Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

—Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice”

It’s time to begin.

—Imagine Dragons, “It’s Time”
They were coming for her. She could hear their heavy footsteps echoing in the concrete hallway. In a way, the sound was a relief. For days upon days she had been left in the room, alone, in total silence, with little food and water, the weight of solitude becoming ever more oppressive, the silence a heaviness that she could not shake, punishment for refusing to do as she was told, punishment for being what she was.

She had forgotten how many days, how many months, she had been left here, alone with only her thoughts for company.

But not quite alone.

I warned you about waiting, rumbled the voice in her head. The voice that she heard in her dreams, whose words echoed like thunder, thunder and ash, smoke and flame. When it spoke, she saw a beast through the inferno, carrying her aloft on black wings through dark skies as it rained fire upon its enemies. The fire that raged within
her. The fire that destroyed and consumed. The fire that would destroy and consume her if she let it.

Her destiny. A destiny of rage and ruin.

Fire and pain.

The voice in her head was the reason her eyes were not brown or gray. Her clear tiger eyes—hazel-green with golden pupils—told the world she carried a mark on her skin, one that she kept hidden, one that was shaped like a flame and hurt like a burn, right above her heart. The reason she was imprisoned, the reason they wanted her to do as she was told.

The girl did not want to be different. She did not want to be marked. She did not want to be what the voice said she was. What the commander and the doctors believed she was. A freak. A monster.

Let me go—she had implored the first time she had been brought to this place—I’m not what you think I am. She had insisted they were wrong about her from the beginning of her captivity.

What is your talent? they had demanded. Show us.

I have none, she had told them. I have no ability. I can do nothing. Let me go. You’re wrong. Let me go.

She never told them about the voice in her head.

But they found ways to use her anyway.

Now they were coming, their heavy footsteps plodding against the stone. They would make her do what they wanted, and she would not be able to refuse. It was always
this way. She resisted at first, they punished her for it, and finally she gave in.

Unless…

Unless she listened to the voice.

When it spoke to her, it always said the same thing: I have been searching for you, but now it is you who must find me. The time has come for us to be one. The map has been found. Leave this place. Journey to the Blue.

Like others she had heard the legends of a secret doorway in the middle of the ruined Pacific that led to a place where the air was warm and the water was turquoise. But the way was impossible—the dark oceans treacherous, and many had perished attempting to find it.

But perhaps there was hope. Perhaps she would find a way to do what it sought.

Out there.

In New Vegas.

Outside her window, far away, she could see the glittering lights of the city shining through the gray. Before the ice, night skies were supposedly black and infinite, dotted with stars that shone as sharp as diamonds against velvet. Looking up into that dark expanse you could imagine traveling to distant lands, experiencing the vastness of the universe, and understanding your own small part in it. But now the sky was glassy and opaque at night, a reflection of the bright white snow that covered the ground and swirled in the atmosphere. Even the brightest of stars appeared only as faint, distant glimmers.
in the blurry firmament.

There were no more stars. There was only New Vegas, glowing, a beacon in the darkness.

The city lights stopped abruptly at a long arcing line just a few miles out. Beyond the line, beyond the border, everything was black, Garbage Country, a place where light had disappeared—a no-man’s-land of terrors—and past that, the toxic sea. And somewhere, hidden in that ocean, if she believed what the voice said, she would find a way to another world.

They were closer and closer. She could hear their voices outside, arguing.

The guards were opening the door.
She didn’t have much time...
Panic rose in her throat.
What would they ask her to do now...what did they want...the children most likely...always the children...
They were here.
The window! the voice bellowed. Now!
Glass smashed, broken, sharp icicles falling to the floor. The door burst open, but the girl was already on the ledge, the cold air whipping against her cheeks. She shivered in her thin pajamas, the arctic winds blowing sharp as daggers as she dangled on the knife-edge, two hundred stories in the air.
Fly!
I will hold you.
Her mark was burning like a hot ember against her skin. It had awakened, as a rush of power, electric as the sparks that lit up the sky, snaked through her limbs, and she was warm, so warm, as if she was bathed in fire. She was burning, burning, the mark above her heart pressing on her like a brand, scorching her with its heat.

Let us be one.
You are mine.

