

Prologue

When the end of the world comes, people always expect poetics. They expect a rousing speech as the sky burns, and the moon crumbles, and the sun blinks out. It's as if saying something brave or clever will push back against the tide of fate and stop time in its place, when the truth is just the opposite. Screams lay curses on the gods while monsters loom in the distance, leveling buildings that have stood for centuries, their wails carrying on the wind and growing in number. The eerie chorus vibrates as dark masses make their way down every street, the shepherds of fire and brimstone, and we all know there's nothing that can stop them.

We're the only ones left, and all we can do is watch on in silence as our people die.

This makes it easy for me to slip in mostly unnoticed, gritting my teeth with the effort it takes to haul myself up the ladder leading out of the catacombs, but it's hard to disguise the drag of my leg or the trapdoor slamming shut behind me. It doesn't matter either way. Rein always could spot me, whether it was across an empty courtyard at the end of the world or a crowded ballroom, swarming with aristocrats. She lunges across the distance, narrowed eyes taking in the growing pool of blood beneath my feet and my goofy attempt at a smile as I wave.

"Is it too late to say 'ow'?"

"You're lucky I'm not carrying you." She says it like it's a threat. I'm one hundred percent sure it is one as she bends down, fingers making quick work of the makeshift bandage that had done absolutely nothing to stop the flow of blood. But don't let anyone say I didn't try.

There's no use telling her that, though, so I hobble back to give her space to work. It's as bad of an idea as it looks. Rein's grip is iron tight and she has to catch my hand to keep me stable when my balance fails. "Careful! Just- give me a second. This looks pretty bad; I know it must hurt."

"Love, I'm fine," smoothing a hand through her hair, I proudly gesture to the wiggle of my toes, how I can roll my ankle, promptly biting back the cry that follows after. "See? It's just a little swollen."

“Says the girl with shrapnel in her foot.” She isn’t having it, and I can’t tell if her voice breaks due to her hiss or the sight of my heel turned to mush. She’s so careful in trying to remove the tiny pieces of metal that it’s nearly impossible to spot the tremble in her hands, but I’ve known her for too long. Just like she’s known me for too long and I’m not even sure why I try to lie to her anymore.

Shrinking in on myself, I whisper an apology. She nods. A fucked up ritual for when *I’ve* fucked up and she’s already forgiven me. Her grip on my ankle tightens. “I don’t care who’s throwing around the orders next time,” a pointed look directly behind us, “I’m going with you. No one needs to be out there on their own.”

The ground shudders beneath our feet, heaving with the collapse of another building, another life completely extinguished. A life we don’t know the name of and can’t carry forward--a name that will forever be lost to dust.

I have to clear my throat. “There was nobody out there.” Five simple words, but it leaves Rein pausing. The flame flickering between her fingers is only an inch away from cauterizing the wound. I want to ask her what she’s thinking about--her parents, her home, perhaps the little trinkets we hadn’t been able to bring with us--but she’s already wiping away the little beads of sweat off her brow. Moving just to *do* something, I assume, but then she peers up through the strands of hair stuck to her cheeks, violet eyes pinning me in place with their soft wall of tears, and I can’t breathe past the heart in my throat.

Her next inhale is closer to a rattle, “Why didn’t you call me? I would’ve met you halfway.”

“Rein, that’s not-” She does her best to protest as I bend down, but screw my heel, there will be time later to finish off the bleeding for good. Cupping her cheeks, I bump our foreheads together. “You know I’m not going anywhere. I would’ve called you, but I didn’t have a choice.” A small gesture to the shattered remains of my radio, the top half still strapped to my belt, and that’s all the answer she needs. How it’s there is a miracle, how skin hadn’t been gorged away with it was even luckier. I could dip, dive, and dance around buried mines all day, we were trained by the best, but that stuff is easy compared to what’s outside now. There was little reason as to why I wasn’t laying under piles of rubble like the rest of the royal guard.

She snuffles, but leans forward to hide away in my hair, her breath tickling the side of my neck. “You promised.”

“Hey, you may be a *tiny* bit stronger than me, but I’ll have you know I sent that monster packing! There’s no way I’m breaking any promises.” Scooting back, it’s only so I have enough room to tilt her chin up, “We’re in this together. Like always.”

“A very heartwarming performance, but are you going to keep standing there? There’s no time for your theatrics. Get over here.”

What is a Queen without her Kingdom? My mind whispers and I want to laugh, yell back, throw the scattered remains of my bloodied rag at her face. *Nothing but a figurehead waiting for checkmate.* But the fight rolls out of me with Rein’s burn.

Her growl is a practiced whisper underneath the sound of searing flesh. “She can’t do anything on her own.”

I can’t argue with her, not when people lay slaughtered on every street, not when they slink toward us, disjointed and hazy reminders of past failures. Instead, I shrug and offer a dingy piece of fabric for my new bandage, “If we take much longer she’s going to blow a fuse.”

