

# ARGENT

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Saturday night parties suck. They only end up with the cops showing up or getting so drunk you forget your name. So why do I go to them? *Bethany Rivers*. I met her in first grade, and it didn't take her long to become my friend. It's funny how quickly a pack of fruit snacks can persuade someone. Her previously shy demeanor transformed and now she's one of the most extroverted people I know. We do everything together, even if that means going to parties that I hate.

*Your destination is on the left.* The monotonous voice of the car's GPS brought me out of my thoughts. Bethany turned the steering wheel, parking beside the house. *Wow.* I leaned forward to peer at the borderline mansion in front of me. The yard was meticulously maintained and Roman columns held up iron balconies. We exited the car and walked to the front door, where Hashim awaited us.

From the moment I saw him, I could feel his gaze on me. He oozed confidence. I could see his mind trying to figure me out, analyze me. Whether in the classroom or on the streets, Hashim Silver had the ability to absorb random snippets of information. He needed to in order to be in control. *He liked to be in control.* Of all my competition at Spangler High, he was the biggest. I guess it's telling when your worst rival is a mirror of yourself.

"Welcome to my humble abode," he chortled.

*Humble, you've got to be kidding me.* I scoffed. "The house could be a bit bigger."

"Whatever you say, Argent. Come in." He didn't buy my act of disdain. The mansion's interior was even more marvelous, an immaculate

chandelier hung from the high ceiling, and a gold-plated double curved staircase led up to the second floor, overlooking the grand foyer. On a normal day, this house would be put-together, family portraits specifically placed to tell the outside world how perfect, unbroken, the Silvers were, but today was not a normal day. Music blasted from stereo speakers, and I could feel the thumping of the bass through the floorboards. People were scattered everywhere, the air was suffocating.

I turned my head toward the living room and heard the *clink* of a bottle, and then saw the sloppy make-out session that ensued: spin the bottle, a must-have for any high school party.

Bethany tapped my shoulder and looked at me eagerly. "Do you want to go there?" She pointed to the living room.

I rolled my eyes. "Please, you know me better than that."

The thing about party games like spin the bottle is that they force you to make a choice: kiss them or you're a coward, give in or be an outcast. The only thing I hated more than Hashim Silver was an ultimatum. I noticed Bethany's glee turn to disappointment and I couldn't shake my feeling of guilt for brushing her off.

"You know what, go have fun. I need to use the bathroom anyway," I said.

Bethany smiled. "Ok, see you after?"

I nodded. "Of course." I gestured to Hashim. "Where's the bathroom?"

Hashim rolled back his shoulders and raised his chest. "Go upstairs, turn to your right, walk down the corridor, it'll be the first door on your left."

"Thanks." I turned away from him but still felt his gaze on me. As I walked up the spiral staircase, my heels tapped against the marbled stairs, every click reminded me of the Silver prestige.

*Turn right, first door on your left. Simple.* While walking toward the bathroom, I watched as a door slightly opened. I know you're not supposed to enter random rooms in people's houses, but curiosity has always overpowered the reason within me. Besides, doors don't open without reason.

I walked toward the door and it *creaked* open further. The room inside was lackluster – everything the Silver family was not. In their world of diamonds, dusty boxes never seemed to fit in. I was about to close the door and walk away until a glossy, oval-shaped mirror caught my attention. I remembered Hashim mentioning a mirror once. "Delver looking-glass," he called it.

*"My family has had it since forever. You know, there's a story that goes behind it,"* Hashim ominously stated. *My classmates stayed glued to his pathetic spiel. "If you look into the mirror's corner you'll see a dark figure, the Reaper, and then, you'll vanish."*

You've got to be kidding me, does anyone actually believe this crap? I stood up from my seat. "Ok Hashim, let's all pretend that this delusional story is true. Prove it."

*“I don’t have to prove anything to you, Argent,” He stated my surname like a curse, rather than a name of honor, “But if you want evidence, ask the four.”*

*“What are you talking about?”*

*“An English duchess from 1709. William Penns, a rug merchant from 1746. The son of Sandra Bates, and Johnson Spangler, founder of our school. These four people have gone missing after seeing a dark figure in the corner of a Delver looking-glass. Four people who have permanently vanished. Disappeared.”*

*Disappeared. The tone of his voice as he said the word made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and my face turn pale. I didn’t expect a response. I wanted him to fall back and accept defeat, but could he be right? I wanted to believe that he was lying, but something within me sensed what he was saying was true. A feeling that he was right. All eyes turned to me, waiting for my response, and all I could say was, “Hm.”*

*"Hey, put that down!"*

*The sound of a glass vase shattering downstairs and the following squeal pulled me back to reality. I looked around me, having a feeling that I wasn't alone in the room. The same unease that I felt in the classroom that day — the lump in my throat and the raising of the hairs on the back of my neck — was caused by the sight of the mirror. While these red flags were of some concern, the thought of being able to prove Hashim wrong took precedence over any warning. The floor groaned as I pressed my feet into the cracked wood, creeping toward the looking glass. A thick layer of dust*

covered the dresser, but the mirror on top of it was pristine as if it had been routinely attended to.

