

Nova Graves

by

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Meliora Sheriff or Outlaw, Pardner?

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The Wastelands

The wind whipped and danced around a dark figure making its way through the desert. The deafening buzz of the raging sandstorm clouded their senses. The force of billowing dust and air current made each thundering step forward feel like they were dragging not only one horse alongside them, but ten.

Even with a heavy mask covering the figure's face, it was difficult to breathe through the fine grains. While the coarse feeling of gritty sand was pushed into their eyes making their vision blurry, they were still able to catch glimpses of the violent swirling beauty surrounding them.

They could watch the smooth and tranquil movements of the wind, and view a lone and silent breeze as it plucked small groups of grains from the neighboring dunes and sailed them through the sky. Only to watch that breeze shortly be devoured and churned by an enormous and far more harsh gust of wind, then added to the looming spiral of hostile sand flying in every which direction.

The dark figure refocused their attention to the path ahead, being very careful to not misstep and lead themselves and the horse onto a sand slope. A shiver ran through their frame; whether from the thought of slipping on a mound or from the ever present and freezing undercurrent, they could not know. They gripped the horse's reins tighter to their chest and pulled a little more firmly.

When the pull of wind and tightening of air in their lungs became too dangerous, figure and steed drudged their way through a rock path to the nearby slot canyon to wait it out.

When they entered the narrow red sandstone formation, the lack of light grew more and more apparent, save for the solitary beam of sunlight shining through the open roof at just the right angle. They inched closer to the limited light, which happened to be in the open section of the gorge.

The sand floor below was just soft enough to take a rest on, so they collapsed down for the first time in hours. After squinting a bit through the darkness to make sure there were no other openings they released the horse's reins.

With nothing to do but sit patiently until the storm lightened, and listen as the overflowing grains trickled down the rocks from outside, the shadowed figure's eyes took the liberty to travel along the slot canyon's walls.

They followed the twisted contours of the stone ridges and pillars that had been formed from years and years of the floods and rains that came early in the blistering summertime.

Fortunately, the rainy season had just passed, and the canyon was dry. In fact, the storm had been a major surprise for the desert traveler .

From the light, the stone walls almost looked as if they were dancing along to the flickering song of the sandstorm above, and the shadowy figure found themselves drifting off to the constant hum of screaming wind gods outside.

A silhouette rose to stillness and sunlight. It was the type of noiselessness one could only discover after the world had been raging in one way or another; like the quiet calm before and after a tremendous hurricane hits.

The pair of travelers carefully crept out of the canyon. The vast and silent landscape outside had not been altered by the storm at all. Someone might even begin to believe they had dreamt up the disturbance if they stared long enough.

After pulling their body up onto the horse, the figure directed the creature towards the top edges of the canyon. Each step and trot back into the open desert shone more light on the face of the shadowy sandstorm survivor. And as the figure reached the towering vantage point they were searching for, the sun and its rays exposed the figure to the deadlands below.

The traveler had long jet black hair that was tied back. A braid twisted past her neck and fell far down, near her waist. She was a stark contrast to the pale side of the desert in her dark boots, leather gloves, sharp black Stetson, and coal-colored bandana shrouding her face. Her tan cowhide and leather patched cloth that draped similar to a skirt, rested just below her holster, and colt revolver. And her pitch-black shirt and pants were covered up by her slightly grimy charcoal-brown leather duster.

It didn't take much time for her to climb down the canyon with her steed and cross back into the empty desert. She planned to make up for the time lost during the storm and did not stop until she reached what looked like the remnants of an ancient forest. The desert floor's pale and gritty color opposed the torched skeletons of trees that curved in front of the traveler. The trees had dried out long ago, a result of the town's mining of resources and minerals in the area.

With no shade or clouds nearby, the heat was finally getting to her. The girl begrudgingly reached for her steel canteen in the travel pack. She slid to the ground and proceeded to spill the rest in a stream in front of her horse. It was more than enough rest to make it home.

The Iron City

Outside the city walls, the typically harsh and blinding red glow of Sidero was dulled. With the afternoon light bleaching the streets, the industrial trade city looked far softer than it did in the night. The brightened scene and sparse population present made it look almost welcoming to visitors, albeit a bit dirty. *It's like a stage play, how sickening.*

When I reached the inner gate of the city, I dismounted Onyx, and gathered his reins. It was easier to be on guard while walking beside him.

