

The following is a free preview of the first chapter
of the young adult novel **Twixt** by Sarah Diemer.

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Chapter One: Asleep

I open my eyes.

The sky is dirty red, like drying blood. I sit up fast, heart pounding, fingers curling into the brittle leaves beneath my palms, the mud sucking me under a little more. I'm dripping, shaking. The whisper of the stream beside me, water rushing under the hole in the ice, sounds like voices.

I lift up my hands, stare down at them. For a moment, I marvel: are *these* my hands? They're bloody, my fingers. And blue. My dress is black, with more holes than fabric. The laces on my boots are frozen solid, and as I struggle to get up, turn over, kneel on the bank of the stream, blood drips from my face, plunking hollowly upon the snowy mud beneath me.

A shadow—to my right. I turn, but I'm not fast enough. Something filthy and covered in furs is scrabbling away, leaving wet footprints upon the stone of the escarpment that huddles over this little valley and spit of stream. Its dripping bulk is familiar to me, but it crawls too quickly over the edge and is lost, hidden amongst the skeletal trees beyond, branches scraping together.

I'm shaking so hard my hands blur.

I reach up, brush a knuckle over my lips, smearing my mouth with blood. I creep forward and dunk my hands beneath the hole in the ice, let the freezing water sweep over my skin, dragging at my fingers like it wants to take me down and in, devour me.

"Hello?"

I scramble back from the edge of the stream, turn so fast that the world spins, and there, behind me, is a girl, a young woman. Pale and thin and stark, she stares down at me. Her dirty blonde hair is hacked short, feathering around her ears like bird down. She's wearing a shabby brown coat, two sizes too big, tied around her middle with sawn rope. Her face is grubby, but her brown eyes flash as she squats beside me, and though fear runs through me like blood, I'm not afraid of *her*.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers, looking me over, reaching out a hand toward me. I flinch away, and she frowns, leans back. "What are you doing here?" she repeats then, voice soft, gentle, curving toward me like a beckoning finger. "It's almost sunset."

"I don't..." I gasp, start. That voice. That was my voice? I stare down at my hands, white and blue with streaks of red, still trembling.

"What's your name?" she whispers.

I close my eyes, feel the press of mud beneath me, the pulsing ache in my hands, the blood running over my face, dripping off my chin in a heated rhythm.

"I don't know." My voice—not my voice—quivers in the air between us. I stare down at my hands again, desperate, turning them over and over, scratching at my skirt, the sleeves of my blouse, my boots with their frozen knots. "I don't *know*," I say again, desperate. My words echo back to me from the trees as if they shattered against their roots.

"It's all right. I promise, it's all right." Her voice is soft, smooth-edged, as she reaches out to me, her hands against my arms. There are holes in my sleeves, and her

palms press against my bare skin, warm. It's the warmth that makes me pause, makes my thundering heart quiet for a moment.

She looks in my eyes, looks hard, staring deeper and deeper. "I'll explain everything," she murmurs after a moment, and then she's standing, helping me to my feet. The mud squelches in protest, and I find that I can hardly rise. Everything seems to be spinning. Blood falls onto the sleeves of the girl's coat from my chin as I totter. My eyes fixate on the blood, dark and ugly spots that stain.

"We have to get inside before sunset," she whispers, glancing up at the sky. "They come at sunset."

Her words are so breathy, so quiet, they almost don't exist.

"They," I whisper, and something moves through me, a shudder, a shake, and I stare at her, open-mouthed, as she tilts back her head, watches me.

"Come on," is all she says, putting her arm around mine, all but dragging me over the half-frozen ground, away from the whispering stream. I glance over my shoulder at the bright-red blood surrounding the hole in the ice.

"We've gotta be fast." She leans toward me, shaking her head. "I know you must be stiff, but—"

"What's wrong?" I ask, breathless, as we mount the escarpment and enter the forest. I trip on a frozen gouge in the earth, but she catches my elbow, helps me up.

"What's happening?"

