caught dead with such a pitiful spact.

“...but I hope this will jog your memory,” he said.

Swiping the glass with his thumb, the reflection faded, and Annie’s breath caught when her childhood home appeared on the smooth surface. Her mother had painted the house pale yellow because it reminded her of springtime, and her father had taught her to ride her first flyer in the backyard. A lifetime ago, Annie had been happy there.

The end of a wand came into view along the bottom of the glass, held up by the person whose memory supplied these images.

“*Neighbors called it in,*” said someone; it came from the mirror, but the view didn’t turn, so Annie couldn’t see who was speaking. “*Reports of screaming and some heavy duty spells.*”

The front door lay scattered across the porch, and Annie heard fighting coming from inside the house. Screams and shouts echoed from the mirror, and the image jostled as the person rushed the doorway shouting, “*Police!*”

Annie knew what happened next. She didn’t need this fractured image bouncing in and out of focus to show her exactly what happened. She had lived through it; the screams and explosions still played through her nightmares, and the sight of her father lighting the air in a rainbow of deadly colors was vivid in her memory. Slicing the air with his wand, her father had deflected and

attacked at once, sending up a shower of dust and debris to block Annie and the others from view. To let them escape out the back.

Not that it had done any good.

From the mirror came the screams, Annie's own tiny voice shrieking in fear.

"*Nell!*" Annie felt her father's frenzy. He slammed a fatal hex at one of the attackers, but another jumped on her dad, knocking him to the ground. The sounds of her father's fight died while more screams and shouts came from the kitchen.

A deafening blast shook the image and light blared, blocking out all other sights and sounds. The viewpoint shifted, hurrying into the other room, and Annie didn't want to see this but couldn't turn away. Standing in the middle of the kitchen, surrounded by twisted and broken bodies, was her six-year-old self.

Porter tapped the mirror to pause it and zoomed in on her startled, little body. A necklace dangled from her clenched fist.

"How did you get this?" Annie whispered. But the moment she asked, she knew. "This is your memory." Bits and pieces of memories snapped together, and slowly, Annie understood. This man was Porter *Mason*.

Another distant scream ripped through the air, snapping Annie to the present, but Mason drew her attention back to the mirror.

"I want this," he said, pointing to the medallion dangling from the chain. "I saw you take it when you ran away that night."

But with more shrieks and explosions coming from the village, Annie couldn't stand to waste any more time with this man. She turned to leave, but his hand snatched her arm.

"Don't slip away just yet." Mason pulled his wand free of his arm holster and drew a circle of fire in the air. "Give me the Drogue, or I'll burn you and everything you love to ashes."

Annie snorted, her anger flaring brighter than the flames. "You must be stupid to threaten a Nymph—even a half-breed like me—with fire," she said, her accent slipping. Pulling from the magic deep in her heart, Annie swiped at the flames, gasping when it singed her skin. Lissy squeaked, and Annie pulled her closer with her uninjured hand.

"It's taken years to find you, but I came prepared," Mason said with a dimpled smile. "Tweaking Lampad magic to withstand the Nymphs' abilities took time and a lot of energy, but my fire spell is perfection. Give me the Drogue, and I'll leave. It belongs to us."

Looking into his eyes, past the jovial façade, Annie saw the darkness lingering there. Feeling as young and helpless as that six-year-old in the mirror, Annie's heart screamed at her leaden legs to run. Her hand clutched Lissy behind her, the little girl giving a squeak when Annie's grip was too tight.

"You're a Dark Knight," Annie whispered. She didn't know why she said it. Some strange part of her brain thought he'd deny it, but his grin quirked upwards. Annie's eyes widened, her chin trembling as she thought through her options.

Lissy said something, but Annie couldn't focus on it at the moment. Lissy jabbed her in the side, and it bumped the knife resting in Annie's pocket.

"Lissy," Annie said, holding her lips still and whispering so Mason's human ears couldn't hear. She doubted he would understand her Nymphish, but Annie wouldn't risk it. Mason kept speaking, but Annie was no longer listening.

"What's going on? I don't understand!" Lissy sounded one step away from hysterical.

"Don't talk. Just listen. I need you to run as fast as you can up into the trees and meet me at our spot by the river, okay?"

“But what’s happening?” Lissy whispered.

“Just do it. Please.”

She felt Lissy nod, and Annie reached up under the folds of her tunic to grab the knife; it wasn’t large or heavy enough to be that useful, but it would give Lissy time. Even a few extra seconds could save her. Annie couldn’t allow herself to think about the odds or the improbabilities of them escaping; she just needed to act.

With a fluid snap of her hand, Annie freed her blade and launched it at the man closest to her sister. Without waiting to see it hit her target, Annie spun, pulling her wand from its hiding place and whipping the first spell she could form at Mason. Lissy bolted, scurrying up the nearest tree as Annie ducked a counterspell.