The uneventful midday picture of the town was a complete front. All it took was a glance in the wrong direction towards a bounty hunter, gunslinger, or mercenary and the place was up in arms.

The nighttime was even worse. Screams, shouts, and shots were the oil that kept all the fires blazing in the air, but it never stopped people from flooding the streets to pay a call to the midnight market and saloons.

In recent years Sidero had become the central train station and a bustling trade city. This was in no small part to Orson Graves. Graves and his gang practically built the city from the ground up.

He bargained for the station to be built there, and kept business streaming into the city with a company of gunslingers for hire. They could be sent to protect shipments, take out any problem, and run pretty much any mission involving fisticuffs and pistols. And they'd gained even more of a reputation when I'd become old enough to run commissions on my own.

As Onyx and I strode past one of the many open bars in the city, I noticed some of Graves' more callous and impudent goons taking up residence. They were drowning in the empty glass mugs surrounding them. I could only hope they'd be too inebriated to focus on me.

Unfortunately, my Stetson's cloaking abilities didn't work that well.

"Nova!" I kept pulling Onyx forward.

"Nova Graves."

The ice ridden glare hadn't scared them off yet, which meant they were truly more birdbrained than I'd given them credit for.

The rest of the bar was rightfully silent. The lone bartender began pulling the glasses off the counter one-by-one. An unnecessary precaution, since I didn't have time for a full out brawl today.

The smug looking and slightly shorter of the low-class bounty hunters was the first to approach, his duster dragging across the wooden floor boards and onto the dusty main road. Two other equally smug men were lugging their feet my way too.

Onyx huffed and pulled me back. I turned slowly towards him. "Fine, I'll only rough them up a little bit," I whispered.

"Now, I heard that you've been out on a job for a while, and a little bird told me you haven't collected the reward yet," the short one practically giggled.

I was definitely right about the birdbrain bit.

One of the others took my silence as a golden opportunity to lay out very explicitly that if I were gone they'd be able to turn in the reward for themselves.

I honestly didn't have the heart to tell them how horribly thought out this plan was, but I'd give them points for absolute gall. I wasn't quite sure how long I needed to listen to their detailed plan of my demise.

The shorter one, who was truly beginning to get on my nerves at this point, cut the other one off. "What are we waiting for? There are three of us, and she's only a young girl."

He began to raise his gun, but a resounding bang split the air. A scream echoed as the man clutched his bleeding palm in his other hand.

The smoke from my gun was still rising, but I decided to put it back in the holster anyway. Onyx pulled me again. He was right, it was definitely getting late.

All the men in Sidero were the same, all talk. Only Graves' personal unit of gunslingers were decent shots.

I left the bounty hunters on the dirt road, I didn't see the need to take out all of them, what if the gang needed extra hands at some point.

If it weren't for Graves, I would have left this sad excuse for a town years ago, but he still needed me.

The Graves house wasn't like the others on the outskirts of Sidero. It didn't have a false front reaching towards the sky to project a fabricated sense of wealth to outsiders, it really did reach towards the sky. It was a symbol of Sidero with its towering iron grates, red bricks, and tarred timber sidings.

There were mercenaries constantly walking the grounds of the house, but none of them would ever dare question me entering.

I left Onyx with the other horses at the stable, and silently hoped he would opt to not start trouble with the other stallions again.

The inside of Graves house was far more embracing and gentle looking than it was on the outside, or at least it was to me. I'd spent most of my childhood here. I had even helped Graves pick the brightly colored wallpaper in each room.

He'd brought me home when I was seven years old, despite my gloomy disposition. He rescued me. Plucked me off those dark Sidero streets.

Three years before he found me, my parents had died. Caught in the crossfire of some late-night gunfight. After that, I'd lived day to day. No one to rely on, nowhere to go. So I grew up, the only way I knew how. I learned to fight, and fight dirty, like all the adults in this town.

I knew the streets well. I knew how to stay out of trouble and when trouble came knocking, I was vicious. It was easy to earn money in the fighting rings and even easier to pick up the smaller bounties on the hunter boards that only required tracking.

I had hated guns since they had taken my parents from me, but I began practicing with a revolver after I was almost caught and shot myself. But I vowed to never let someone get caught in my crossfire. So every single day I trained. I collected old tin sheets and cans as my makeshift target range, and soon, I was able to never miss any shot.

