

THE WHISPERING DARK

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Delaney Meyers-Petrov wasn't made of glass, but sometimes she felt as though she might be. The early-September morning was bright and warm, the wide green square of Howe's tree-lined quad banded in thin sapling shadows. Overhead, the bluebird sky was laced in pale, pretty clouds, and it wasn't so much that she felt close to breaking, but rather that her parents were watching her as if she would.

Her parents, who she'd asked repeatedly to stay home. Her parents, who were terrible at listening, for two people whose ears worked perfectly well. Her parents, who had vehemently ignored her requests and had shown up on her first day of class—woefully out of place among the climber ivy and the baked-red brick and the buildings hewn from old money—with a sign on which they'd written her name.

WE LOVE YOU, LANEY!

The inscription was done in fat black letters. The poster paper was bubble-gum pink. The entire experience was, as far as experiences went, extraordinarily humiliating. More than one student on the quad was pointing. Perched under the slender branches of a fledgling elm, her mother didn't appear to notice the attention she attracted. At her side, Delaney's father looked positively out of place, his arms inked in grayscale sleeves, his hair slicked back, his beard threaded silver. His expression was a mug shot capture, and though the other students on the walkway gave him and his scowl as wide a berth as physically possible, Delaney could tell that the tight line of

her father's mouth was only there because he was doing his very best not to cry.

Shouldering her briefcase bag and swallowing her pride, she wriggled her fingers in as inconspicuous a goodbye as she could manage. And then off she went, careful to keep to the sunniest of spaces, stepping over shadows the same way small children skipped over clefts in the sidewalk—*Don't step on the crack or you'll break your mother's back*. Every step she took—the children's rhyme looping between her ears, her parents cheering for her like spectators at Fenway, the shadows cool and leering—she felt less and less like an incoming college student and more like a child toddling to her first day of preschool, lunch box in hand.

It was, she supposed, sidestepping an elongated branch of dark, hard to fault her parents. Brittle of bone and prone to catching cold, she'd cut her teeth on the edge of death well before she could read. She'd slipped away in a hospital bed, lights winking and machinery humming, and resurfaced from the cataleptic dark to find her ears no longer worked. She was left with silence whispering in her head and shadows whispering at her feet and the very distinct feeling that she'd been somehow fractured on the inside.

Every silent day since then, she'd been handled with care.

A glass girl, in a glass menagerie, all the world a whispered hush.

If she was honest with herself, Delaney Meyers-Petrov had never really expected to go to college. Her parents made modest incomes—the kind that kept the lights on, not the kind that paid tuition. Free spirits, they spent their evenings booking spoken-word gigs at local indie venues, their days driving Delaney out to Walden Pond to skip

stones across the water. They didn't put much stock in things like capitalism and folded laundry and formal academia.

Little breakable Delaney hadn't just fallen far from the tree. Her apple had been picked up by a grazing deer, carried over meadow and hummock, and discarded miles away. While her parents eschewed the notion of higher education—*"It's just an expensive piece of paper, Laney; it doesn't define you"*—she wanted nothing more. She wanted the regimen, the freedom, the promise of opportunity.

She wanted the chance to prove she was made of tougher stuff than glass.

She *wanted* to be defined. Not by the silence between her ears or her fear of the dark, but by the sum of her achievements. Not by what she couldn't do, but by what she could.

That was why, the minute she was of age, she'd gone online and registered for the placement scholarship. The applicant exam was an intensive labor, spanning the course of a week. It assessed mental and physical health, personal aptitudes, and, the forms ominously noted, *etcetera*. Her results, once factored, would determine her placement in a field that most closely matched her individual skill set.

The needs-based fellowship came with a single caveat: They'd pay her tuition in full, so long as she agreed to go wherever she was placed.

Her parents had been visibly hesitant, but their abhorrence of discipline meant they wouldn't ever force her hand. "*Lane,*" they'd said, "*if it's a degree you want, there are plenty of online programs with manageable tuitions. Not only that, but they'll be far more accommodating to your needs. There's no bar here. You don't have anything to prove.*"

But Delaney did.

Not to other people, but to herself. She'd been handled with white gloves all her life, kept high on a shelf, and it wouldn't do to sit up there forever, collecting dust. Glass, she'd learned, was terribly easy to crack, but the pressure it could weather was immense. She wanted to parse out her limits, even if doing so earned her a few nicks. She wanted the chance to melt herself down and shape herself into something new.

Someone capable of conquering the world all on her own.

Someone who wasn't eighteen years old and still afraid of the dark.

The first day of the exam, she and three hundred other hopefuls spent the morning locked in the echoing chamber of a public high school gymnasium. She'd felt, as she often did in wide, empty spaces, the soft tiptoe of unease down her spine, the unsettled ruffle of shadows along her periphery.

It was a bad habit—her tendency to personify the dark. To imagine it restless, the way she had when she'd been little and lonely and looking for a friend. To fear the way it drew her eye, the way it pulled at her like a tide. As the proctor rattled off rules she couldn't hear, she'd busied herself with setting her pencils into a neatly sharpened line and done her best not to stare into the gymnasium's murky corners.

The second day of testing, the aspirants had been called one by one into a little wan room by a little wan man, made to sit in a polypropylene chair with the legs gone loose. There, the darkness had pressed cool and close. It fell across her lap in shallow pools of blue. It coiled against her like a happy cat.

Hello, she imagined it said. *Hello, hello.*

Across from her, the interviewer watched her much too closely, firing off a series of seemingly unrelated questions. Delaney fidgeted on

the edge of her seat and did her best to read his lips beneath the wiry fringe of his mustache. She kicked herself for imagining the way the shadows purred.