The light seems to lengthen between the trees, drawing toward us like thin, red bones.

"We'll talk about it when we're inside." Her voice is still warm, but sharper now. Urgent. And then, as she glances up at the fading light, her eyes widen. "Do you think you can run?"

I can barely *move*, boots clumping down at odd, awkward angles. It's as if I've never walked before, though I know I have. I grit my teeth, take a running step and sprawl on the ground, chin banging against another frozen rut of earth. My teeth clatter together, and I shove myself upward as she grabs at my elbow again, hoisting me to my feet gently, steering me between the trees.

"What comes at sunset?" I ask as she glances at the branches overhead again, cursing under her breath.

She rakes a hand through her hair, eyes flashing. Her words are heavy with regret: "I guess you'll see."

My heart is beating so hard, it's all I can hear. The trees sigh around us, shifting, as if they're waiting. We move faster, faster, and even though I have to watch my feet, I keep taking in little glimpses of what's in front of us—and far ahead, through the huddled trunks, I think I see a long, dark shadow rising along the ground.

A wall?

It's as sudden as a cut-off breath, the change from the deep, dripping red of sunset to the absoluteness of gray. The color is gone—one blink to the next. I trip again, falter, as I whirl about me, staring at the absence of red, at the heaviness of monochrome that seems to steal up the trunks of the trees like wrinkled hands.

The girl drags at my arm. "Run," she says, and then again, voice cracking, "Run."

We move between the trees, two shadows, breath coming out in jagged scratches as she helps me up again and again. My limbs move looser now, as if they're slowly thawing, but the ground is rough and ragged, and the darkness is crawling toward us like the gray now. I can't move fast enough, but the girl's patience is absolute, even as she glances over her shoulder, panting, her brown eyes wide and anxious.

All I can hear is my heartbeat, is our breathing, is the breaking twigs and the *oof* of my gasp when I go down again.

But then I hear *them*.

A wail—long, thin, piercing, like a flashing silver hook that arcs through the air and into me, cutting bone deep. I jerk around, as if dragged, and I see it in the air between the trees...descending toward us.

It's a human skeleton, but it isn't—the skull has a thin, wicked beak in place of a mouth, and wide, black-feathered wings heave up and down upon the thing's back.

The creature is huge, three times the size of a person. The sharpness of its beak flashes in the dying light as it unhinges its jaws again and screams. The sound is the world, is *everything*, as the creature pumps its black wings, reaching toward us with bone hands that curve into claws. The sockets where its eyes should be are as hollow as heartbeats, and it comes after me, after us, faster than sound, dragging its wailing behind it.

The girl yanks my arm, and then somehow, impossibly, we're running again, the screaming behind us growing louder, larger, with more wails of thin, piercing sharpness. I glance back and feel my heart stop within me: there are four of them now. No, five.

Fear burns through me, searing my bones and muscles, as ice moves beneath my skin like a wet, crawling thing. They are so close, I can feel the chill of their wings, the gusts of air rushing forward, stealing my balance.

A whistle, a tear in the air, as one of the things drags its claws down and toward me. It is going to catch me, hook its sharpness through me, and I am all animal, all fear, as I cry out something wordless, moving through the dark, hunted.

The long shadow rises ahead, near enough now to make out silhouettes of stones. It is a wall, and we're aiming for it; we're going to run *into* it, collide with it as it arcs higher and higher, huge and solid. We can't stop. We're running too fast to stop, and the things are too close. If we stop... I hear the slice in the air behind me as one of the creatures extends its claws, nearly grazing our heads, and I close my eyes as the wall looms before us, as we run, never slowing, because we can't—

Darkness.

My arm jerks as I'm halted, skidding to a stop, the girl gripping my elbow so hard that it hurts. I can hear her panting beside me, feel the aching surge of my own breath, and there's only darkness, darkness everywhere. No trees, no sky, nothing.

I gulp, cry out—

A flare of light, thin and yellow, in the deep black space.

The girl lets go of me, and I watch her move her hands through her hair as she leans forward, staring at the light with narrowed eyes.