I began taking rewards from the Graves gang. On one of my commissions the "infamous" Orson Graves was there to hand out the reward. When he saw me show up for the pay, he let me know just how perturbed he was that a seven year old had been bringing in targets.

Graves was the only person who had ever tried to get to know me. He kept showing up to the streets I frequented. Always bringing things with, one day it would be biscuits, the next, a little wooden horse. It was small, but I'd never had someone look out for me before, let alone see me as an actual child.

When he asked if he could adopt me, I didn't believe it would last. But it did. He took me in, built us a house, taught me, and gave me my childhood back.

Graves, the hypocrite that he was, wouldn't let me go out for rewards anymore, well he tried at least. I didn't get the title of *deadliest shot in Sidero* and the highest count of captured outlaws by staying at home.

"Nova. Is that you?" Graves questioned from down the hall.

I tried to silence my steps even more than before, which to any normal pair of ears, resembled the volume of a cloud passing in the sky, but Graves still noticed as I crept up behind his desk. Sadly, there was no chance of him getting spooked enough to spill his scalding earl gray tea.

"What took you so long?" He interrogated, while raising a single eyebrow high up on his forehead. "Pleasure to see you too dad," I voiced with cheek. The eyebrow went higher. "Sandstorm, had to wait it out in the canyon three miles west of Chalko." I quickly remarked. Now his eyes were widening too.

"It's fine, I'm here aren't I?" If anyone else saw the glare sent my way, they would never question that we were family. "How's Onyx?" He asked with a lighter tone. The fiery horse he presented me with when I was fourteen never failed to bring a smile to both of our faces. "Same as ever, still getting me into trouble."

"You two were made for each other." He replied. "How's Sora doing? And Marius?" I asked. "Both are fine. Now, how did the trip go?" Back to business then.

"I took care of it. The bandits in Chalko pass won't be stopping any more shipments." I reported.

"Good, I'm glad I sent you instead of Marius this time." Graves gave a look. "Yes, as much as I love his enthusiasm and dedication, he would have ended up blowing the whole pass up." I responded with an equally concerned look.

"Nova, I hate doing this to you since you just got back home, but for the same reason, I think it would be best to send you out for this. I have a delicate matter and I need results to be

secured. I can't trust any of the others with this. Do you understand?" His mood felt oddly heavy and now that I was really examining it, his eyes looked far more tired than usual.

"Of course Graves. If anyone can handle it, I can." I made sure to emphasize his title, he needed to know I was taking this seriously. "What's the time frame and objective on this?"

"You've heard of Ashena?"

"The ancient city? Near Cavallo Bend? "

With a nod and smile he continued. "You're to bring no one, only the villagers can know, I don't want anyone getting it before us. I need you to approach them with an offer. That land is going to be used for the new railway and town we're planning to build. The capital city has agreed to fund our project if we acquire the area. They think having a "natural wonder" like the canyon river in Cavallo Bend and a historic site, namely the Ashena dwellings, nearby will draw in more people. They're putting a lot of pressure on me to acquire it. Go find Yarrow, the head of the city and get her to sell the land to us if you can."

"We need this expansion Nova. The more we keep updating the city and adding land the sooner it will improve life for those kids on Sidero's streets."

"Where will the villagers in Ashena go?" I said neutrally, feeling a bit disquieted, but trying to keep it out of my voice. "I'm sure they'll move into Cavallo town, and any who don't want to are welcome in Sidero." He assured me.

“I’ll leave in a few hours then,” I affirmed. “Then I will leave you to pack, do stop by to visit Marius and Sora, they’ve been asking after you the whole week.” He informed me as he picked up his now cool tea once again.

Just as he suggested, I went to visit my crew. Marius wasn't in his apartment in the Graves House's outer buildings, so I decided to check the community hall. My boots tapped on the graveled path as I moved closer to the sound of rowdy mercenaries gathered together.

Tucked in a lone corner of the dining hall was the entirety of my backup team. Marius was looking pompous as ever with his slicked backed golden locks, and bushy eyed Sora looked like she was desperately trying to avoid him.

"Marius, leave her alone for goodness sake." I asserted, while popping up behind him. His cocky and spooked smirk turned into a smile, which was returned with a light smack to his head.

“I didn’t know you’d come back today!” Sora exclaimed while jumping at me with a hug. I squeezed back, “I only just got here a few hours ago, and I’ll be headed out again later tonight.”

