

Chapter 1

The last time Esther truly saw Damien was the moment before his eyes went completely black. In the final moment before the Void consumed him — gushing from every orifice, streaming down the grassy hill in a torrent that had been taking and taking and would not quit — everything had been perfect. The final one-hundred and nineteen seconds of his life had been perfect.

The sun was setting, not yet below the horizon of rolling hills painted in a soft bluish glow. Trees dotted the horizon and grew in number toward where the couple lay under the old cedar tree. Damien's voice was soft and quiet as he turned away from Esther, towards the weathered trunk. The wind was strong, and it whipped his dark curls in every direction, teased at the sleeves of his shirt, which fluttered against his freckled skin.

God, Esther thought. How much I love him. She had been so amazed to have found a man so gentle and so kind. She prayed he would never disappear.

“Don't look,” Damien said. His dark eyes flicked up toward her, painted gold in the rays of sun, a timid smile catching the edge of his lips.

“Hey!” He said, realizing that she was looking through her fingers. “I can see you peeking.”

Esther grinned as the sunlight lit up the red freckles on her nose, parting for the little dimples in her cheeks. She spread her fingers apart against her face, smiling as the wind blew her curly red hair gently over her shoulders. She had known Damien's plans for that day — it was hard to keep a secret in the apocalypse — and so she had tucked little white wildflowers into the braid running along the top of her head. She looked so beautiful.

“What do you mean?” She asked playfully. “I can't see a thing.”

Damien rolled his eyes, unable to suppress a smile. “I’m going to have to give this to someone else then, I guess —”

“No, wait!” She laughed. “I’m not looking, I promise!”

“Sure.” Damien smiled softly, eyes flitting downward as he took one last look at the object cupped between his hands. Then, in one swift movement, he turned to face her, pulling his hands apart to reveal the open box.

“You can open them now.”

She already knew what it was. She could see the glint of silver from between her fingers even before she lowered her hands to behold the shimmering jade. Yet she beamed just the same.

Damien sighed in relief. “I didn’t know if you would like it,” he said. “It’s not exactly what you wanted —”

“Oh quiet, Damien,” she said. “I *love* it.”

Esther daintily extended her hand to him, and he smiled as he slipped the ring onto her finger. She brought her hand back, eyes sparkling as she admired the gem, and Damien raised an eyebrow, leaning back against the tree with a playful smile.

“So that’s a yes, then?”

Esther looked up at him perplexingly. “You didn’t —”

Damien’s eyes went wide. “I forgot to ask.”

The two were silent for a second before both collapsed into laughter. Oh, how like Damien it was to forget.

“I, uh,” he said bashfully. “I thought it in my head,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

“Oh, it’s no big deal, Damien,” she said, grinning.

A large breeze swept up her hair, tousling it in all directions as the tree shivered, red and orange leaves tumbling down on them from all directions. Far off in the distance, a dark cloud was growing. They paid it no mind.

“But,” Esther said teasingly. “I guess that means I’m still unmarried.”

“Oh come on, Esther.” Damien rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right back to square one.”

“When I found you in the clutches of that Hollow,” she said.

It was meant to be a joke, but it was a sour one, and Damien’s smile fell as he turned away from her, looking toward the sun. Yes, she had saved him that day. But she had saved him from someone who never wanted to hurt him.

After a moment, Damien shrugged, turning back to shove the empty box into his jean pocket. “Well,” he said, “at least I still have my good looks and charm. Maybe I’ll find a new wife.” He grinned, pulling a toothpick out of his pocket as she laughed, and he stuck it between his teeth. “If the Void hasn’t gotten to us yet,” he said “I don’t think it ever will. I have ample time to find a replacement.”

Esther’s smile faded as an image blurred into her vision, one sepia-colored and aged: an old television with a newscaster standing in front of a green screen. She had been sitting at the kitchen table that day, sketching a cat onto a piece of computer paper. Her father was washing the dishes behind her, humming a tune to himself as she stuck her tongue out in concentration, finishing the left eye. But she never finished the drawing. Because a sound had caused her to stop, with the edge of the pencil hovering over the paper: the scream.

She had only a moment to see it — to look up at the TV as the man on the screen fell to the ground and convulsed, black liquid pouring out from every orifice on his body, spurting out

from his mouth as he disappeared into a mass of black ooze. The group of news anchors surrounded him as the feed continued to roll.

“Get a doctor!” One screamed. As if it wasn’t already too late.

“Honey, don’t look at that.”

