

After Midnight – Alice, Year 6, WA

I smell the earthy scent of the Market, the potions and powders and exotic objects mingling into a powerful smell.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

One minute till midnight and she's still not here.

I refuse to grow alarmed, pushing down my fear. Refusing to let it grab hold of me, because once it does, its vice-like grip won't let go. Absentmindedly, I trace the scar that snakes up my arm. An ugly, glaringly pink thing that's usually covered by a sleeve, but it isn't today. It certainly has attracted a lot of stares from passersby.

People pass me, couples, families, children. Somewhere out in the crowd I hear someone laughing, someone crying, someone screaming. A multitude of emotions.

50 seconds.

I grip my trunk tighter and brush some dust off my shirt. I'm starting to think she won't come as I step into a changing room and slip into pants. So many things could have happened, so many things I'd be responsible for, so many things I wouldn't know about. I step out of the changing room, inhaling the mingling scents. It calms me.

One of the famous drifting lights of the Marketplace wanders over to me, and it hovers above me for a few moments before moving away lazily.

"Are you alright there, pretty lady?" the merchant in the stall closest to me. He was selling an assortment of magic tools, things that would allegedly make your life easier.

"Yes, sir, I am quite alright," I reply coldly. "Just waiting for a friend." Then I turn my gaze pointedly.

40 seconds.

I open my trunk and reach for a small, embroidered pouch. I take out the black coins stored in it. At first glance, it looks like the Empire's currency, but under close examination it reveals that the logo is different, a mountain range instead of the Emperor's head. The sign of the Inepta. I play with one as I wait, releasing all my nervous energy. I scan the Market again, watching. Always watching. Always assessing.

30 seconds.

I hear the shouts of Kavin guards, low, angry, furious.

She's here.

Immediately, my heart starts beating quicker, and a flush rises in my cheeks. "Make way!" one of the Kavin guards barks, pushing aside some Market wanderers. The crowd parts like water, watching the spectacle and forming a clear path for the escapee and the guards. They don't engage in the chase, only watch, gaping.

She shoots me a grin, the very one I'd fallen for in the beginning.

20 seconds.

I tap my trunk furiously and it shrinks suddenly. I toss it into the embroidered pouch and tie it on my belt. In no time, she's next to me, breathless and clutching the paperwork.

"Val," she breathes. "You're here."

"I almost thought you wouldn't be," I smile. For a second, it's only Isolde and I, bathed in the warm glow of the Market, safe and alone, no-one chasing us. The shouting of the guards brings me back to my senses.

"Watch out," I whisper. Then, I fling the black coin devices, and they burst into smoke as they hit something.

10 seconds.

Instantaneously, we rise, spinning higher and higher into the sky with a loud boom. Below, we see the confused shouts of the guards and wanderers and merchants alike. The Market is a glorious view, even blanketed in a thick layer of black smoke. I see the vague outline of the Palace in the distance and smirk. *You won't be getting us now.* The smoke fades, and I see the guards' pointing. *Too late now,* I smirk. Isolde tightens her grip in my hand, and I'm reminded of her dislike and fear for heights. I wrap an arm around her waist as the cold winter wind flies into my face, watching the twinkling drifting lights of the Market below us.

I see the floating airship above us, and I reach my other hand up. Someone reaches their hand and hoists us up.

"Welcome aboard the Dove, fellow rebels," he says, grinning.

Midnight.

Bells chime below us, the twinkling chimes of the famed Market Bells. It plays a soft melody, complicated yet simple. Like our lives, I think.

"This is a new beginning for us," I say, fingers intertwined with Isolde's.

“A new beginning,” she echoes, a smile spreading across her face. “Yes, I would very much like that.”