“Well, that’s a positively charming way for Graves to welcome you back now isn’t it, ” cut in Marius. The haughty smirk was back. “You know he’s just trying to keep this place running, Marius, no need to be so brash. I should be back by the end of the week.” The

disappointment on both their faces was so palpable we burst out laughing. I really had missed them.

“I’ve got to start packing, but I’ll see you both soon, I promise, and I’ll make sure to pass up the next job.” I declared. Sora was quick to coerce me into another brief hug before I departed. “Be safe.”

After a well needed wash, I loaded my travel pack up. I never brought much with me, so I was able to get on the road before the sunset.

Wild West

With Onyx having been well rested and full of his usual fire, we made more than half the journey by nightfall. The wind whipped in both of our hair and as we raced forward the breeze became solid. It resisted and pushed us back, but that only incited us to go even further.

The sand and starry sky were far calmer on this trip, so I was able to view the open range with more ease. The bright setting purples, pinks, and oranges in the sky lit up everything we passed. Onyx particularly enjoyed the field of sage he glided through.

While my personal favorite was the vast palm sculpture rising from the depths of the sand that had always inhabited the desert. It almost looked as if it was reaching for the moon. The statue had been left here long ago by some ancient civilization.

We finally slowed when I spotted a stationary chuckwagon with cattle surrounding it. I hadn't planned on stopping for food, but the scent of charred beans wafting around and the fact that no one else besides the cook was there, made it hard to pass up.

I'd never been fond of the stews that were customary on the sand highway. I did, however, love the different assortment of beans that were found practically everywhere.

I handed the chuckwagon cookie his payment and gorged myself on bean soup, biscuits, and dried fruit, before setting up my camp. Which was otherwise known as a solitary blanket that covered both horse and rider. As I rested up against Onyx, the crackling heat from the fire and soft glow of the flames made it easy to relax till morning.

When the sun rose the next day, the cookie, professional man that he was, had breakfast ready. As I ate my grits with more biscuits, I watched him make the coffee. In a boiling cast iron pot of water, he pitched a handful of roasted Arbuckle beans.

By the time he finished, I'd packed up, and threw my lunch in the sack. I gulped the coffee down quickly, said my thanks, and galloped away as fast I could. I didn't want to be caught by any of the stray cowboys or gunslingers drawn in by the smell of the roasting coffee.

Ashena

As I neared the outlook to Cavallo Bend, the sun had reached a peak in the sky. I'd heard about the bend before, but I never would have imagined the pure grandeur of it.

In the center of the emerging limestone canyon, stood a colossal boulder, in between each of the rock walls was a circular river, colored cerulean. The river banks were dusted in a thin viridescent sprinkle, and there were clumps of spiny Agave, rosy Sclerocactus, and a variety of wildflowers growing.

Cavallo looked only half as old as I imagined Ashena to be. The city's backdrop was an enormous dune, and the buildings themselves were made up of tiny limestone bricks that formed miniature desert castle structures.

Other than a few odd glances in my direction from the residents, I traveled past the city without a holdup. Onyx and I carried on through the sand, heading southeast for a few miles.

As we advanced further the sand got less dry and compact, vegetation looked more at home here. Soon we had to weave between clusters of yellow and green barbed shrubbery.

A prominent mountain ridge and rocky landscape surfaced as we got closer. And there in the middle of the desert was an oasis. Ashena looked like a mirage with the luscious emerald plants encompassing every inch of it.

Some of the houses were constructed near the desert lake, while the other dwellings were carved into the mountain itself, closer to the waterfall.

One particular building was fashioned with different levels leading down like a set of stairs, the large arch windows that graced the walls, were covered up by red patterned tile.

Everywhere I looked, there was a bright moss-like plant growing in strange formations, and attaching itself to every surface. It made Ashena appear to be a living breathing creature, kindred to its inhabitants fluttering and drifting about.

The first inhabitant to approach was a bouncy and beaming young child who looked to be around twelve.

"Ooo a visitor!" The child proclaimed.

"I'm Lantana, who are you? Are you here to trade for something? I can show you the way if you want. Or not. But I am the best guide here, so I'd take up my offer. You're not one of those cowboys from Cavallo are you? Cause then I don't think I'd want to show you around as much." Lantana gasped without a single breath.