We're in a small room, I see now, with walls towering around us on three sides. On the fourth side, there's a door. A door that's open, cracked, an eye and wrinkled nose peering through, along with the light.

“*Charlie*,” sighs the old woman, pulling the door open fully. She’s layered in sweaters and shawls and skirts, her gray hair sticking up at odd angles. She peers at us, squinting as she looks at me, raising the lantern higher. Inside of the lantern, three golden orbs bump lazily against the glass.

I stare, swallow.

“Charlie, what have we here?” The old woman moves closer, shoving the lantern beneath my nose. “Who’s this?”

The girl—Charlie—slumps against a wall, sliding down as she runs her hands through her hair again, knuckles white. “It’s complicated, Abigail. This is a new Sleeper.”

The woman takes a step back, draws the lantern away, clutching it to her chest as she stares me up and down, shaking her head slowly.

“I found her by the stream before sunset. But she has no memories. She must be a Sleeper.”

“That’s...not possible.” The woman turns from me to glare at the girl, but Charlie shakes her head, too, and lifts an eyebrow. “*Before* sunset, Charlie?” She sniffs, stares down at my boots, at the tattered edge of my skirt, and then rakes her shrewd gaze over the rest of me—as if I’m a thing, an unusual object whose worth might be guessed at by a glance.

I raise my chin, and she sighs then, and softens a little, though she’s still frowning, thin lips angling down over jagged, brown teeth. “It gets stranger every day, don’t it, Charlie, my girl? Why *not* before sunset?” She steps toward me, head to the side, cocked like a bird, as I crush back against the wall, flinching as she reaches a hand up, as if to touch me. She stops, fingers poised in midair, and glances to Charlie, who shrugs.

Then the old woman backs away, and I let out a shaky breath.

“My name is Abigail,” she tells me, lowering the lantern and pressing a palm against her chest. Her eyes are wide and wild in the circling light. “Welcome to Mad House.”

“*Don’t*, Abigail,” Charlie hisses, rising, rubbing at her shoulder. “Not yet. She was nearly *Snatched*—”

“Rubbish.” Abigail sniffs, stares up at me with one eye closed, one eye narrowed. “She’s gotta know where she’s found herself—”

“She’ll know soon enough.” Charlie sighs, glances at me, shaking her head.

“Come on,” she says, holding out her hand. “It’s all right. You’re safe here.”

“Safe?” I whisper. I’m shaking, and the word shivers into the little room.

“Yes,” says Charlie, nodding, smiling softly, encouraging. “I promise, you’re safe.”

“For *now*.” Abigail grins toothily up at me, drawing out the word.

Charlie rolls her eyes, takes my arm gently, tugs me out of the little room, a closet—how did we get into a *closet*?—into a high-ceilinged hallway with peeling wallpaper. The thick, red carpet swallows my boots to the ankles. Glittering chandeliers loom above our heads, though no light sparkles within them. The windows are covered with draping curtains, concealing the outdoors, but I still shy away from them as we three pad down the hallway, the lantern in Abigail’s fist casting a trembling bubble of light around us. Here, the light is close and warm, but it does little to comfort me.

“What were those *things*? The...monsters?” My voice is a panicked whisper. I grit my teeth together to stop them from chattering.

Charlie sighs, bows her head. “We call them Snatchers. They come out at night, take new Sleepers, old Sleepers... Whoever they can catch. But don’t worry, because you’re safe now—”

“Safe?” I say the word again: it tastes desperate, sour. “Where do they take the people they...Snatch...to?”

Charlie glances sidelong at me, eyes narrowed. “We don’t... We don’t really know. But it doesn’t matter. They didn’t Snatch you. We were faster. Fast enough.” I stare at her until she breaks the gaze, biting her lip. “You’re a new Sleeper, and Twixt is very confusing in the beginning, but I promise that—”

“No promises, Charlie,” says Abigail, waving her arm at me. “You know how I’m always telling you—‘Charlie,’ I says, ‘you waste your time on the new ones, trying to make ‘em more comfortable,’ and you know it’s a sweet thing, but you could be saving your energy for them that *needs* it, not them that wants coddling.”