Annie moved on instinct, dodging and weaving while pulling and twisting the strands of magic in her wand. Breaking into a run, she sprinted through the jungle while shrubs and foliage exploded around her. A small jolt of relief shot through her when she realized the minute she was out of their line-of-sight. Those men may be better at Wizard magic, but there was no way humans could ever outrun her in her forest.

Annie heard Lissy above her, sprinting along the limbs, leaping from tree to tree. But just as their path veered towards their meeting spot, Lissy turned the other direction and headed towards the village. Annie shouted for her sister and followed after her. With each step, the smoke thickened and the noise grew, but Lissy wouldn’t stop.

“Lissy, no! I’ll go and find Mom, you go to our spot!” But the words died on her lips when Annie burst through a thicket and into an inferno. Fire snapped and crackled around her, engulfing her in heat; the smoke and heat filled her lungs, singeing them from the inside. She shouted for her sister and her mother but couldn’t hear her own voice, let alone theirs.

A spell slammed into her shoulder, throwing Annie to the ground as pain tore through her. She tried to turn or stand or do something—anything—but every movement sent a stab of pain through her.

A foot nudged Annie onto her back, and Mason stood above her, hands in his pockets. His lips moved, but she couldn’t focus on the words. His men stepped forward and yanked her up by her arms, and Annie shrieked as her vision faded at the edges.

“I have to say I’m impressed,” said Mason, tugging the wand from Annie’s fingers. “It’s not often I get surprised like that. I wonder how you learned to use a wand out here among the Nymphs, but frankly, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you give me one tiny, little thing and all of this will go away. Like it never even happened.”

Annie’s shoulder felt broken; the pain throbbed in time with her heartbeat, sending shivers of agony shooting outwards with each thud.

Though she remembered a lot about that night all those years ago, Annie didn’t remember much about the necklace Mason wanted. If it were the stuff of legends, it seems like it should have made more of an impression. She didn’t even know if she believed the stories about the Droque, but Annie knew she couldn’t give the medallion to the Dark Knights—on principle if nothing else. Annie knew what her parents and the rest of the Group had sacrificed to stop them. Whether or not that trinket had the power to decimate cities and bring nations to its knees, Annie couldn’t give it to Mason.

“No,” Annie said between clenched teeth.

The man holding her injured arm gave it a tug and pain lanced through her; it would’ve dropped her, but the man kept her upright. Mason leaned closer, his mouth moving but her throbbing heartbeat filled Annie’s ears.

And then someone screamed, and Annie recognized Lissy's voice. Nausea washed over her, the bitter taste of bile burning the back of her throat. Annie tried to hide it, but her muscles tensed, and Mason's right eyebrow drew upwards while he watched the worry and fear playing across her face. Holding up his wand, a streak of purple light shot into the air, and the fire vanished. He grabbed Annie's chin, holding it tight and forced her eyes to his.

"Give me the Drogue and this will be over," he said. "If you don't, everyone in this village will die a horrible, slow death, and I'll sift through the ashes and find it anyway. You can save me time and hassle, not to mention the lives of everyone you love, if you'll just give me a silly little necklace."

"Annie!"

Though Mason kept a tight hold on her chin, Annie turned her gaze to see Lissy clinging to the branches of a charred tree. Sliding her gaze back to Mason, Annie's eyes filled with tears.

"I don't have it. Not anymore," she whispered, giving up all pretense. She'd already shown her hand and failed.

Mason's eyes narrowed, and he leaned closer, his thumb brushing a tear slithering down her cheek. "You know, I actually believe you. But that leaves one more question. Where is it?"

They stared at each other, though Annie didn't know what she was looking for. Mason's smile was warm, but his eyes were dark and cold. Looking into them, she knew exactly what the future would hold for her home if she didn't tell him the truth, but she couldn't delude herself: telling him would only shift her pain onto someone else's head. Someone she cared about.

One life lost to save her family and village.

That wasn't such a terrible thing.

If it were her life to sacrifice, Annie would do it in a heartbeat. But throwing away someone else's away was another matter. More than that, giving Mason the Drogue—if that was what the necklace really was—would destroy far more lives than those in the village. If she agreed, she could be killing far more people than she was saving. And that was assuming Annie trusted Mason to keep his word.

Before Annie could decide, Mason flicked his wand again and the flames sprang to life. Lissy howled, and her sister's pain throbbed through Annie far worse than her own injured shoulder.

Desperation possessed her mouth, ripping the answer from her. Annie knew she shouldn't. Knew it. Every rational thought screamed at her to keep quiet, but her heart begged her to save Lissy. Her mother. The village.

