

The Hope of the Moon

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3 years, 47 weeks and 5 days. That's how long the war has been going on for. I know because I'm counting. Every single day, hiding under whatever debris Char and I can find, ducking under dead trees, I count. When people are getting killed around me, I count. It's the only thing that's stayed constant, never changed, since this all started.

Change is what took away what I knew and loved; it's what killed them. Mom and dad both joined the war to defend Silver Terraces magic against Gold Sallow. They didn't have to. They could've just stayed with me and Charlotte, my little sister, who was still young at the time. I wanted them to stay, so they wouldn't get hurt. But they didn't listen and now they're gone.

"Hollie, they're coming!" Char whispers frantically from beside me. Leaves cling to her golden hair, which is messed up. We haven't had time to wash up for a while, because we've been hiding.

My eyes snap towards the heavy footsteps. We are hiding under a fallen concrete wall that is leaning against a big tree. Since it's nighttime I was sure we'd be safe here, but turns out I was wrong. The Gold Sallow soldiers are doing all of this just for some more power. I grab Char's small hand and motion for her to move into the shadows of the wall as much as possible.

The footsteps are growing louder.

They're close.

I squeeze Char's hand mostly to reassure her that it'll be okay, but also myself. I need to protect her now, because I'm all she has left. I close my eyes and hold my breath waiting for the Gold Sallow soldier to pass.

I remember how it all used to be. Trees soaring up into the sky, vines hanging from them. Rocks with moss, grass growing wild and free. There were birds, squirrels, rabbits and *life*. Life everywhere. And...magic.

Stomp. Stomp. The soldiers are right behind us. I squeeze my eyes shut even more, my heart pounding loudly in my ears.

The people of Silver Terrace drew magic from the moon, moon magic was mostly used in defense or protection. While the people of Gold Sallow drew magic from the sun, which was offensive magic. We lived in different parts of Minlow but there had never been any conflict. Until that day 3 years ago when the leader of Gold Sallow got too greedy.

“Check under the debris! They could be hiding anywhere!” A soldier’s shout makes me open my eyes.

The clanking of metal armor fills the air. Besides me, Char stiffens. I watch with quickening breaths as a pair of boots draw closer and closer...

The wall above us suddenly shifts.

They found us.

“Over here!” A soldier yells.

And before I know it we’re running. I hear shouts behind us, but I ignore them and sprint with Char clinging on to me, weaving through the rubble. My breathing is already uneven as my feet pound against the ground. I miss the soft grass that has now been replaced by dry, cracked ground. I miss the tall trees and the shade they provided.

There are rocks and beams of fire being thrown at us. One narrowly misses my arm leaving my skin an angry red and in piercing pain. But we can’t stop. I look at Char, who has tears in her eyes. This must be so hard for her, I wish I could defend her like our parents would’ve. I wish I could still use magic.

I need to get into the—

Char screams. I turn back to see a boulder land on her leg, pinning her to the ground. I immediately stop and run over, trying to get the boulder to budge. I pull and push against it.

“Charlotte!!” I yell, panic building in my chest.

I glance at the sky, but like always, the moon is clouded over by the smoke the war has caused, so I can’t draw any magic from it. I think it was part of their plan to block out our only source of magic, to weaken us as much as possible.

The Gold Sallow soldiers reach us in a matter of seconds, and before I can do anything, they have grabbed Char and I's arms and roughly pulled us up. I thrash against their grip and besides me Char is screaming and kicking at the soldiers, but they hold strong.

Calm down Hollie, you'll wear out your energy if you keep fighting, I remind myself. Plus, they could always hurt us even more than they already had, so I force my arms down. The realization of the situation dawns on me as they drag us to wherever we are heading. Char and I had stayed hidden for so long, but just a slip up had cost us. I heard of the places they put the people of Silver Terrace: places so dark no light can even reach, places surrounded by fire as a constant battle to stay alive.

Why is this happening to us? What did we do to deserve it?

I take a few breaths to calm myself, counting as I go. *One, two, three, four...* And that's what I keep doing as I am dragged and pulled on the rough ground, Char stumbling besides me. My legs soon are worn out, shaking now from all the walking. My arms hurt from how hard the soldiers grip them, and my mind is tired from worrying to where we are headed. But it's a waste of energy worrying about what hurts, so I keep counting, using it as something to keep my mind off the rest.

3241, 3242... The sun's rising now, casting light oranges and pinks all across the sky. There is still rubble and dry land as far as I can see. Char has grown slow in her steps and the soldiers keep pushing her along to keep the pace. I finally get sick of the silence.

"Where are you taking us?" My voice sounds hoarse.

No one replies, and we're back to silence. And after what feels like years, the soldiers stop. Then with so much force, they push me and Char to the ground and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from crying out.

"Just wait for a second," A soldier says suddenly. "We can't have you knowing the way in."

I lift my head in confusion but it immediately gets knocked down. Then everything goes black.

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My mom used to say that when the people of Minlow die, they turn into another star in the night sky. But the war has clouded the sky so much that not even a single star—no matter how bright—can shine through. So with the moon *and* the stars clouded over, the tiny room I was put in is wrapped in thick darkness except for the small window at the top of the back wall that lets me see the outside world.

I can make out the thin mattress and toilet that are in the cell, and the cold iron bars that hold me in. I had woken up here, without Char and underground. I hope she's okay, I hope with all my might.

I don't know what they're going to do with us now that we've been caught.

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I think there are other people down here with me, since I hear some rustling sometimes. I wonder if they're from Silver Terrace too. I don't know how long it's been since I was captured, but I've been trying to count the times light comes in through the small window. It's kind of like how I've been counting since the beginning of the war...