Charlie closes her eyes, rubs at her nose. “And you know how I’m always telling you that you purposefully *terrify* the new Sleepers with too much information?”

Abigail laughs, a thin, piercing cackle that makes me shudder. “Coddled Sleepers are Snatched Sleepers. They gotta know what they’re facing, or it’s over. I just tell ‘em the truth.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, breathing out the words. “What’s the truth?”

Abigail stares at me, eyes narrowed. “The *truth*, girl? The *truth* is that you’re in Twixt,” she says, holding up one, sharp finger. “And that you’re a Sleeper. And that Snatchers like Sleepers mightily. That daylight is safe, and nighttime is not. That you’ll probably get Snatched long before you Fade, and most of what you have to look forward to is *fear*.” She’s grinning as she growls out the last word, eyes wide in the skittering half-light of the lantern. “So you best not need *coddling*, girl, because you’ll last *five minutes* here if you don’t toughen up, and fast.”

Charlie grips my arm a little tighter, shakes her head. “That’s not all true, Abigail...”

The old woman sniffs, turns back, continues hobbling down the hall. “Yes, it is, and you know it, Charlie, my girl. And soon enough, she will, too.”

With a heavy sigh, Charlie leans toward me, eyes lowered, mouth close to my ear. “Ignore her. It’s all right. Tomorrow, you’ll decide if you want to stay in Mad House. You get to choose. You won’t have to put up with her if you don’t want to.”

“Twixt,” I murmur, swallowing. My mouth forms the word easily. “Twixt,” I say again, and shake my head. “What’s Twixt?”

“Well,” says Charlie, clearing her throat, “it’s where you are. You’re in Mad House. In Abeo City. In Twixt.” She shrugs her shoulders. “It’s where Sleepers go,” she finishes, as if that explains everything.

“Sleepers.” I bite my lip, walking faster to catch up to the spheres of light Abigail carries in her lantern.

“You’re Asleep right now,” says Charlie, lengthening her stride, too. She lets go of my arm, and I stumble a little, surprised. But I do seem to be walking better now, more smoothly.

“I’m Asleep, too,” Charlie says. “We all are. We’re waiting to wake up.”

“This is a dream?” I ask, glancing at the walls that look so solid (but weren't when we somehow passed through them, moving from outdoors to in, through the wall, into the closet), at the carpet that swallows my boots, at the frozen knots of laces scratching my chapped knees, at the dark clothes that shift against my body, the dried blood caked on my hands.

Charlie regards me strangely, biting her lower lip. “Not exactly a dream...” she begins, but Abigail stops in a doorway, stops so abruptly that I have to trip a little in order to avoid colliding with her small, sneering bulk.

“In there,” she says, jutting her chin toward the room before us. Inside, there are lanterns and glass jars containing orbs on every available surface, washing the furnishings and the faces of the people with a trembling yellow glow.

And the people... There must be twenty, at least. They stand around the empty fireplace, sit stiffly on plush couches and chairs, lie sprawled upon the floor. Young and old, men and women, boys and girls, wearing ragged clothes, their heads tufted with ruffled hair. Their expressions are wary, their eyes glassy and wide. They speak in whispers amongst themselves, but the room falls silent as they notice us, turn toward us in the doorway.

“A new one,” announces Abigail—loudly and without explanation.

Charlie ushers me in, hand at the small of my back. I make a conscious effort not to stumble, feeling all of those eyes, hardly blinking, trailing my every move.

A young woman rises to her feet. Her hair is black and short and thin, curving upon her head softly. She's pretty as she shoves her hands into her hoodie's pockets, as she cocks her head to the side and smiles shyly at me. Others gather in small, tight bunches, staring, but none steps forward or speaks except for this girl, who glances from me to Charlie and back again.