Esther’s father pressed himself between her and the television screen. She couldn’t see that his hand was trembling as he turned the dial down and flicked the power off. And of course, she couldn’t see that the news studio was empty; that the other two anchors were all that remained of the doomed skeleton crew, desperate for a normalcy that could never return.

Esther had seen the posters that had lined the dirty streets of her city in the weeks following the first taking. The spray-painted image of a gas mask, with the words below in disjointed letters:

When you sense the Void descend, you must always clear your head.

Everyone knew what to do. So why didn’t Damien remember?

“Esther? Esther, are you there?”

Esther blinked, returning to the moment as the memory faded. Nothing would happen to them, she was sure of it. She and Damien were going to live a long, happy life. After all, it had been seven years, and they’d followed the two steps properly. They’d survive. The Void would grow hungry, but it would inevitably starve. She knew they would be okay.

The sun crested the horizon.

Damien had ten seconds left to live.

He smiled at her, a warm smile that made his sun-tanned cheeks go pink as he leaned towards her. “Is it okay to kiss you now?”

He had been waiting. After all, they were sixteen. It was going to be special, just like how she'd pictured it in her head.

Esther nodded, full of giddiness as Damien pulled himself toward her. One pull, then two. Her heart pounded in her chest, breath catching as she leaned towards him, closing her eyes.

Then it happened: the feeling.

It hit her suddenly, hit her hard: the heavy feeling that something was wrong. Very wrong.

For only a fraction of a second, she convinced herself it wasn't true; that they were safe in this moment; that the preciousness of it protected them from harm. Still leaning in, eyes closing, Esther allowed herself to move closer to him, refusing to believe that what was creeping over her — over both of them — was the creature they had evaded so many times. But the shadow moved closer until it penetrated her very heart, and because of her delay, by the time she realized it — fully let the sinking feeling creep in — it was too late.

Esther yanked herself away from Damien, her body rigid as she looked over his shoulder, staring at it as it stood behind the tree.

Staring at death itself.

It was a shape that at first glance resembled a human. However, after a moment of truly looking at it, it revealed itself to be nothing like it. It had too many arms, and its proportions were uncanny — legs too long, face drooping to its chest, fingers scraping against the ground. It had no face, but it had an eye, or something that felt like an eye. And Damien had tried to stop himself from letting it take him. Yet, despite the tens — no, *hundreds* of times that he had been able to escape its grasp — the creature captured Damien's soul the moment he let the thought pass through his mind. Because all it needed was a single coherent sentence. That was all it took. And with his small thought, the creature latched itself onto Damien's brain and stole his soul.

If only he hadn't been so joyful in the moments before. If only the thought hadn't flitted in his head:

God, I love her so much.

Esther moved without awareness of her own body. Her hands jerked towards him as if, through sheer willpower, she could dig the creature out from under his skin. But it was too late, and it was impossible; it was over for him, and, having realized this, she froze before throwing her hands behind her, pulling herself backwards, tearing herself away from the evil in front of her.

Damien? That's what she had wanted to say as her fingers dug into the wet earth, as she yanked herself away from the wretched creature. *Are you still there?*

Her heels scraped against the grass, staining her socks a deep yellow and brown as the earth caked itself onto her red shoes. But she couldn't say those words. Her voice would not come as she beheld the image before her.

Damien — because it was Damien's body and Damien because it was Damien's *skin* — sat before her, still on his knees. And she beheld the black sludge thicker than oil as it gushed out from his eye sockets, from two holes too large for a human face, streaming heavily because there couldn't be that much liquid inside a human head. It consumed his expression, devoured the life from his body, flushed the soul from his being. His hand extended toward her in a way that pleaded desperately, but Esther could not bring herself to move closer to him as his fingers cracked and twisted into long, broken claws that crunched and inched toward her.

She couldn't even breathe as the viscous fluid poured from his nostrils, dripping down his blackening lips. And the scream that poured out from her lungs made no sound as the creature consumed every part of him: every moment, every memory, every wish and desire.

Esther's feet slipped out from under her as she threw herself backwards away from him further, her body trembling as a wail tore from her soul.

The last words Damien had said to her were so like him as he sputtered so quietly:

“Oh.” His voice was warbled and choked. **“I guess... it got me.”**

And then he collapsed in front of her, body convulsing from the tendrils seeping into his brain.