On the third day, Delaney was swapping out the dull lead of one pencil for the pin-sharp nib of another when the proctor summoned her by name. "*Delaney Meyers-Petrov?*" Several curious heads picked up. "*I'd like to see you in the hall.*" Ears burning, she followed the thin slip of a woman out of the gym and into the menthol-green colonnade of lockers. The slam of the fire doors rattled her teeth.

"*Pack your bag, Ms. Meyers-Petrov,*" the proctor said, without preamble. "*You're done here.*"

The elimination hit like a sucker punch. Delaney wanted to push back. She wanted to resist. But she hadn't been built to cross lines, and so she thanked the proctor and slunk back inside to pack up her things. That afternoon, she'd lain in bed and thought of all the things she might have done wrong. When dusk settled, she'd felt the dark of her room *tsk* reproachfully at her, and a bubble of shame beaded deep inside her chest.

Maybe she'd answered a question wrong.

Maybe they didn't want an applicant who couldn't hear.

Maybe they thought she was a little bit odd, this girl who side-eyed the dark.

And then. *And then.* One day, on a very unremarkable Tuesday morning, she received a letter in the mail. It was late April, the days wet and insipid. She'd huddled by the mailbox, fingers numb, and torn into the seal of the Grants and Scholarships Committee, all hard wax and insignia. The header was embossed in glimmering silver, the paper fine cream-colored card stock.

Ms. Delaney Meyers-Petrov,

Congratulations on a job well done. You are a recipient of our needs-based placement fellowship. Due to your decidedly unique capabilities, the placement committee has determined that your talents would be best utilized in a neo-anthropological field. As such, you have been assigned to Howe University's Godbole School of Neo-Anthropological Studies. The scholarship will be sent directly to the college, indicating that it can be used for tuition, fees, or books.

Your presence is expected at the Godbole building, auditorium B, on the morning of September 1st. More information pertaining to your placement can be accessed on the global student portal. Please see the attached documents for your login information. If you have any questions, feel free to call the student resources department at the number listed below.

At the bottom, the signature of a board member was signed in a looping scrawl. She'd stood there for a long time afterward, rain needling her skin. She'd heard of Godbole. Everyone had. It was a highly prestigious yet controversial program, a magnet for those who dabbled in the occult.

It's all smoke and mirrors, she'd seen someone comment, when a leaked video purported to show a Godbole student slipping between worlds. *Anyone with a laptop can doctor footage. These students are paying into a sham.*

The video looked like something out of *The Twilight Zone*. One instant, the student stood perfectly still and stared behind the camera, waiting for a cue. Then, with a nod, he took a single step. The sky swallowed him up. The air rippled like water in his wake. He didn't reappear.

Unique capabilities, her letter said.

People had used plenty of adjectives to define Delaney Meyers-Petrov in her eighteen silent turns around the sun. Tragic Delaney, who'd fallen too sick too young. Fearful Delaney, who still slept with the lights on. Fragile Delaney, who needed constant coddling.

But capable Delaney—that was something new.

She liked the fit of it, like an unwashed sweater.

And so, on a bluebird day in September, she packed up her things and she went. To conquer the world, and maybe some others. To prove that she could.

She took a breath and she took a step.

And the shadows followed.

Howe University looked like everything Septembers were meant to embody—like bricks and books and new beginnings. It smelled like it, too. Fresh-cut grass and petrichor, coffee grounds and vanillin and the faint, autumnal smack of sour apples.

At the far side of the quad sat the Godbole building. An imposing glass monolith, it sparked like a diamond in the light, a structural incongruity among the neat rows of ivy-clad brick.

The irony didn't escape her. A glass girl, bound for a glass palace.

The chilly cling of early autumn faded away the moment Delaney stepped inside. The foyer was minimalist in design and built for aesthetic. At the room's crux, a colorless floral arrangement of dripping

hyacinths sat atop a sleek marble plinth. At the windows, the sun fell and fell. Each slap of her combat boots across linoleum cracked through the space in a startling eddy of thunder, and she was unsure—as ever—if the sound was magnified only by her cochlear implant, or to everyone in the vicinity.

Fortunately, there appeared to be no one else in the vicinity, only Delaney Meyers-Petrov and endless dazzling white. She wasn't sure if she liked it. The rest of the campus looked like old money and old books, all brick and ivy and nostalgia. But Godbole—Godbole looked like the future. It looked like Januarys, bleak and severe.

She rounded a corner, tailed by the warped slip of her reflection in the glass—high pigtails deepening to a pale periwinkle, black blouse framed by a white baby-doll collar, all punk and pastels. *Loud*, a woman on the T called her outfit once. Loud, to make up for the unassailable quiet. Amid the sterile white of Godbole, she stuck out like a sore thumb.

And she was alone, which meant she was likely late. She hated being late.

Up ahead sat a pair of elevators, one set of doors steadily trundling shut. She caught diminishing sight of a figure within—gray sweater and burgundy tie, the neat gloss of chestnut curls. A single striking eye met hers through the thinning gap.

“Hey,” she called out, breaking into a run. “Could you hold the—”

The doors clicked shut just as she skidded to a stop, her nose inches from the crack.

“Asshole,” she said into the metal panel, and jabbed the button with her thumb. Once, twice, three times for good measure. She stepped

back to wait for the other elevator to make its way down from the fifth floor, conscious of the steady trickle of seconds passing her by.

To her horror, the first elevator ground back open. Inside stood the stranger. He lounged against the wall, hands braced on the rail, the round face of his watch winking in the light. His hooded eyes were the color of coffee, his straight nose framed by pale, prominent cheekbones. His mouth was a dagger, unsmiling. The shadows pressed against him in a way that felt hungry—like they had teeth, and he was something sweet. Like everything about him beckoned the dark.

The stranger's brows drew together at the sight of her. He looked, she thought, surprised.

“Lane,” he said.