“Charlie, a new one?” she's asking, and Charlie shrugs, shakes her head.

“Yes.”

“But it just got dark—”

“Don't ask me, Vi. I don't know how or why.”

“Things are getting worse,” moans a woman then. She has tangled red hair that shifts over her shoulder as she looks toward us, her skin pale as milk. “New Sleepers in the *daytime*? What *else* will change? Will walls grow solid, or fail to keep out the Snatchers?”

“New Sleepers in the daytime is *good*, Ella,” says Charlie with a tired sigh, rocking back on her heels. “That would make Fetchers' work easier, and Twixt safer.”

“But what *else* will change, Charlie?” asks an older man, sucking on the ends of his mustache. He brings his cane, a ragged stick, down upon the floor with a loud thump. “That's the thing: what *else*? What will change *not* for the better?”

“Listen, we'll worry about all of this later. This girl was almost Snatched. Try to make her feel comfortable.” Charlie falls onto an unoccupied couch, leaving me standing alone in the center of the room. I clasp my hands before me, uncertain.

“I'm Violet,” says the girl in the hoodie, angling her chin up to grin at me again. “Have you got a name yet?”

“I...don't know my name,” I whisper, panic threatening to eat me up, but the girl shakes her head, still smiling.

“Oh, no, it’s all right. None of us had names when we first got here. Charlie, have you thought of one for her yet?”

“No,” she says, opening one eye to look at me. “We’ll think up a name for her tomorrow. I’m sorry. I’m fried, and I still have to go Fetching tonight. I was just out for a walk before night fell and—”

“Who knows if there’ll even be new Sleepers tonight,” says the older man, throwing up his arms. “This is serious. We need to hold someone accountable, is what we need to do. I’ve said it before, but—”

“Robert, ease up,” commands Abigail, setting her lantern down upon the dusty piano. She hobbles over to Charlie’s couch and perches primly on its arm. “Ain’t nothin’ happening that we can stop, anyway, and you know it.”

Silence descends, hazy as a shroud, and I shiver, rubbing at my arms. Everyone watches me, the new Sleeper, the oddity. My eyes flit over the pale gathering of people with their wide, sunken eyes. Beneath their many gazes, I’m strung as tight as a violin. To shut them out, I close my eyes, but then I see the shadows—white and black and winged—descending from the trees.

My eyes spring open, wider than before.

I don’t want to be here, amongst these people with their probing, accusatory stares. I don’t know them. I don’t know any of them.

I want to feel safe.

How can I feel safe?

I don’t know if I’ll ever feel safe again.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of my neck prick up. I stand a little straighter and notice Violet straightening, too, peering behind me with her large, bright eyes.

I turn, following the line of her gaze.

There’s a shadow in the doorway—small, slight, only a girl, not a monster, I realize, as she rocks on her bare feet, swaying back and forth. *Not a monster*. Just a girl. She’s nearly bald, with scraps of hair tufted on her head, small, ragged knots of lanky blonde, and when she looks up at me, still swaying, I see by the sharpness of her face that she’s thinner than any creature ever should be, and bones poke out at odd angles beneath her formless brown dress.

“Oh,” she whispers, then, staring at me with wide, bloodshot eyes. Animal eyes. “Oh...” she says again, stepping forward, faltering, a skeletal hand stretched out toward me.

She hasn’t glanced away, hasn’t even blinked. She’s staring so intensely at me that I cringe and step back as she moves forward. Her smile isn’t right... It’s too wide, that smile, as she pauses, trembling, before the doorway. “Oh, she has such *pretty* hair.”

And then I notice something silver in her palm. It flashes in the half-light as she runs across the floor toward me, hands curled like claws, mouth open, teeth bared: everything else but her too slow, tilting.

"She's got shears!" Violet wails from somewhere far away.

I move as if through water. I try to deflect the girl, but she’s on me too quickly, too ferociously, and I tumble to the ground as she straddles my waist, my shoulders, pinning me with her knees to the floor. She holds up a great fistful of my black curls—I hadn’t noticed my hair before this moment—and, in her other hand, she brandishes a small pair of gleaming scissors, sharply glittering as she unhinges them, still smiling.

