



**JASMINE SPARK**  
1 DAY AFTER THE EVENTS OF SILVER VALLEY

The universe is a cruel place.

It's taken everything from me. Again, and again, and again.

Mason's birthday was something I never thought it'd miss. And yet, here I am, watching the event unfold from a distance.

I hold my breath as Savannah Shaw, the only person I actually give a damn about in this whole universe, carries on with her life without me. My body sways against a chafing, still-warm tree, thoughts scattering just as smoke from the bombs continue to swirl into the sky.

Everything feels hot and gross—the breeze that's licking my cheek, the grime lining my clothing, my shaking hands. I drag my fingers through my matted

curls, unable to force myself to take that one last step towards the warehouse.

The freaking warehouse.

A hiccough bubbles up my throat as I watch them. No one wants to celebrate a birthday a day after a bombing, but no one can say no to Savannah Shaw.

They congregate near the forest, close to the entrance of the building. They're all there; everyone Savannah has picked up on the island and claimed as her own—Eli, Melanie, Jesse—as well as a collection of Mason's friends that somehow survived.

There's no cake. No balloons. Nothing to mark this day as a celebration. But no one's burst out crying yet, so I suppose that's something to celebrate.

I pick the bark off the tree before me, digging my nails into it until they begin to ache. Around me, leaves brush past my feet, rattling in the wind.

Silver Valley is *gone*. Ashes, death, misery. It feels like a fever dream.

Foliage covers me from view, the soot on my face hiding me. But then Savannah turns, the breeze catching on her chocolate hair, and I all but stop breathing. Her hair brushes her face as she scans the perimeter behind her, sucking on her lips.

*Routine checks. Nothing more.*

My heart is erratic.

Coming here, to Terra, had been my salvation all those years ago. Umbra has never been kind to me—it

killed everyone I loved, took any hope I had, and spat me out like dirt.

I thought, back then, that I could come to Terra and find a new home. Befriending the prophesised would give me a purpose, a family, and a new reason to keep going. But as the years went by, things became harder.

Now, the only thing in this entire stars-damn universe I love, is Savannah Shaw. And for one sacred moment, it felt like she loved me too.

Her eyes linger over the spot I'm hiding.

Savannah. My Savannah.

A heat cascades down my body, warmer than the trees in the forest, searing me. And then her eyes drift past me, a shaky smile returning to her face as she reaches for her brother, and I slide down the tree, a distant sob shaking me.

Something inside me shudders.

My world breaking.

What once was a guise to bring her to Umbra, leaving all those clues about her prophesised reign, changed into something more—I started leaving clues about Umbra because I wanted Savannah to *know* me. The real me. Not Jasmine Spark, but the girl from before.

On days like this, I almost wonder if Savannah thinks about that.

Did I ruin everything for her?

Did I ruin *us*?

My body is stiff as the breeze brushes smoke around

me, filling my nose, bringing my tears to my eyes. I take a deep breath as Savannah links her arm through Jesse's, pulling him closer to her brother and the rock they have lined with a blanket. Eli packs up some salvaged food on the blanket, a grin splitting his face as Melanie says something.

Mark drifts his hands down to his daughter, as if subconsciously, fingers brushing her jacket.

Savannah doesn't notice as she leans over and begins to help pack up the array of food, just as Jesse takes a step back, eyes resuming Savannah's task of scanning the trees while she is distracted. They move in tandem, working together subconsciously, and the sight of it makes me sick.

My jaw stiffens as I watch him, my body cold and aching.

I almost leave from my spot, but then, Savannah lets loose a loud laugh.

My entire body freezes.

Her laughter rings through the trees, shattering the world. I stare at her, unblinking, as I absorb the sound. Laughter like that shouldn't exist. Not now. Not here.

She used to laugh like that at my jokes.

But now I can't even look at her without my heart tearing.

Mark shakily grins, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Before them, Mason coughs.

He's laughing too.

His friends have left their rock, all clambering down to the river, food in their hands. Some of them have downcast faces, but most of them are smiling.

Mason doesn't for one second look at them, not while his sister is shining brighter than the stars.

I wonder if she told him about Umbra yet. I wonder if he's become a part of this now.

Selfishly, I wish he wouldn't.

Blood roars in my ears as I pull myself away from the tree and return into the forest.

My foot snags a twig, the sound ricocheting around me.

The world pauses at the sound.

I'm close enough that they might be able to hear me. But Jesse Hayes has stopped scanning the forest. He follows Savannah as she drifts down towards the river by the warehouse, struggling to keep up with Mason as he lunges after his departing friends.