I was too preoccupied with holding my laughter in to respond to the kid, before another person joined us. "Is she bothering you?" An extremely elegant and soft looking woman asked in a defensive manner. "I'm not bothering her Hosta, how could you possibly say that?!" She declared vigorously, while turning her head in a questioning look that looked akin to an insulted puppy.

I coughed a bit to push the laughter bubbling up even further down. "Well fortunately I'm not from Cavallo. I will however need some help in finding Yarrow. I understand she's the head here?"

"Yup she sure is, and Yarrow is Hosta's mother too." Lantana said with extreme pride. Before the young girl could start again, Hosta cut her off. "Why are you looking for her?" She inquired. With a look of slight distrust she glanced at my revolver, then pulled her pale blue sweater tighter to her chest.

"I'm delivering a message from the Graves House in Sidero, they have an offer for her in regards to land." I covered my revolver with my duster in an attempt to make her comfortable again.

"Well I'm sure she'll decline if it's anything to do with giving up our homeland, but you're welcome to stay here until she comes back from her trip to the capital for supplies and ask, " she said with a bit more ease.

It wasn't great news for Graves House, but I wasn't going to give up yet. "Thank you miss. Are there any inns or taverns that have room nearby? Or a stable?" I asked while nodding to Onyx.

"We don't get enough travelers for that, but my family does have extra rooms for any visitors. As for the horse, let him roam the city, we don't usually confine our animals up in any pens or sheds." Hosta smiled.

Lantana, sensing a lighter tone, jumped in. "I'll take... you!" She seized my arm and tugged me towards the building with the red windows. "What's your name anyway?" She questioned.

"Nova."

The inside of the residence was warmer and cozier than I expected the side of a mountain to be. The blankets and mats coating the stone floor were a kaleidoscope of varying colors and the walls with built-in-benches had stiff pillows lined up on them.

Then I noticed that even within the house walls, the moss-like plant was growing. It climbed up walls in peculiar shapes and was left in little fluffy blobs around the room. Lantana caught me gawking. "It's called Fyto. It grows just about everywhere in Ashena."

"Why don't you keep the... Fyto outside?" I asked slightly puzzled. She gave the kind of eyeroll and scrutinizing smirk that only blunt children could effectively give, it said, *you're really not that bright.*

"Why would we do that?" She said, perplexed.

I barely managed to constrain my retort, but clenching my jaw seemed to be the best option.

When she showed me the room I was staying in , I saw that it too was padded with the stuff, but resting on top was an expertly crafted cerise sleeping mat.

Two heads popped in through the doorway. Not so subtly trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on in the room.

"Nova, meet Vinca and Kedros." Lantana pointed first towards a black haired girl around my age, who she introduced as her sister and explained that she was training as Yarrow's apprentice. She didn't get to what kind of apprentice before she pointed to the other bobbing head in the doorway, a boy who looked to be slightly older and apparently was Yarrow's son.

"Hosta says it's time for dinner." Vinca was the first to emerge from behind the arched frame. I dropped my Stetson and Colt on the mat and followed them to the kitchen.

The rest of the night breezed by. We sat together eating some of the oddest looking fish I'd ever seen. It was nice to be around people who weren't trying to shoot you all the time. While we ate, I asked about Ashena and in return, I shared stories from my many bounty hunting jobs.

Just as Hosta had foretold, Yarrow returned. She had come in the night, the gentle stomping of her horse had woken me from the soft mat. At first light, I requested a meeting.

Yarrow, on first inspection, looked just like her kids, but when you got near, she was far shorter. I almost couldn't tell though, with how she held herself. Her round face was deprived of Hosta's shy distrust, and unlike Kedros, her eyes revealed a striking confidence. "Hosta tells me you've brought an offer," said Yarrow.

I explained all of the development plans Graves had for the town. I talked about the relocation, and the amount offered, which was no small sum since it was funds from the capital.

By the end of our talk I could tell Graves was not going to be happy with my results, he'd have to come himself. Yarrow was as sturdy as a willow tree with its roots sunk deep in the ground, there'd be no moving Ashena's people. So I decided to head back to Sidero as soon as the afternoon sun cooled down.

Cavallo Bend & Other Watering Holes

It took me some time to locate Onyx who was hidden in a patch of Fyto. I had just tugged him out of the bush when a thunderous bang crackled in the air. Yelling followed soon after.