I brushed my hands down the sides of my strapless black dress and then gently laid my hand on the silver pendant around my neck. It was a gift from my father, a family heirloom. While I've always dismissed superstition, seen it as an ideology that gave too much faith in something unknown, the pendant always gave me tranquility. *You're being a coward, just look at the damn thing already, it's not like the story's real.* I gave in and looked around the mirror, searching for a dark figure.

*Nothing.* I chuckled. "Looks like your story's fake, Silver." I stared into the mirror, looking directly at the corner. *My lipstick's starting to fade,* I thought to myself. I reached into my purse and pulled out my lipstick, layering it over my lips. I rubbed my lips together with a devilish glare in my eyes. *Wait until your little party hears of what a fraud you are, Hashim.*

*Khhphrrr...*

The screams of frat boy wannabees and teenagers dissipated. All I heard was breathing. One breath.

But I wasn't making a sound.

*Khhphrr.*

My heart sank. An external force pulled me toward the mirror. Face-to-face, the flat, peering eyes of a distorted figure smiled at me.

*Thud.* My lipstick fell onto the dresser, echoing throughout the room. Everything in me wanted to scream, but I had no power. The pulling force grew stronger in every direction. It clawed at me. Closer and closer, it shoved me to the looking glass.

"Katherine."

Like a game of tug of war, I was dragged toward the mirror. On the other side, I could see some *world*, like this one but darker, upside-down.

"Katherine!" The voice called out again before grabbing my shoulder, twisting me to face them. *Hashim*. His touch was enough to break me out of my trance.

He looked at me with concern. "Your face..." After I was pushed into the mirror, it left a gash on my cheek. He reached to my face to dab away the blood, but I reflexively pushed away his hand. A river of tears and snot filled my face, my eyes burned red, and I stared at Hashim blankly in the face, unable to process what had just happened to me.

I gulped down the lump in my throat. My voice trembled, "I-I don't know what is up with you and your *demented* family, but I'm leaving."

I started to leave the room, but Hashim shouted, "Wait! Katherine, I'm-"

"Hashim, if I were you, I would burn that mirror to the ground."

I stormed down the staircase. *Click*. I ran out the entry door and slammed it behind me. Shivering uncontrollably, I needed to find a place of solitude. I noticed an enclosed part of the garden, and though stumbling, managed my way to it. I rested my back against a garden wall strung with vines, collecting my breath. The thorns pricked my back, but they were the only security I had. Every time I closed my eyes I saw its face, its eyes, *smiling at me*. I buried my fingers into my scalp, trying to tear the vision from my mind.

The sound of electrical devices powering down one by one called my attention. There was no more noise. Nothing. It was as if I'd entered a different reality. Another world. The only form of electricity remaining was a ray of light, radiating from a single light post, illuminating the street.

"Katherine?" A voice called. I turned my head and saw Bethany.

"Bethany?" I looked like the type of person I'd laugh at. My hair was a tangled mess, on my face — dripping mascara, and the lump in my throat returned.

Bethany walked toward me and kneeled to my head level. "It's okay. The power went out, but Hashim is starting up the generator." She extended her hand to me. "Let's go back inside, Katherine." I grabbed her hand, using her strength to pick myself up. We walked toward the house in silence, *how could I have explained what I saw?*

"Katherine?" she asked.

I nodded, the lump in my throat preventing me from speaking.

Bethany smiled at me. "Have you ever wondered what death feels like?"

"What?" I croaked.

Bethany's face disfigured into the mortifying figure I saw in the mirror. A newly-formed black cloak that draped to its feet appeared on its body. It drew back its cloak, revealing an array of weapons. One of them glistened in the moonlight, *a scythe*.

The scythe had a curved single-edged blade on top of a pole, allowing the Reaper to reach me from long distances. Its tip, fine and sharpened, begged to murder someone. *To murder me.*

The Reaper grabbed it from its holding place and sprinted at me, lunging the scythe at my neck. I stood, paralyzed, until my rationality returned. *Move you idiot, you're going to die!* I pushed myself over and the scythe's swing lingered in the air. I forcefully rammed at the Reaper's legs, toppling it over. We rolled over each other in alteration. It punched my cheek, and the sound of my jaw dislocating screamed. Deep red blood infused with my cherry lipstick. *That tasted weird.* I clawed my fingertips into its eyeballs, temporarily blinding it. Wrestling against its overwhelming strength, I pushed the scythe away. I dug my fingers into the concrete road, crawling away. I didn't know where I was trying to go, but I knew I had to go anywhere but there. The Reaper's eyesight quickly recovered and it dragged me off the road by my hair. It slammed my head against the concrete. My vision went red. I felt its palm grip my head as it twisted it, forcing me to face it. I rushed my hands to my head and felt blood dripping onto my palms. This *creature* liked to see me fight, it enjoyed the struggle. It knew it had the advantage. And I knew it too.