The scream that finally broke free from Esther's lungs was so deafening that it could not register in her brain. And the hills and trees around her fell silent as her mouth pulled apart in a raw keening; as tears gushed down her cheeks and mixed with her saliva. And, in movements not her own, she reached into the bag beside her and pulled out the hatchet.

Time did not move as the sun fell below the horizon and the light turned everything gray. There was no life, no feeling, no sound as she raised the hatchet and brought it down into Damien's neck, between his Adam's apple and collarbone, where she had kissed him so many times before. Her voice was monstrous — a wail bleeding agony into the night — as she pulled the axe free from the tattered flesh, then back down again, and again, and again.

She hacked until the bone cracked, until she couldn't tell whether what splashed against her bared teeth was the creature, the Void, and what was Damien: the blood that once colored his cheeks when he laughed and flowed through his veins and beat his precious heart. Time stood still as she brought the blade into his soft pink flesh, glinting in the light of the rising moon.

Once she had hacked enough that Damien's head was fully separated from his shoulders, she stopped. For an amount of time that was unmeasurable, she sat on that hill, only breathing. Had the Void wanted to take her in that moment, it could have. She had given up.

But as time ticked onward — as her vision went dark with the fall of the night and the black substance which continued to consume Damien’s body, trickling out from the two holes where his eyes had been — the threat dissipated. After the moon reached the peak in the sky, the Void had taken him. His lip twitched.

It was impossible to have seen it the first time. No one ever did. This was how the Void had become so good at destroying everyone that anyone had ever loved. But Esther noticed it. Of course she had. She had seen that mouth twitch up in a smile a hundred times.

And she knew that if she did not strike that blade down in the spot between Damien’s eyes, the Void would rise and live through his corpse, and that it would haunt her forever.

Damien’s left eye twitched next. Whatever was left of it.

I need to kill him now, she thought. If I wait any longer, I won’t be able to. Then he will wander endlessly.

And yet, knowing this — knowing that, that if Damien rose, he would suffer eternally — Esther sat and waited. The axe lay on her lap, held in hands coated in a thick, sticky substance that was so black that it couldn’t be blood. Still, she did not move.

Damien’s eyebrow twitched.

This was it. This was her final chance. The final chance to let him be free.

Esther sucked a breath in between her teeth, and she looked down at the bloodied ring still on her left finger. Her eyes flitted back to Damien, his face soaked in a dark, sticky solid that dripped down his chin into the red and pink of his oozing neck. And in that quiet night, she raised the axe above her head, and she held it as she beheld him for one final time. The blade trembled as the wind picked up, shaking the tree above her until the leaves fell again, grazing her body.

She hesitated.

And then it was too late.

Damien's eyebrows scrunched together, his mouth puckering into a distasteful expression that was wrong for Damien, because he was never distasteful, and Esther's muscles weakened as her hands fell to her sides. She stared down into the soulless black eyes looking at her with an emptiness, a glossy film filling the space so the Void had something with which to perceive her, and she gently brushed away the hardened blood and slime from his face.

If she'd had more time — but then again, she could never have had enough time — maybe she would have done it. But it was too late now. That chance had come and passed.

Esther stared down at the decapitated head in front of her as Damien's eyelids glided shut over the black orbs, then opened again. She watched his body shift in the darkness, the beheaded body pulling itself up towards its head. And this time, she was able to act quickly; she grabbed the handle and sent the axe straight down into Damien's heart. The claw of its outstretched hand twitched in the air, inches away from his head. Then it fell still.

Esther then did the only thing she could think to do. She reached town into her bag and took out the zip tie, clutching it in her hand. Then she took a deep breath and crawled toward the body. The minute she was close enough to make contact, she threw herself forward and slammed a red heel down into his spine. The severed head let out a cry that wasn't in Damien's voice as she yanked his wrists back, securing the tie around them.

She stepped away from the body and leaned down towards the head, raising her palm to strike him between the eyes. It hovered over his face, and she stared into the empty void bleeding from his eye sockets, her features twisted in an agony that said *I will never forgive you*.

Her hand remained suspended above his face, but it was trembling. Even he could see that. The edge of his lip turned up into a smirk that could be seen even through the black stains coating his face and teeth.

“You can’t do it, can you?” he said.

Her lower lip quivered, and the other edge of his mouth turned up to complete the smile. A laugh rose up in his throat, black foam bubbling from between his teeth as the laugh trickled out quietly. And in that moment, an immense feeling overtook Esther, filling her chest with a fire that tore through her limbs and emptied her mind completely. She struck his face so hard that, even having no brain or eyes to do so, he saw stars.