It took me a moment to sift through the shuffling people to get to the action. That's when I saw tan dusters covering yoke shirts, dripped with fringe. *Cowboys. Just great.*

I stood still, waiting to hear just exactly what they wanted. It wouldn't be wise to bring a revolver out too soon. One particularly overbearing cowboy in mustard yoke stepped forward and delivered just what I wanted.

"The people of Cavallo are sick and tired of you keeping what they need all to yourself. No more will they have to ration and preserve water while Ashena lives with lakes and natural streams at their bedside. So they've sent us to set it right." The cowboy practically shouted.

The dozen or so cowboys behind him began to grab everyone nearby. The captured villagers of Ashena struggled against the grips of the men to no avail. "Either desert your dwellings or surrender your water to Cavallo. If not they all die." Another cowboy contributed.

I slipped to the front of the crowd and surveyed the situation. In one of the men's arms was Lantana. *Well he's not making it out alive.* They looked to be amateurs at best, I'd just have to be careful that none of the hostages were shot as I moved.

I slowly raised my hand up in front of me. I inhaled and shut my eyes, but right as I was about to pull the trigger, I swerved. Someone had been behind me, and now my barrel was aimed directly at their chest.

I almost dropped my revolver like it was a scalding mug of coffee, when I stared at golden locks and a hand gesturing for me to quiet myself. He pointed behind me, and I didn't give myself time to question why Marius and Sora were standing all the way in Ashena beside me.

We all locked eyes for a second, then the three of us turned in unison. Four shots fired from each of our guns right after the other. Every single cowboy dropped to the ground, and the hostages began screaming.

I fired once more and the one in mustard clutched his side, blood pooling around him. I quickened my steps and moved toward Lantana, pulling her away from the motionless body that had just tried to kill her.

I crouched down in front of her, prompting her to drop down too. "I know you're scared Lantana, but it's going to be okay. Your friends and family are safe, those men can't touch you anymore. I'm sorry we had to shoot them over you. Did he hurt you anywhere?" I tried to steady her a bit.

"No. I.. I'm not hurt. You were the one who shot them?" she managed to get out. I let the pang of guilt and shame of what I'd done sink for the moment, it was more important to make sure she was okay than to address how she viewed me. "Yes." I said calmly.

"Would you like me to take you to someone else right now?"

When she nodded, I scanned the crowd for Vinca, but I only found Kedros. I lifted her gently and I left her with him for the time being.

I barely had to turn before I knocked into Sora and Marius.

"How.. why? Why are you here?" I asked, still a bit stunned.

"Does it matter why? We're here now," Marius proclaimed with his trademark smirk.

Sora smacked him lightly. “Marius heard some rumbles about discourse in Cavallo, so we thought you could use the backup. Turns out we were just in time.” She said brightly.

We didn’t get a chance to finish talking, because Yarrow marched up to our group. “Thank you.” Her usually unaffected attitude sounded strangely soft and vulnerable. “Thank you for saving our families.” It came out more choked up than she meant it to.

Sora, Marius, and I decided to take care of the bodies and let the others comfort each other. It was so different from Sidero. In the Iron city not even a young child would be as shocked as the Ashenians were. There was something calming about the fact that this place had remained undisturbed till that isolated dispute.

The Earth Below

The evening held a disquieting silence around it, but as more and more people went to sleep, the tranquil air of Ashena mended itself.

Sora was sharing my room with me for the night, and caught me up with everything happening in the Graves House. When Kedros came knocking on our door to tell us it was time to quiet down, she instead moved on to reading one of her novels and soon became absorbed in it.

I pulled my revolver from its resting place beside the mat, and ran my fingers along the barrel. Even though we had saved lives, I couldn’t forget the look on Lantana’s face when she asked if I had shot them, out of my head. I had taken lives too. So many. Too many.

I shoved the gun under a pillow and away from my line of sight. Sora glanced up at me with a sort of sorrowful smile, as if she knew my thoughts. That's when Yarrow decided to barge in. I was surprised she was awake at such an hour.

And I was even more flabbergasted when she requested that I accompany her out of my warm room into the dark midnight air. I plucked my duster up and followed.

I wouldn't have guessed we'd walk to the waterfall, but then again I was clueless as to what she wanted from me. At least the sound was soothing, and the subtle glow from the Fyto erased the pitch black sky. I watched as the curtain of water poured down between the sheets of rocks in a never ending loop. Yarrow didn't speak for a while, almost as if she were contemplating.