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They come down here every night, beating us for information. Information about how to draw magic from the moon. It hurts, each hit coming down harder than the next, but I won't give the secret to them. I don't think any of us will...

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It's been getting colder recently; the nights are dark and gloomy, my only company is my voice while I count. Sometimes I can talk to the people in the cells next to me, but that's when their mind is in the right place.

The food they feed us is tasteless, barely enough to keep me alive. I'm tired, and hurt. I don't know how long I can keep going, it's already been so long...

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I wake to a voice one night.

“Hey, guys wake up.”

It's the voice of the girl in the cell next to me. She told me her name is Tammy, short for Tamila and she's been keeping me company recently.

“What is it?” I respond, a little surprised I can still hold a conversation. Some others nearby make sounds to tell us they are awake.

I hear Tammy pause then say, “I heard that the *marina* is coming back.”

Marina. I hear the other’s draw a sharp breath. In Silver Terrace that means moon. The moon is coming back.

“How do you know?” I whisper-shout, my eyes wide in disbelief.

“I heard some rumors that the army is trying to make something new, and to do that they need to pause the magic covering the night sky for a small period of time.”

I don’t know what to think. This can mean we have a chance to escape, it can mean freedom. But are we strong enough to break out? We have been starved and beaten for so long we barely have the strength to stand. But... it’s hope.

“When is this happening?” Another cellmate asks.

“I hear it’s anytime—”

A blinding light cuts off the rest of Tammy’s sentence. It takes me a moment to realize it’s the moon. The *marina*. It’s back—

But then the light disappears, followed by a clunking sound from the small windows. The guards have closed the windows, blocking our only hope to leave this place. I slump back down into my bed, feeling more defeated than ever, and my spirits crushed.

I hear the sighs of the other prisoners, all probably feeling the same way I am. I resume my absent minded counting while going through what just happened. I know the moon is outside, I just can’t see it to access its magic.

But wait...can I technically still use moon magic because the moon is out?

I haven’t ever heard a story where someone could use magic without seeing the moon, but it’s worth a shot. It’s not like I have any other options.

I raise my arms, trying to draw in magic, imagining the moon staring down at me in my mind’s eye. Immediately I feel its fullness flood me, and I feel as powerful as ever.

It works!! Surprise and delight fills me.

I look around my dark cell, and at the iron bars. Silver Terrace magic has never been used to cause destruction before, but that’s our only way out. Hopefully this feeling of magic isn’t just a hallucination.

I close my eyes, praying the moon stays present for enough time to get out, and channel the magic to my fingers. My cell lights up faintly from the magic at my fingertips. Then I push it outwards, towards the bars and they break with a big *bang!*

Suddenly I hear alarms blare, which cuts my moment of triumph short and I hear the sound of heavy footsteps coming my way.

The soldiers heard that, I realized frantically.

My heart pounds in my ears as I rush out of my cell and before I can hesitate, use my magic to blast open the rest of the cells. Silver Terrace magic used for offense? That's unheard of, but I've done it. I immediately feel like energy is stripped from me, but I continue to run towards a door. I reach it and tug on it, only to find out it's locked.

All the prisoners are flooding out of their cells now, confused about what is happening. I've accidentally led them to doom because of my stupidity. There's so many people—and suddenly I knew what to do.

“Everyone!!” I shout, over the alarms. “I know you can't see it, but the moon is out right now!! Just imagine the moon in your mind and draw the magic from it!”

Somehow, my voice carries and people start to do as I say. Everyone is starting to glow a bit, full of magic. I hear a door slam open, and turn to see the Gold Sallow soldiers coming in, blasting magic on us. They try to get us back into our cells but we outnumber them.

There are blasts of fire and red magic sailing across the room, each deflected by a flash of silver magic. I join in on the fight, using my newfound offense moon magic to knock out more and more soldiers. It seems others find out about the moon offense magic too, because I see more flashes of silver knocking guards out.

Soon, all the soldiers are on the ground, and the door in which they entered is left wide open.

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We emerge from the underground prison in the middle of the night, all of us eager to get out. We make sure to make no sound to alert what's left of the guards as we slip out.

And once we've set foot on the ground, we're off, sprinting as far away from the prison as we can. I'm exhausted from using all the magic, but my craving for freedom keeps me going.

Our group of almost 60 people slows down after a while in an open area, far from the territory of Gold Sallow. There starts to be talk about setting up camp for the night, then continuing the next day. Other people are hugging and rejoicing the escape and freedom from the torture they endured. As people start attending to that, I glance up at the sky where the moon still shines. I am silently thanking the moon for staying there while we escaped, when a hand taps my shoulder.

I freeze, assuming it's a guard that found us somehow. With a pounding heart I turn, only to see Char standing behind me, looking pale and tired but still smiling.

"Char!" I cry, pulling her into a tight hug. I don't know where she was but I'm so relieved she escaped. Though there are bruises on her frail arms, I hold on to her like it's for dear life.

"I heard you leading everyone out," she says, hugging me just as tightly.

I blink away my tears of happiness. "Yeah, I'm just glad you were able to escape too. I was so worried."

I continue to hug her as people set up camp with their magic around me. I look around and a green shape catches my eye at the center of our campsite. A small tree taking root in the crumbled ground. My eyes widen at the sign of life that has been absent for so long. Minlow is changing and slowly recovering.

"Hey Hollie, look at the sky," Char says as I release her.

I do as I'm told and my breath catches in my throat when I see them. Stars. Millions of them, all illuminating the sky with the moon. And I swear I see two of them shining brighter than the rest.

Silver Terrace magic, this world, they're all changing, but change...can be a good thing. And even though this war isn't over yet, the moon returning gave us something valuable: hope.