Melanie rolls up the blanket they left behind, her body stiff as she glares down at it with a sullen expression. Eli almost stays with her, but then she angrily snaps something at him, and he retreats.

My breathing grows laboured, the weight of the world settling on me.

And then, as time stops, Melanie Beckett rises her eyes to mine.

She knows I'm here.

I haven't been paying attention to her.

Maybe it was the sound I made, or perhaps she always knew and was waiting for a moment to address the situation.

Everything around me feels languid, the breeze tickling the hair against my face. And Savannah's stupid hacker friend just stands there, staring.

I can't do anything but stare back.

She bundles the blanket into her arms with a slow precision, never once taking her eyes from me, and then drifts towards my place in the forest.

I set my jaw, take another step back. The leaves engulf me, hiding me utterly from view, but she continues her prowling.

Nothing slows her. Melanie Beckett is a force.

With a huff, she tightens the blanket into a ball against her chest, and steps into the treeline.

"You shouldn't be here. You should leave."

Her words spiral around me, stabbing my ears.

I flinch, unable to meet her gaze.

*Run, run, run*, my mind urges. But the way she is staring at me with those piercing eyes, as if she has any right to tell me what to do, makes me snap back, "It's Mason's birthday."

She rises her eyebrows lightly.

And then she's right in front of me, so close I can smell the weird lemongrass of her scent and hear the way her green jacket hisses as she moves.

"I'm aware," she mutters, deadpan.

I swallow sharply, my voice raw, “I just wanted to...”

“To what?” she snaps at me, her words like a knife. “Savannah is happy. Unwillingly, she is happy—for Mason. For his birthday. And you being there will do nothing except remind her of the pain of the last couple days. So please, just let her have this moment.”

I slash my eyes to hers, the inferno of my agony squeezing out of me. Everything feels hot and sick, pain lashing up my throat, and it takes nearly everything in me to not cry in front of Savannah’s new friend.

Savannah’s new *bestie*. My goddamn *replacement*.

I want to hurt her, to make her feel the pain that’s ripping through my chest.

I want to scream and plummet her into the ground.

Viciously.

“Alright then, Melanie Beckett, tell me how you plan to keep me away. Because let’s be real, I have the same right to be here today as you do—for Mason,” I quip, acid pooling in my mouth.

“For Mason?” she enquires, lifting a brow, seeing right through me.

*No, not for Mason.*

*Everything I do is for Savannah.*

I jut out my jaw, glaring at her, letting her see how much I hate her.

“One day, you will regret crossing me. You cannot keep Savannah from me, eventually she’ll come back,” I

say, my voice raw.

The way she scoffs lightly, the corner of her lip barely twitching, makes my face grow hot.

*She acts like she's a god.*

I clench my jaw, muscles twitching, unsure if I want to flee or to hit her clean in the face.

“You may think that,” Melanie says, her voice flat, “but we both know you’re the only thing keeping yourself away from Savannah—you’re a walking mess. I’m just here to remind you of the fact. So please, stars, go away before you shed your misery over, what is supposed to be, a happy day for our friend.”

*Our friend.*

*Ours.*

Savannah is not *our friend*, for stars sake.

I bundle my arms across my chest, huffing a chuckle that doesn’t sound genuine by any means, and splutter, “Screw you, Melanie Beckett. I will hate you until the day I die.”

She barely moves a muscle, zero emotion flashing over her features as she takes a step back, and says, “and you will never even cross my mind, I will forget about you the moment you turn back into that forest. So, please, enjoy living with that hate in your heart, Jasmine James.”

The use of my old name makes me recoil, I feel myself backtrack, my body flinching. The edge of Beckett’s face quirks at the sight of it, and immediately



the shock transfigures back into hatred.

I feel my whole chest grow hot with it.

And then Savannah's stupid hacker friend drifts her eyes from me, rolling her shoulders as she repositions the blanket before her. With a small nod, she dips her head, departing the forest.

*We're done now*, she seems to say.

I blink rapidly, my fingers twitching.

"One day, you're going to need me!" I basically yell.

She turns briefly, a lick of amusement on her face, "I highly doubt that."

She keeps walking away, returning to Savannah's side.

Taking my old place as her friend.

The tears building behind my eyes finally fall, pattering down onto clothing as I lower my head to my chest, trying to control myself.

*Screw them all, screw this place.*

"Screw you, Savannah. You and Beckett deserve each other," I breath, my voice getting lost to the wind.

And all at once, I turn away.

I head back into the forest, towards the base on the other end of the island.

Running away is the one thing I've always done well.

The universe can be a damn cruel place.