When she did decide to address my presence again, she first inspected our surroundings. "Nova, I've come to realize something today. As much as I wish to be able to protect Ashena with my own two hands, I can't shoulder it alone." Yarrow gripped her forehead as she spoke.

"I've done what I could to keep the city and people harmonious with nature. And I have always encouraged peace over the violence that has swept like a fever over the other cities. But I neglected our safety. I've left us unprotected for too long. Today we were defenseless, and if you had not been there, lives would have been lost. I want you to be the one to guard us. The people here like you. I've come to like you. And even Ashena itself likes you." Suddenly she began walking ahead, not even checking if I was following.

Then she wandered straight into the water.

After a brief period of being startled. I rushed after her, worried she might have abruptly become unhinged during our talk.

I tried calling out, but she just kept walking. So I jumped in with her. Shock immediately hit my system as the cold water encircled me in its ripples, but I pushed forward and trailed after. I thought she had gone under when she was no longer in my view, but then I registered that she had crossed to the other side of the waterfall.

I plunged onward and quivered as the cascading shower struck my head. Once I wiped the droplets out of my eyes my whole being entered a bewildered state.

Before me, to my absolute wonderment, settled deep inside the cave, was the most breathtaking landscape I had ever seen in my life.

From floor to ceiling Fyto blanketed every inch of the space, making the cavern glow a blazing emerald color. And floating in the air above me were turtle-like animals, but sprouting from their iridescent shells were a majestic assortment of trees, ranging from Dragonbloods to Wisterias.

I was shoved back and knocked into the pool at my feet as a flickering ball of light zoomed at my face. I grew more and more alarmed as the wisp creature began flashing different colors.

Everywhere I turned there was some type of being that defied my imagination even more than the last. And in the center of it all stood Yarrow.

“This is what we’ve been safeguarding in Ashena while we were leaving ourselves vulnerable. This is why I cannot sell the land to Sidero, if we were to destroy the home these spirits lived in, they would no longer be peaceful. The desert has already started decaying in some places due to their absence.” She moved her stout frame closer to me.

“I need to know if you would risk your life for the people of Ashena again, just like you did today. If you are willing to protect us?”

I honestly still wasn’t sure if any of this was real or not, but I thought about the question regardless. *Was I willing to die for the people here? Had I grown to care for them the way I did Graves, Marius, and Sora?*

I wasn’t sure if I cared for them in the same way, but I was willing to protect if it came down to it. When I let Yarrow know as much, she nodded. It seemed to be good enough for her now.

I walked back to my room in a dazed stupor, barely managing to tread lightly so I wouldn’t wake anyone.

Stolen From the Garden

The morning after visiting the cave had left me with a buzz. The smile on my face must have been odd, cause when Sora saw me she scrunched her face in amusement. I thought about telling her, but decided waiting couldn’t hurt.

Together we walked to Marius' room to gather for breakfast. But when we found him, he was sporting a grave look that seemed outlandish on his cocky face.

"Good you're both here," he started.

"What happened Marius?" Sora inquired.

"Riders arrived early this morning, they brought a word from Graves." He said as he led us out to the messengers. There were four riders out front, which seemed like overkill for a communications trip. One rider handed a scarlett envelope over to me, the black wax-seal donned the mark Graves had used since he first took over the gang in Sidero.

My brow became more furrowed the further I read. He wanted us to take Ashena by force, if they hadn't already agreed to sell. With orders to kill Yarrow. It didn't seem like him at all.

He was acting like the tycoons he'd always hated from the neighboring cities. "There's no way I can go through with these orders. I was sent to make a business proposition, not force them off their land unwillingly." I declared, getting more and more agitated by the minute at the request.

Marius rose up along with me. "So you won't do it?" He asked gravely.

"Of course not," I retorted.

Without any warning, two of the riders lunged for my arms, restraining all my movements. In mere seconds Sora was beside me and howling crude remarks at the men, but the other two grabbed her.

Our shouts had drawn a crowd from inside the house. Yarrow came barrelling out. She began moving towards us, but before she could take another step a shot was fired. I watched in horror as she started bleeding from the chest. I ripped at the arms holding me, but I couldn't break the grip.

"I'm sorry Nova, he said at any cost." Marius' face looked full of regret as he held a chloroform coated cloth up to my face. He didn't lighten the pressure of it against me until my vision blacked out.