No, never! She shook her head, but they were inside now, the commander and his men, raising their guns, training their sights on her.

“STOP!” The commander stared her down. “REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE!”

GO!

She was dead either way. Fire and pain. Rage and ruin.

She turned from the room and toward the city lights, toward New Vegas, frozen city of impossible delights, a world where everything and anything could be bought and sold, the pulsing, decadent, greedy heart of the new republic. New Vegas: a place where she could hide, a place where she could find passage, out to the water, into the Blue.

The commander was screaming. He aimed and pressed the trigger.

She held her breath. There was only one way to go.
Out and down.
Up and away.
Fly! roared the monster in her head.
The girl jumped from the ledge and into the void.
PART THE FIRST

LEAVING NEW VEGAS

Am I just in Heaven or Las Vegas?
—COCTEAU TWINS, “HEAVEN OR LAS VEGAS”
ONE

It was the start of the weekend, amateur night; her table was crowded with conventioneers, rich kids flashing platinum chips, a pair of soldiers on leave—honeymooners nuzzling between drinks, nervous first-timers laying down their bets with trembling fingers. Nat shuffled the cards and dealt the next hand. The name she used had come to her in a fragment from a dream she could not place, and could not remember, but it seemed to fit. She was Nat now. Familiar with numbers and cards, she had easily landed a job as a blackjack dealer at the Loss—what everyone called the Wynn since the Big Freeze. Some days she could pretend that was all she was, just another Vegas dreamer, trying to make ends meet, hoping to get lucky on a bet.

She could pretend that she had never run, that she had never stepped out of that window, although “fall” wasn’t the right word; she had glided, flying through the air as if she had wings. Nat had landed hard in a snowbank, disarming the perimeter guards who had surrounded her,
stealing a heat vest to keep herself warm. She followed the lights of the Strip and once she arrived in the city it was easy enough to trade in the vest for lenses to hide her eyes, allowing her to find work in the nearest casino.

New Vegas had lived up to her hopes. While the rest of the country chafed under martial law, the western frontier town was the same as it ever was—the place where the rules were often bent, and where the world came to play. Nothing kept the crowds away. Not the constant threat of violence, not the fear of the marked, not even the rumors of dark sorcery at work in the city’s shadows.

Since her freedom, the voice in her head was exultant, and her dreams were growing darker. Almost every day she woke to the smell of smoke and the sound of screams. Some days, the dreams were so vivid she did not know if she was sleeping or awake. Dreams of fire and ruin, the smoldering wreckage, the air thick with smoke, the blood on the walls...

The sound of screams...

“Hit me.”

Nat blinked. She had seen it so clearly. The explosion, the flashing bright-white light, the black hole in the ceiling, the bodies slumped on the floor.

But all around her, it was business as usual. The casino hummed with noise, from the blaring pop song over the stereo, the craps dealers barking numbers as they raked in die, video poker screens beeping, slot machines ringing,
players impatient for their cards. The fifteen-year-old bride was the one who had asked for another. “Hit me,” she said again.

“You’ve got sixteen, you should hold,” Nat advised. “Let the house bust, dealer hits on sixteen, which I’m showing.”

“You think?” she asked with a hopeful smile. The child bride and her equally young husband, both soldiers, wouldn’t see anything like the main floor of a luxury casino for a long time. Tomorrow they would ship back out to their distant patrol assignments, controlling the drones that policed the country’s far-flung borders, or the seekers that roamed the forbidden wastelands.

Nat nodded, flipped up the next card and showed the newly-weds...an eight, dealer busted, and she paid out their winnings. “Let it ride!” The bride whooped. They would keep their chips in play to see if they could double their holdings.

It was a terrible idea, but Nat couldn’t dissuade them. She dealt the next round. “Good luck,” she said, giving them the usual Vegas blessing before she showed them her cards. She was sighing—Twenty-one, the house always wins, there goes their wedding bonus—when the first bomb exploded.

One moment she was collecting chips, and the next she was thrown against the wall.

Nat blinked. Her head buzzed and her ears rang, but at least she was still in one piece. She knew to take it slow,
gingerly wiggling fingers and toes to see if everything still worked, the tears in her eyes washing away the soot. Her lenses hurt, they felt stuck, heavy and itchy, but she kept them on just to be safe.

