



BEHOLDER

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PUSH

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CHAPTER ONE

I close the bathroom door, shutting out the party.

The room smells like the perfume of the trio of girls who were just in here. It's a tiny, beautiful space. The dark green wallpaper rustles with monstera leaves, and a golden faucet gleams in the candlelight.

It's serene. Safe.

I wish I could match it. I often feel this harsh contrast between me and the artful rooms I pass through, working for a designer like Uhler. Someone arranged this space with love and intention. I wish someone would peer into the chaos of my interior and pull me into peaceful composition. It's no wonder the rich enjoy life; they get to live it in such beautiful spaces. Like this penthouse. It's softly lit and artfully decorated and way, way too big for the bachelor who Uhler introduced as the host when we arrived. It's hard to believe anyone lives in so much gorgeous emptiness.

I'm not threatened by the casual grandeur, though. I've faked my way through dozens of these parties before. It's easy. The guests are always the same: brand-new New Yorkers trying out being fascinating, looking for someone to listen to them prove it. As Uhler's personal party date, that person is usually me.

I'm a good listener, they always tell me, which is true. But the actual truth is that I know if I ask people about themselves, they're less likely to ask about me. By the night's end, I know everything about them.

For instance, Hannah Chloe Kaplan, the girl with bleached bangs, thinks she's an empath because she can read "vibes," and for the record mine are immaculate, and she doesn't believe in New Year's resolutions

because they're for weak people who don't believe in spontaneous evolution, whatever that is, and she's upset with her boyfriend because he doesn't flush the toilet all the time, which I agreed sounded like weaponized helplessness of the first degree. All this I learned just by letting her talk, and I don't think she even knows my name.

Athan.

I'm still not ready to head back out there. I flush the toilet with gusto and take my time washing my hands.

Athanasios.

My name means "immortal" in Greek, but it might as well mean "survivor's guilt." In my head, I hear the whole thing spoken in Yiayia's pleading voice. *Athanaaaaasios*. I should go home—this is far too long to be away from an old woman who depends on me—but lately I can't be around her for more than a few minutes a day. Her rituals, her superstitions, her wards against some all-seeing evil eye that's searching, searching, *searching* for what's left of our family. She's gotten so much worse in the past few months.

Look, just look, my mind whispers as I wash my hands, but I keep my eyes off the mirror. Not yet.

How long can I hide in here? I don't want to go back out to the party until that girl has found another person to talk at. There was a cute boy watching me over by the window, but his eyes were shooting daggers. Probably someone I ghosted. Oh well. I *should* look for Uhler, but he never stays at these things long. And besides, I can't keep running to him every time I start to feel lost. His charity won't last forever. I'm not even sure it *is* charity. All these party invitations, all the checks slipped to me so that Yiayia and I can keep up with our monthly rent—it's got to add up to something, right? I'm not eager to find out what.

Look. Just a peek, I urge myself.

It's embarrassing, but I'm building up the courage to look at myself

in the mirror. Most people look at themselves without a second thought, but not me. Of all Yiayia's superstitions, avoiding mirrors is the most important.

Yiayia doesn't want me to end up like her, I think.

Morning to evening, my grandmother clutches a scratched-up hand mirror and prays. Sometimes it's a frantic song, and sometimes it's a quiet mumble I hear through the thin walls of our apartment. For a while we could still go on walks, me leading her with one hand while she used the other to hold the mirror up so she never had to look away. Not anymore. Now she won't leave our apartment. The praying has gone from a few minutes each hour to a constant babble. She even falls asleep with the mirror buried on her chest, clutching it with hands that have gone clammy and stiff since they used to tuck me in. The few times I've tried to slip it away, her grip seizes like a nightmare is blowing through her dreams.

That mirror has her trapped, and I don't need to wonder why. She tells me, in her rare moments of lucidity. *Athanasios!* she'll cry out suddenly, her voice rising like a siren wailing over the din of the city. *Our eyes cast curses!* On and on, her warnings reel with the momentum of a far-off catastrophe rushing toward us. *What we can see, can see us!*

Ever since the fire that took our home and family, she's filled my head with cautions against the evil eye and all the doom its focus brings. *Never let it find you, Athanasios. Promise me you will never look for it.* Greek superstitions, as ancient as the Acropolis. Myths that have turned into a madness I'm afraid I'll inherit.