Rein eyes it before pushing it away, fishing out a spotless rag from the pouch on her hip. “Yeah, and if I don’t treat this right, it’ll get infected. She can wait. They aren’t getting in anytime soon.”

Touche.

I glance at the walls of the courtyard, undulating starlight that’s turned crystalline in the fading rays of a dying sun. The grass closest to the barrier, already yellowed by the harsh throws of winter, has been reduced to scorched earth. Orange trees, which for years have stood guard over every walkway and every pedestrian, are now shriveled into dehydrated stumps. Their fruit, once the most prized possession of traders from beyond the galaxy’s limits, lay blackened and rotting, the acid scent drifting on the breeze. Even at a distance, my skin crawls, the air humid, heavy, too unyielding for mid-December. Sweat glides along the curve of my spine. If a living

soul couldn't withstand the heat, then neither could the dead; they'd dissipate, vanish back into a squealing mist before getting within thirty feet of this safe zone.

Even so, I find the Queen among a smattering of smushed fruit and hesitate. Her fingers hold a dazzling display of the same light, her eyes a shimmering gold through the storm of ash that twists at her feet, cutting a ridge into the earth, deeper and deeper. She's shaking, pale. Her regal appearance diminished to that of the commoners she once resented; long, flowing gown replaced by slacks stained with blood and streaks of mud. She looks up, sensing my stare, and her face pulls into a familiar sneer, but for once she doesn't have time to berate.

Good riddance.

Tugging on Rein's sleeve, I gesture in her direction. "How long has she been holding that up?"

"A little over an hour?" She sighs, "She's not keen to let me forget it either, because then she'd have to admit she's tired." Rolling her eyes, she finishes the last knot with a flourish, leaning back on her heels. "Perfection. Now. Stay right there."

She starts climbing to her feet, but I'm already side-stepping. "Hey, wait-! No, I know what you're doing!" Pouting at the way she chuckles, "We can't!"

Her hum is low as she watches me stumble, but she'd never let me fall. "Too slow, doveling." I don't even have time to register the ground getting closer before she's sweeping me into the air, the motion so smooth, so practiced, that it's easy for her to nestle me into the crook of her body. "Doctor's orders. No walking for you, princess."

It's difficult not to smile under the assault of those violet eyes, nibbling at my bottom lip like it might actually control the rebellious little urge. "You're a worrywart. I'm perfectly capable of walking on my own."

"But then I wouldn't get the absolute pleasure of carrying you, would I?"

"...flirt." the grumble only makes her laugh, so foreign in this wasteland of shattered glass and empty doorsteps. It's a cackle, energetic, and far better than any birdsong or fine-tuned

instrument--my heart jumps into overtime and I feel the heat all the way to my ears, but I can't bring myself to hide; it's the first real smile she's made in weeks. I want to bask in it.

Rein guides us through what remains of mangled cobblestone paths and marble arches, but we have to stop about five yards away from the Queen. It's just far enough that our skin withers instead of burns, but the Queen's voice is a wisp of what it used to be. A speck compared to the boom that once commanded the attention of the army, the nobles, the peasants, the researchers. Everyone. There wasn't a soul who didn't listen when she spoke and now we have to inch closer to catch every word.

"It's nice of you to finally join me." She throws a hand out. We pretend not to notice the skin that's peeling away from the bone, bleached a vivid white in the glare of her own magic. "Start the machine. *Now.*"

The muscle in Rein's jaw jumps as she bows her head, but when she turns she mutters a curse just loud enough for me to hear.

Not much longer, I ache to tell her, instead nuzzling into her chin to earn another small grin. Where we'll be going... maybe this sacrifice will be worth it. We'll at least be free.

The teleporter whirs to life, a vortex of color that descends and stretches out into oblivion. The machine rattles, growls, coughs out a bit of smoke, but it stays in one piece despite the seared edges and wires poking out of the panel on the side. I recognize Rein's handiwork there; the ends have been melded together so the power inside has a proper path to flow. Knowing her, she's handled all the technical wizardry, checking that the engine purrs under her fingers while she types in our coordinates at least thrice. This will probably be its last journey, but none of us would like to end up in the middle of an asteroid or floating in the emptiness of space, left to drift while our organs implode. That meant precision and the more precise, the less chance we have of someone trying to follow us.

"...Go." The Queen gets the word out from between clenched teeth. We stare at each other for a long moment, her eyes lingering on Rein's arms, the way they cradle me that much closer under her watchful glare. Our history is laid out at our feet, in the scars that decorate my

skin like a patchwork quilt. It's a gaping wound and there are no goodbyes strong enough to mend the gap.

I'm not sure either of us wants to. She puts her attention back toward the wall while I face what can only be forward, the unknown, the future.

"Are you ready?" Rein's lips barely brush against the crown of my forehead, as if she can sense the thoughts beginning their tailspin, her attempt to stop them before they carry me away. Thankfully, she's always been a natural at wrangling them and they rear back as I seek out the endless expanse of her eyes.

"I think so. Are you?"