So her dream had been real after all.

“Drau bomb,” she heard people mutter, people who had never seen a drau—let alone a sylph—in their lives. Ice trash. Monsters.

Nat picked herself up, trying to orient herself in the chaos of the broken casino. The explosion had blown a hole in the ceiling and pulverized the big plate-glass windows, sending incandescent shards tumbling down fifty stories to the sidewalks below.

Everyone at her blackjack table was dead. Some had died still clutching their cards, while the newlyweds were slumped together on the floor, blood pooling around their bodies. She felt sick to her stomach, remembering their happy faces.

Screams echoed over the fire alarms. But the power was still on, so pop music from overhead speakers lent a jarring, upbeat soundtrack to the casino’s swift fall into chaos, as patrons stumbled about, reeling and dazed, covered in ashes and dust. Looters reached for chips while dealers and pit bosses fended them off with guns and threats. Police in riot gear arrived, moving from room to room, rounding up the rest of the survivors, looking for conspirators rather than helping victims.

Not too far from where she was standing, she heard a
different sort of screaming—the sound of an animal cornered, of a person begging for his life.

She turned to see who was making that terrible noise. It was one of the roulette dealers. Military police surrounded him, their guns trained on his head. He was kneeling on the floor, cowering. “Please,” he cried, collapsing into heart-wrenching sobs. “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot, please don’t shoot!” he begged, and when he looked up, Nat could see what was wrong. His eyes. They were blue, a startling, iridescent hue. His lenses must have slipped off, or he’d taken them off when they burned from the smoke, as she almost did hers. The blue-eyed ones were said to be able to control minds, create illusions. Apparently, this one didn’t have the ability to control minds, or his tears.

He tried to hide his face, tried to cover his eyes with his hands. “Please!”

It was no use.

He died with his blue eyes open, his uniform splattered with blood.

*Executed.*

*In public.*

And no one cared.

“It’s all right, everyone, move on, the danger’s passed now. Move along,” the guards said, ushering the survivors to the side, away from the corpses in the middle of the broken casino, as a sanitation and recovery team began cleaning up the mess, moving the tables back upright.
Nat followed the stream of people herded in a corner, knowing what would come next—ret scans and security checks, standard procedure after a disturbance. “Ladies and gentlemen, you know the drill,” an officer announced, holding up his laser.

“Don’t blink,” security officers warned as they flashed their lights. Patrons lined up quietly—this wasn’t the first bombing they’d survived—and several were impatient to get back to their games. Already the craps dealers were calling out numbers again. It was just another day in New Vegas, just another bomb.

“I can’t get a read, you’re going to have to come with us, ma’am,” a guard said to an unfortunate soul slumped by the slot machines. The sallow-faced woman was led to a separate line. Those who failed the scans or carried suspect documentation would be thrown into lockdowns. They would be left to the mercy of the system, left to rot, forgotten, unless a celebrity took a shine to their cause, but lately the mega-rockers were all agitating to restore the ozone. The only magic they believed in was their own charisma.

It was her turn next.

“Evening,” Nat said, as she looked straight into the small red light, willing her voice to remain calm. She told herself she had nothing to fear, nothing to hide. Her eyes were the same as the rest.

The officer was roughly her age—sixteen. He had a row of pimples across his forehead, but his tone was
world-weary. Tired as an old man. He kept the beam focused on her eyes until she had no choice but to blink and he had to start over.

“Sorry,” she said, crossing her arms against her chest and struggling to keep her breathing steady. Why was it taking so long? Did he see something she didn’t? She would hunt down the lockhead who’d conjured her rets if he’d proven her false.

The officer finally switched off the light.

“Everything all right?” she asked, as she flipped her long dark hair over one shoulder.

“Perfect.” He leaned closely to read her name tag. “Natasha Kestal. Pretty name for a pretty girl.”

“You’re too kind.” She smiled, thankful for the invisible gray lenses that allowed her to pass the scan.

Nat had gotten the job with fake papers and a favor, and as they waved her through to the employee lockers so she could change into a clean uniform and get back to work, she thanked the unseen stars above, because for now, she was safe.