The smile on Damien’s face — which was truly unfair — cracked in two, turning downward on both ends as the creature stared at her with utter distaste.

“You disgust me.”

“Says the decapitated head.”

Esther rolled her eyes, a sudden realization of the sheer absurdity of the moment flooding her mind. And in that nothingness, in that pit of despair, she began to laugh.

At first it was small, a tickle in her ribs. But then it grew until it shook her shoulders, sending a handful of blackened daisies tumbling to the ground. Esther wrapped her arms against her stomach, keeling over with the realization.

“Oh god,” she said through gasps. “This is all my fault. I have to —”

She turned to the creature. “I have... to put us both to rest, now.”

The creature unleashed a biting laugh that broke through its teeth.

“I am a *god*. It will only be you who dies today. You, after your lovely prince.”

A lump of gore rolled down his cheek. The breeze picked up, sending an array of leaves down upon Damien's decapitated head. A bolt of lightning struck far off in the distance, and as the wind whistled around them, the faint sound of thunder rolled over the grassy highlands.

Esther smiled — a smile that was so genuine, it made a flicker of fear flash across Damien's face. Then she nodded, gesturing to him.

“Well, come on with it. Kill me.”

Even without eyes capable of conveying emotion, Esther could tell what the creature was thinking. All at once, the forest around her fell unnaturally silent. A heaviness began to drape itself over her. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, smiling to herself as it began to envelop them both. But, all at once, mere inches away from her, it stopped.

The creature pulled back, then lunged forward again, harder. She felt it strike the edges of the fine hairs on her skin, and the smile on her face grew as it recoiled again and again, striking nothing. Smashing itself against her, screaming, it shook the leaves from the trees as it descended into a chaotic, tormented tantrum. She could feel the weight of the Void as it realized it had made a terrible, terrible mistake. For even as it lashed and wailed, it was for naught; it could not escape.

Esther leaned down towards the decapitated head of her love, and she whispered.

“We found out how to capture you.” A grimness filled her expression, and the tears began to fall. “I just wish... it had been me.”

“**No, NO!**” Shouted the creature in a voice so distorted it was barely a mimic of Damien's at all. Esther leaned back, breathing shakily as she pulled herself away from him, kneeling on the blood-splattered grass.

“You can try everything,” she said. “But it’s over. You’re trapped in there until I take you to the mountains, where I will free us both.”

The creature screamed a distorted and jumbled scream so divorced from reality that it evoked primal terror. Its separated body yanked violently at the cuffs, pulled its skin apart as its eyes swiveled in all directions, bled the black ooze down its cheeks. She watched as the skin shrank off from its wrists, metal biting into bone before repairing itself over the wire. And this body, which had promised to sacrifice itself for this task, held the creature tightly and did not let go.

The Void looked up at her incredulously. It narrowed Damien’s eyes.

“Let me out of here. What have you done to me? What have you DONE TO ME?”

“I didn’t do anything to you,” Esther said, pulling herself to her feet. Then in one swift movement she pulled off her jacket, revealing the handle of a blade sticking out from the center of her chest. “I only did to you what I also did to me.” She leaned down towards him, smiling sweetly as his expression froze in an indescribable horror. She pointed down at his own chest, where a needle jutted out about half an inch. Then she stepped back, gathering a gob of spit in her mouth before spitting it down on his cheek, red blood and saliva mixing with the black mess on his face.

“Do you think we don’t know about your methods?” she said. “How you need to kill the person most precious to the host before you can move on to the next?” She laughed bitterly.

“Well. I suppose you’ll have to stay with me until I put us both to rest in Ethesda.”

The void stared at her in abject terror.

“How,” it asked. **“Are you still breathing? What is this madness?”**

Esther stared at the creature, the moonlight catching the tears brimming in her eyes.

“It’s no matter. This is the end. For both of us.” Her voice came out hoarse as she leaned down towards him, placing a hand gently on his head. With a shaky breath, she leaned toward the rotting flesh, and she brushed aside a curl and kissed the top of his forehead, pressing her lips against the sticky, blood-stained mess of a corpse breathing. And she whispered.

“I will take us to our final resting place. I love you, Damien.”

The void laughed.

“Damien is dead.”

“I know,” she said, pulling the head up by its curly black hair. Flesh dripped from the severed neck as Damien sneered. Esther looked out toward the distance.

“We’d best get started, then,” she said. “We have a long way to go.”