Dr. Wei says the resentment I sometimes feel toward Yiayia is okay. That it doesn't mean I don't love her, or miss her, or want the old her back. Dr. Wei says that sometimes we self-mythologize to make ourselves big in our own minds, and Yiayia believes her praying is an act of heroic sacrifice. It's called a compulsion. He says that I probably have a

predisposition, but I still have the chance to prove to myself that mirrors can't trap or hurt me. Gently, Dr. Wei has asked if I really believe in evil eyes. In mirrors and their magic.

I said I don't believe in any of it.

But I'm lying.

Because it's not all myths. I've known that since the first time I broke Yiayia's rule, found a mirror at the very back of our family's frame shop, and saw what our eyes could truly do. I'm not sure if the Sight is a superpower. It feels more like a curse I can't control. It happens automatically in any mirror—in anything reflective—when my reflection's gaze meets my own. It makes living in a place like New York City, an entire world gilded in reflective glass and chrome, a hazard. But I've gotten good at dodging myself.

I've experimented here and there when I'm feeling brave, mostly just to prove to myself that I'm not suffering from some contagious delusion. I'm not. The power, or blessing, or curse, is real. But that's all the more reason to fear it. Dr. Wei says my fear enables the mythology, but Dr. Wei can't see what we can see.

I dry my hands on expensive towels, the kind with tassels. I'm done. Nothing else to do now but face my fears.

Look. Just for a moment. Just for a blink.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror.

For the briefest moment before it happens, I'm able to see my reflection. It's like looking at a stranger. Someone else's eyebrows in an unsure furrow, someone else's chestnut curls, someone else's fear clenched in an unfamiliar jaw. Then I look into my own eyes, and the Sight activates.

Time reverses in the mirror, showing me everything it has seen this night. I watch my reflection look away, then reach for the towels. I watch me un-dry my hands, then un-wash them; watch the water flow up into the faucet; watch myself back out of the bathroom and the

girls from before cram inside; watch a cloud of perfume hang in the air over them before sucking back into their little spritzing bottles.

Now that I've finally looked, I'm captivated. The girls gaze at one another in the mirror as they touch up their makeup, but it feels like they're gazing at me. They smile and laugh. They look so close. I put a hand on the glass and tap, like they're in an aquarium.

Something slams into the bathroom door and I jump. The reflection in the mirror lurches with my shock, jumping into the previous day, showing a man on the toilet, scrolling on his phone. I cover my eyes, blushing.

The slam turns into knocking. "Just a minute!" I shout.

I rush to reset the mirror. My mind scrambles, and so do the images in the glass. The edges glow white-hot.

"Stop," I beg the mirror. "Stop. *Please.*"

I shouldn't have looked for so long. I tap my fingertips over my eyebrows, like Yiayia used to do when I was a little kid and had even less control over our family power. If she'd only let me practice, if she'd just told me how . . .

The slam comes again.

Tap tap tap. Stop stop stop.

A scream squeezes through the gap as the door is pushed open. I only just catch it with my foot. The lock must be broken. I peek, and the mirror is back to normal. This time, I avoid my reflection as I swipe my phone from the counter, put on a smile, and swing the door all the way open.

"Sorry—" I start, but no one is there.

The hallway is empty. The party has gone silent. I turn toward the living room, expecting to find it suddenly vacated, but everyone is still there. Just standing still, like statues. Is it a game? Or a prank? A surprise, maybe? But they aren't huddled in gleeful anticipation, waiting for a person to walk through so they can explode with *Surprise! Happy*

birthday! They look scared. Everyone is facing the walls. Hannah Chloe Kaplan, the girl who said she was an empath, notices me standing in the doorway. Tears are gushing from her unblinking eyes, dragging dark stripes of mascara to her chin.

“Help me,” she whispers. Her eyes rise to the wall behind me.

I turn, but before I can see what she’s looking at, a shadow cuts through the crowd and rams into me, knocking my phone from my hand. It’s a person. They grab me around the waist, driving me backward until I stumble back into the bathroom.

I land on my ass, swearing.

“Hey, what the f—”

The person—the boy I saw earlier, the one watching me from the window—cuts me off. “Don’t open this door. If you don’t open it, they won’t see it. I’ll come back for you when it’s safe.”

He slams the door in my face, and I’m left with just the flash of an impression. I recognize him now as one of Uhler’s many interns. I remember him because he always wears that bandanna knotted around his neck. Orange, black, and white, like a monarch butterfly’s wings. I caught those colors now. I’m sure it was the same guy.