Tears stream over her face, falling warm upon my cheeks, as she closes the pointed jaws around her handful of my hair.

I wince.

And then, just as suddenly, I can breathe again, and I sit up, gasping, because Charlie knocked the girl off of me. Together they tumble across the floor, the shears skidding, clattering toward the empty fireplace. Violet snatches them up as Charlie pins the girl down, hands at her wrists, sitting upon her waist as the girl sat upon mine.

“Violet, *help*,” Charlie hisses when the girl begins to scream. The sound is slight at first, almost pathetic, but after a moment it rages, piercing, like the monsters’ shrieks.

“Florence,” Charlie murmurs, over and over. “Florence, it’s all *right*. Florence, *look* at me.”

The girl spasms beneath her, shaking violently, back arching, snapping. Violet falls to her knees, smooths her palms over the girl’s cheeks and her bare, tufted head.

“Florence, breathe. Breathe, baby girl,” Violet whispers, voice catching. A single tear falls from her eye, splashing against the girl’s nose, and then, suddenly, with a wracking sigh, the girl just...stops. Her eyes close, and she shudders once and slumps, like a boneless thing, and all is still.

Charlie curves forward, crawling off of the motionless body and falling to her back on the floor, beside Florence, breathing out and then shutting her eyes, too.

“Well,” says Abigail, with a quiver in her tone, “that might have gone much better. Or much worse.” Her sharp eyes pierce through me.

I sit up carefully and then stand, bending away from the lot of them and folding my arms across my middle. I’m ready to run if I need to, to flee into the hallway and just go. I don’t know where I’ll go. But I’ll leave. I’ll find someplace else, someplace...safe.

The hair that the girl snipped off with her shears lies limp upon the floor, curled in upon itself.

“I thought it was Nancy’s turn to watch her,” says Charlie, rubbing at her eyes. “Where’d she get those scissors?” She sits up, leaning back on her hands as she stares down at the unmoving girl. Face falling, she rubs her eyes again, and I see tears on her fingers. She stands, sniffing. “Violet, will you help me?”

Violet, pale and wide-eyed, rises to her feet, nodding, as Charlie reaches down to lift up the broken girl as if she were only a doll, cradling her length in her arms.

“Are you all right?” asks Violet quietly, reaching out and touching my elbow. Startled, I flinch away, and Violet stands beside me awkwardly, biting her lip, before she straightens, tucking her hands into her hoodie pockets. “If you...if you come with me, I’ll show you a room where you can stay tonight.”

Florence is out cold, lying limp against Charlie’s chest, and Charlie stays very still, watching me, her eyes red-rimmed and shining. “Sorry,” she mutters, noticing my gaze, and then ducking her head to stare down at the girl. “She’s been getting worse, but I didn’t... I thought she was being taken care of. I’m just...so sorry.” The words catch in her throat, and I flush, suddenly ashamed for flinching away from Violet. But I don’t know what to do or say. I shift from heel to heel as the people staring at us all around the room maintain their heavy silence.

“Let’s take her upstairs,” Violet whispers, and I don’t know if she means the girl or me, but I follow Charlie and Violet out of the room, away from the heat of those probing eyes. There’s movement behind me as I leave, and I glance back over my

shoulder to watch a small woman steal quietly toward the lock of hair coiled on the floor and snatch it up, her thin hands curling around it greedily before pocketing it in one jerky movement.

I look away and shiver.

Violet takes up one of the lanterns from the floor outside of the entryway, holding it in shaking fingers, angling it overhead so that it casts flickering light on the dark red carpet.

I notice Charlie watching me carefully as she shifts Florence's weight in her arms.

"Upstairs, Violet," she says gently after a long moment, and Violet starts, nodding, leading the way down the corridor with the lantern aloft in her hand. Within the confines of the glass, the golden orbs swing about in lazy circles, resting for a heartbeat on the bottom only to rise and try to move through the glass again, bobbing in place.