"Jaycob Faltz!" Annie shouted. "He and his mother were there. I found the necklace on the ground beside her and thought it was hers, so I gave it to him."

Mason released his grip on her and patted her cheek. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

He nodded to the man holding her, and the goon shoved Annie to the ground, stomping on her shoulder. The burning light around her faded to black, and her thoughts grew fuzzy until Annie lost all sense of time as she writhed. Panting and moaning, it took several moments before she was coherent enough to notice that the village was still burning.

"Wait..." Annie tried to shout for Mason, but the words wouldn't come.

With a grunt, she struggled to her feet and saw Mason strolling into the jungle, his hands in his pockets. Annie stumbled after him, but only got a dozen feet before she struck an invisible barrier. Reaching out with her uninjured arm, Annie felt the surface. Glancing in either direction, she saw a clear line in the ground around the village where the fire stopped.

Annie didn't bother to scream at him or demand his help. Watching him disappear, she knew she hadn't really expected him to keep his word. But that hadn't stopped her from sacrificing Jake. For only a faint hope of saving her family, she'd done the unthinkable.

Tears poured down her cheeks, but Annie wiped them away as she shouted for Lissy. The flood of noise swallowed it up, drowning her words in a cacophonous sea. People were running and screaming, the flames snapping and hissing and the trees creaking and crackling around her. Smoke hung heavy in the air, filling her lungs.

Running towards the last place she'd seen Lissy, Annie's eyes picked her shape out of the haze. Lissy clung to a tree branch, not far from the ground.

"Drop!" Annie coughed, and Lissy let go of the tree and dropped to the ground.

"Mom?" Lissy asked, wiping at the tears on her cheeks and smearing ash across them.

Annie glanced around, but there was too much chaos. She could barely see and hear in the mess, and Annie didn't have the first clue where their mother was. Annie wanted to comfort Lissy, give her some reassurance that everything would be fine, but the words didn't come, so she gripped Lissy's hand, hoping it helped.

Pulling Lissy along, Annie ran for their home. Others hurried past them, bumping and jostling the pair, but Annie swallowed back the pain in her shoulder and kept a firm hand on her sister. A woman screamed—not a shriek of surprise or fear, but the agonizing wail of someone wishing for a faster death. Annie wanted to cover Lissy's ears, but they needed to move.

They needed to get through the barrier.

Annie was mostly blind in the haze, but her feet knew her village and she followed them through the crowds and billowing smoke. Sweat streamed down her forehead and back as she ran up the stairs curling around the tree that held up her home.

Bursting through their front door, Lissy called for her mother while Annie focused on getting to her spare wand. The trees shivered and shook as people ran along the treetops and walkways, seeking for a way out of the inferno, but Annie was sure Mason and his Dark Knights hadn't left open a single opening. She needed to make one.

The building groaned and shook, and a part of the wall exploded, flames slithering along anything it could touch. Not bothering to search through her bag, Annie threw it on and ran back to Lissy, leading her back out into the madness.

"But Mom!" shrieked Lissy, yanking Annie's hand and digging in her heels. "We need to find Mom!"

Annie tugged Lissy, but the girl held firm. Annie's body ached, her village was burning, and she needed to get her sister away from this, but the girl wouldn't budge.

"We've got to get out of here!" snapped Annie

"We've got to find Mom!" Lissy snapped right back.

Annie wanted to growl and hiss, and throw Lissy over her shoulder and drag the girl kicking and screaming to safety, but there wasn't time to fight her. There wasn't time to deal with this.

"We're going to find her," said Annie.

"Promise?"

"Promise," she said. "Now, come on."

Leaping through the door, Annie pulled Lissy across the treetop walkways, avoiding the pandemonium below. Keeping her injured arm tucked into her side, Annie clutched Lissy's hand with the other, nearly yanking Lissy off her feet when the girl froze.

"Mom!" shouted Lissy, waving to the side.

Annie whipped around and looked where Lissy was pointing. What wasn't burning bright in reds, yellows, and oranges, were nothing more than muted gray, making it difficult for Annie to see the hand waving through the smoke.

But there was their mom standing on a walkway on the opposite side of the clearing.

"Mom!" called Annie. They'd found her. No matter what she'd said to Lissy, Annie had known they'd never be able to find their mother in this mess, but there she was, and Annie's heart leapt at the sight of her. They'd find the shield, Annie would open it up, and they'd get everyone out.

Their mother leaned over the railing, a relieved smile on her face while she motioned for them to come. Behind her, the house exploded, engulfing their mother.

Annie stared at the flailing arms inside the flames, her mother's screams vibrating throughout Annie's body. She couldn't move. She couldn't think, but her eyes and ears recorded it all. Every horrifying moment carved into her soul as her mother slowly and painfully left this world.