The Reaper put its hands on its deadly weapon and grasped it firmly, twirling it above my neck, preparing to plunge into me. I tried to sink into the ground, submit to the darkness, and escape from the death that awaited me.

People say that before you die your life flashes before your eyes, but I saw nothing. I hadn't lived yet. *I was not ready to die.* I drew every ounce of strength I had to fully open my eyes. If the Reaper was going to kill me, it was going to have to see me as it did it.

I begged, "Please."

For a second, a split second, I noticed a shift in its expression. Confusion, empathy, regret. I'm not sure which emotion, but whichever one it was, it's what saved me. Instead of parading my head on the apex of its blade, the Reaper moved its hand in a sweeping motion. And then, there was darkness.

My body slammed on top of a glass surface, but it didn't shatter. The floor vibrated, releasing an acoustic resonance. I felt the pulses on my body as I lay on the floor. I opened my eyes. The entire room was glass, with mirrors on each wall. On each panel, I saw an infinite array of reflected images. My reflection warped when I stared long enough.

"Ah!" I yelped. I looked up and saw three faces hovering over me. I crawled backward and jumped to my feet, prepared to fight.

"Oh, you fool, that didn't go quite right last time, did it now?" A middle-aged man pretentiously stated.

"Penns, behave yourself! The girl is frightened, at least properly introduce yourself," a woman lectured. "I am Sarah Ferguson, an English duchess, or... or former English duchess, I suppose."

A teenage boy, probably around my age, waved at me. He was built like the typical football player: tall, broad shoulders, and defined muscles. He greeted me with a smile. "Hey, I'm Liam Bates." *He's cute.* I might've asked him for his number under better circumstances.

Although misdirected, I snapped at him. "I don't care who you are. Where the hell *am I?*" I laughed to conceal my desperation. "*I'm going insane.*"

I paced back and forth throughout the room, whose borders only kept expanding.

"You aren't going anywhere anytime soon, *Argent*." The voice of a man, isolated from the other three, boomed. He had distinctive arrogance in his voice, his words demanded silence. "If you hadn't noticed already, you're in quite a peculiar predicament. You're temporarily trapped here." I didn't need the man to introduce himself. I had seen him enough in portraits on my school walls to know who he was. *Johnson Spangler*.

*Temporarily*, he said temporarily. *That meant that there was a way to get out. I could get out.* "What? What do you mean temporarily?"

"You already know the answer, Katherine, you're smart. The fact is, ever since your birth, the Reaper has planned the perfect circumstances that brought you to the Silver Manor today. At the manor, he drew you to the Delver looking-glass, allowing him to finally physically contact you and bring you here. Now tell me, what does this mean?"

"I-I don't-" I tried to speak, but I couldn't find the words, my brain couldn't function.

"*He chose you, Katherine.* The Reaper is a lonely man. He didn't choose to be who he is, *they* chose him. He is anchored to this dreaded curse of an occupation. Tell me, what does someone who is trapped desir-

A voice cut him off. "I'll handle it from here." I'm startled by the all-too-familiar tone. The loud, yet quiet, whisper took me back to the moment. The street, my eyes, my pleas. *The Reaper*.

He narrowed his eyes at Spangler. "Thank you, *Johnson*, I appreciate you handling my introduction." Spangler instinctively turned away from him. Anyone could sense the history between the two.

"Hello, *Argent*." The Reaper stared at me with cold eyes. I took a step back from him as he stepped closer to me. I tripped over myself, falling back onto the floor. I tried to pick myself up, but I could only shuffle backward on my hands and feet.

The Reaper kneeled down to my head, the same way he did as Bethany. I gagged. The smell on him was putrid, the built-up stench of hundreds of corpses lingered on him. If I were to smell death, it would smell like him. I wanted to push him aside, but I couldn't. I was paralyzed. He stared at me with a false look of sympathy, I could feel him patronizing me.

He laughed. "It's clear that you aren't as smart as Spangler believes you are, if you were, you would know why you're here."

"W-what are you talking about?" I tried to hold myself together, but I couldn't. As the words escaped from my mouth, they sounded like an incomprehensible slur of syllables. His presence made me break apart.

"You see that little pendant around your neck?" He grabbed it and tried to yank it off my neck, but he couldn't remove it as if some force restrained him from doing so.

I chuckled. "It's clear that you aren't as powerful as you believe you are." Fury raged in his eyes. He grabbed my cheeks, digging his fingernails into them. I screamed in agony. I could feel the cut from the mirror reopen and the sting it brought as he pierced it.