"What are those?" I gesture toward the lantern.

"Oh, Wisps," Violet murmurs distractedly, glancing over her shoulder at Charlie, who isn't paying any attention to either of us, only staring down at Florence with a grave downturn of her mouth.

"I'm really sorry about...you know." Violet regards me with too-bright eyes, her voice pitched low, as if to prevent Charlie from hearing her. "I hope that doesn't mean that we'll lose you to another Safe House. I hope you won't be afraid to stay. It was only a fluke, I promise."

"But why did she—"

Violet shakes her head, puts a finger to her lips, leans closer.

"She wanted your hair," she whispers. "Florence has been desperate for..." She frowns, her words trailing off. Her teeth worry at her lip. "Anyway, I guess seeing so much of it—hair, I mean—triggered her, flipped the switch. She usually has better self-control. Lately, at least." Violet studies the lantern in her hand for a long moment.

I glance at her own short black hair, sticking up like the points of arrows around her ears. "I don't understand. Why would she want my *hair*?"

Violet swallows, her eyes downcast. "I'm not the one to tell you this stuff. Charlie's the Fetcher. She has to talk to the new Sleepers, because you have to be told things the right way. Gently." Her eyes are wide as she turns toward me. Wide and frightened. "I could tell you something the *wrong* way, and then you'd..." She swallows again and shakes her head. "It wouldn't be good."

I stare at her, but she faces forward again and begins to ascend a broad staircase; the wood groans in protest beneath her feet. I follow, but Charlie brushes past me, bumping against my hip.

"Sorry," she mutters, as she shifts Florence in her arms.

Two steps up the stairs, and the darkness seems to swallow the lantern light. It's sudden and intense, how the panic consumes me in the half-darkness. I lift my ruined skirts and take the steps two at a time until I stand beside Charlie upon the landing.

"We'll come for you in the morning," says Violet, and then looks to Charlie, who nods once. "You can stay here, in this room." She rests a palm on the door to her right. Inclining her chin toward me, she turns the knob and steps inside, the lantern illuminating a small, shabby room with sheets covering three large pieces of furniture, turning them into dingy, hulking beasts. Whisper-thin curtains blow over the single—and broken—window.

Violet crosses to the window quickly, pulling the curtains closed and shoving one of the sheet-covered pieces—a desk, I think—against them to hold them in place.

“Always keep the windows covered,” she says, “just in case,” and she glances past the curtains, toward the sky. My blood stills as I follow her gaze, as I remember what flies and claws beyond these walls.

Snatchers.

“They...” I swallow. “They can’t get in, can they?”

Violet glances to Charlie again before she shakes her head slowly. “No,” she says, but hesitantly—as if she isn’t certain. “You’re safe here,” she whispers, holding the lantern to her chest. “And I’m just next door. If you need anything, come right in, all right?”

“I...” I shift from one foot to the other, look to the window again. “All right.”

“Morning will come soon,” Violet promises, smiling softly at me. “Morning is safe.”

And night is not.

“I’m two doors down.” Charlie clears her throat and removes her gaze from Florence, catches my eye. “Come see me, too, if you need to. But the Snatchers aren’t coming in. Don’t worry about that.” Her voice is clear, soft. She angles her head toward me and says, so quietly that I almost can’t hear it, “Again...I’m so sorry about what Florence did to you.”

I open my mouth but don’t know how to respond, so I just nod and look away. Then Violet holds out the lantern to me. I take it, peering at the orbs inside before hugging it against my stomach.

“Good night, then,” Charlie says, her brown eyes still sad, regretful, as she backs away, through the doorway, with Florence still in her arms. Violet follows close behind, shutting the door without a sound.

I’m alone with countless shadows.

I sit stiffly on the edge of the bed, the lantern on my lap, and watch the curtain waft in and out, as if Mad House itself is breathing.

Twixt by Sarah Diemer will be released **April 16, 2013**

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