But . . . what the fuck?

I race to open the door, but hesitate. What did he mean? *I’ll come back for you when it’s safe.*

It’s the tiniest pause, but in that time something *unleashes* beyond the bathroom door. It shakes on its hinges as screams flood the penthouse. High, keening cries. Voices pushed to their limits, cracking, breaking, wrenching out of bodies thrown into violent motion.

It’s the other party guests, but how could people sound like that? It sounds evil. Rotten. I back away from the door, expecting something foul to gush from under it.

The screams go on.

And on.

And on.

For minutes.

For an hour.

I press to the back wall and stare at the door, imagining myself opening it and running, imagining my phone somewhere on the floor where I dropped it. Could I grab it? Dial 911? Call Uhler, or even Yiayia? Pointless visions. I'm too much of a coward to go for it. Whatever evil Yiayia warned me against, it's found me. I looked into the mirror for too long, and it looked back. I don't know what's happening, only that I deserve it. I ball myself up next to the toilet and stifle my sobs, afraid they'll hear me.

The screaming finally resolves into words. Pleading words. The people scream *Can anyone hear us?* They start to bicker, and it turns into an argument. But at least they sound human now. I nearly work up the courage to swing open the door and try to help, but that's when the fighting breaks out.

Crashing. Breaking. Agonizing moans. I don't know how long this goes on for. An hour? Hours? Time frays and unravels as the sounds of violence shred through the thin walls hiding me.

Then someone knocks.

A very polite knock.

So polite, I nearly shout "Occupied!" Like I would in the single-person bathroom of a crowded restaurant. But the memory of the boy with the butterfly bandanna stops me.

He said they couldn't see the door.

I stay quiet. The knocking moves around, like someone is trying to find the hollow space behind a wall. I creep to the door and just barely make out whispering. It's Hannah! The empath. Was the boy right? Can she not see the bathroom's entrance?

She knocks and knocks, whispering, “*Please God please God please God don’t let me die in here.*”

She’s not looking for a way into the bathroom. She’s looking for a way *out* of wherever she is.

I’m scared. I’m tired. But hearing her plead like that . . . it awakens something in me. I turn off the lights so I can see her walking through the glowing band at the door’s bottom edge. The next time her knocking takes her toward me, I give a gentle knock back, just for her to hear.

She goes quiet. I can see her shuffling back and forth.

I knock again. If I can draw her close, I can open the door just enough to squeeze her in, then shut it again. Then she’ll be safe, too. She’ll have a phone. We can call for help.

Her knocks are soft. Questioning. She’s close now. I can hear her breathing.

I knock back one more time.

She shouts, right behind the door, “HERE! HE’S IN HERE!”

All at once the bathroom vibrates as an entire crowd stampedes down the hall, ramming against the walls with terrifying speed. People crawl over one another to get at the door. I fling myself against it, holding it shut, but they don’t even turn the knob. They just pound their fists, desperate and furious. Their cries layer into a messy chant.

Come out, come out, little Athanasios!

The lights flicker. The mirror flickers, too, like it’s responding to the thing in the hall. Not the people, but the *thing* that’s taken hold of them. The thing that is searching for me.

Then it all goes wrong for Hannah Chloe Kaplan. Within the chaos, I hear her screaming, *Back off! Hey! Stop! You’re hurting me!* Her voice slides down to the bottom of the door as the crowd begins to crush

her. Her cries turn strangled and then I hear a crack. Then another. Meaty snaps of bones. Bloody, bent fingers thrust beneath the door—the only visual evidence I get. They twitch as the chaos outside pulverizes her.

Then it all goes still.

It's still for minutes. Maybe an hour. I can't look away from the fingers, and the blood drying on shattered nails. Then, with a *schwoop*, the hand pulls away. Gone. I blink, realizing that the light from the hall has turned from gold to white.

It's morning.

I get up slowly.

I crawl to the door, bending as close to the bloody gap at the bottom as I dare. I listen. I can hear the far-off sound of a siren. Traffic. New York, reappearing on the other side of whatever hell the penthouse vanished into for the past five hours.

It's quiet. It's so quiet now. Is it finally over? Has the eye finally turned elsewhere?

I close my eyes as I stand, afraid to even glance in the mirror. My hand finds the doorknob, shaking as it twists.

I open the door and my eyes at the same time.