Something tugged at her, and Annie's faltering mind finally noticed Lissy tugging and shrieking, wrenching at Annie, reaching for their mother as the woman fell from the walkway, arcing through the smoke and crashing to the ground in a ball of fire.

Lissy. Her sister. Annie's heart and soul crystallized, clearing her thoughts. She had to save Lissy. Annie shoved aside the numb haze gripping her and focused on the here and now. She had to get Lissy out of here. Ignoring the raging pain in her shoulder, Annie threw her sister over her good one and ran towards the barrier. Lissy kicked and clawed, but Annie ignored it.

Reaching the end of the walkway, Annie sprinted down the stairs.

The burning trees surrounded them with flames. Sweat dripped into Annie's eyes, and she wiped at it, but she still couldn't see through the smoke. A cough shook her, and Annie dropped Lissy as her lungs tried to hack out the smoke. Lissy fell to the ground and screamed even harder as her face landed next to a blackened corpse.

Taking Lissy by the hand, Annie stepped over the body and pulled her sister along. Every other step had Annie coughing, but she pushed through it, winding through the undergrowth until she found the edge of the fire. Along the barrier, villagers were lined up, beating their fists against the spell; mothers sobbing for the safety of their children and fathers breaking bones trying to force their way through it.

Whipping off the bag, Annie turned it upside down and dumped everything onto the ground. Annie spied the spare wand sticking out from among the things and snatched it up, sifting through the magic stored inside. There wasn't much inside it, but maybe there was enough to get through the barricade.

Lissy whimpered beside her, leaning hard on her while Annie wiped a forearm across her forehead. The heat scorched their skin while the smoke clawed their lungs like it was singeing them from the inside-out.

Annie placed her hand on the barrier spell and felt past the tactile surface into the magic inside. She'd never broken a shield like this before, and they didn't have the time or magic reserves to guess.

"Hold on, Lissy," said Annie, piecing together a spell.

Pointing the wand at the barrier, green light snaked from the wooden tip and struck the shield. Lissy leaned heavier against her, and Annie propped her upright while concentrating on the spell and ignoring the frenzied people around them—and the fact that their screams were dying away.

A pinprick hole inched open, and Annie wept at the sight of it. The edge wavered, pulling shut again, and Annie pushed more power into it. The hole froze. And then crept open. Soon it was the size of a coin and growing. Pulling from energy reserves she didn't know she had, Annie pushed

her will into the magic, straining to get it bigger. Annie wouldn't be able to take out the shield and wouldn't be able to hold the hole open for long, but if she could get Lissy and some of the others though, that would be enough.

Annie didn't have the breath to say more than a few raspy words. She certainly couldn't call out to the others around them, but Annie pieced together a light spell. It was a simple enough thing she'd done so many times that she could do it while maintaining the stream of magic punching the hole through the shield. Sending the light towards the few remaining voices, Annie hoped it would be enough to draw other villagers to the opening.

With the hole finally big enough to fit Lissy, Annie called to her sister, coughing. Her lungs scraped together with each breath. "Lissy—climb—"

Lissy's eyes looked up and to the left of Annie, and she pointed, screaming a barking wracking noise. Annie twisted to see a flaming tree careening towards them. Annie jumped out of the way, pushing Lissy towards the hole, but a root wrapped around her foot, pulling Annie off balance.

Flailing, Annie fell into the opening, the edge of the barrier slamming her stomach. The collapsing tree clipped her leg, rolling along her calf until it settled against her bare foot. The heat sliced through her skin, and Annie shrieked, kicking at it as it burned away the top layers of her skin. Her foot yanked free, throwing Annie forward until her head struck the jungle floor and her legs slipped through the hole.

Screaming for Lissy, Annie tried to get upright, but her right foot throbbed and waves of agony radiated along her leg. Leaning on her good side and using the barrier, Annie pulled herself up just as the opening closed.

"No!" she shrieked, beating her fists against the wall.

Head whipping, Annie searched for Lissy, hoping she'd somehow come through, too, before it closed.

But Annie saw locks of brown hair peeking out from under the burning tree. Lissy's fingers gripped the bark, her blood seeping into the soil while flames licked the hem of Lissy's tunic.

Ignoring the pain, Annie pushed through the lush undergrowth, hunting for her wand; there wasn't much left in it, but maybe there was something—anything—that could get Lissy out of there. But it sat on the ground next to Lissy's foot, just inches away from Annie on the other side of the barrier.

Unable to do anything more, Annie crawled as close as she could to Lissy. Laying her head on the ground, Annie curled up next to her sister, her hand touching the barrier, stroking the surface. Tears soaked Annie's cheeks as the fire raged, consuming everything it touched.