She starts to purr, that low sultry sound that never failed to set butterflies bouncing off my ribcage, "Always. I'm rather fond of our adventures~"

The giggle bursts free before I can stop it--the last people of a dead race, acting as normal. Absolutely ridiculous. "Well then, I think we better get to jumping."

Rein has enough time to look affronted before she, too is laughing. "How rude, laughing at me! I've been a perfect lady."

Standing on the precipice, we are inconsolable. The Queen refuses to look our way. My face turns red--Rein's grows wet. Perhaps it is easier this way. Perhaps it would be better to sit down and cry. When we look at each other, I can swear I see the same questions in her eyes: why are we doing this; why did it come to this; why couldn't we stop it; why us?

If we actually stopped, put those words into the air, there would be no taking them back. So, we laugh, wondering what's waiting on the other side. Will it be ruins? Or maybe, just maybe, a speck of life that's held on through the torrent.

We link hands, still wiping away tears, and I make sure to hold on tight. I'd always been told intergalactic time travel was a bumpy ride, but no one's ever really come back to explain in real detail. How different can it be from normal space travel?

I think someone said once that the first step is always the worst. They were right.

An explosion from behind pushes us forward. I recognize the Queen's scream in the second it takes for the colors to draw us in, a pull that consumes us whole, yanking us forward, pulling us apart, and ripping our atoms into a thousand different pieces before we're put back together again. Rein calls my name, desperate. Her grip is rigid until it isn't, thin wires prying her away finger by finger, and then she's gone. Leaving me spinning, hurtling onward with her blood hot on my tongue-

My back hits the boundary of space and time and I go crashing through.

Chapter 1

There are images, too fast to process, and my lungs are burning. My heart's beating too fast. I can hear it in my ears, a high-pitched wail over the chorus of our feet smashing through the underbrush. It begs me to stop as I weave around one tree. Then another. Each bleeding out of the darkness, with twisted roots and clawed branches, and I'm sure I scream. But the wind snatches it away, and all I can do is push my legs faster. Harder. Trying not to picture the man that's breathing down my neck, his wires finding their way around my ankles, dragging me down, through the trees--*so many wires*--and he doesn't have to hunt me anymore. A knife will find its way into my chest, my blood the same shade as his eyes, red, red, *red, red-*

The path vanishes beneath my feet and, for a single moment, I'm airborne. Trapped, engulfed in nothing, I'm floating. Only the sting of the breeze is enough to know I'm falling and I barely have the sense to remember to bend my knees.

I hit the ground hard and roll, ankle failing on the way up. A snap that blends with a pathetic shriek, one I try to muffle. Praying that he didn't see, that he might not know- But a glance through the treetops reveals the grey hair, the pallid face, the smile that reaches far past his ears.

My brain screeches at me to run, to find my balance, but my legs are useless. It would only take him a moment to drop down, to finish this demented chase, but all he does is whisper. Soundless words are crickets purring in the underbrush, the mutter of wind rushing through the trees, only broken by the roar of a horn. It snaps me from the approach of death and I turn, squinting into twin spotlights.

Time slows. Ice bubbles underneath my skin, liquefying before it breeches the tip of my fingers. I glance back, to the man now hovering a little further over the edge, the cliff melting under his touch. Over his shoulder, the darkness breathes, bubbling into a gaping maw, a flash of vermilion. The light morphs his face into monstrous shapes, shadows pulling at cheeks and jaw, nose and hair, and I know I've missed my chance. I was too late. There's nowhere I can go where he can't find me.

I close my eyes and prey death is where I'll writhe for eternity.

Chapter 2

Voices drift into awareness, hazy and distant. Floating in on the wisps of darkness that weigh down my limbs, my arms and legs nothing but white noise connected to an engine that's forgotten how to run. Thoughts fire at half the speed they're supposed to, dragged through blocked circuits filled with cotton. It takes too long for the haze to be natural, but I can't even summon a swell of fear.

I just want to go back to sleep. But the longer I float in the gloom, the more sounds begin to trickle in from above: doors that open and close a little too hard, feet that scuffle to and fro, a woman's voice that won't stop crying. The worst part is the consistent beeping, the shrill tone that acts as lightning, setting my skull aflame with white-hot agony. It brings it all into startling clarity, solidifying gibberish into familiar shapes, sounds, and words--someone's whispering.

"...your voice down. That's impossible; just look at her. You expect me to believe that insane story? She can barely move."

"Look, I'm as skeptical as you are. But I got called to an 11-83, and that was the report! She ran into the road and then," A sharp clap leaves my ears ringing, only letting me catch the tail end of the next sentence, "...something dangerous out there."

"Well, that's your department. I can't explain everything to you. I'll call you when she wakes up."

There comes a long, drawn-out sigh before heavy footsteps fade away, leaving only the beeping. Heavy, cold, mechanical, every pulse sends a new chill curling down my spine. But even as I try to recall why, there's nothing, not a face, or a place, just the sound. Bouncing off the walls of my brain and leaving indents in its wake, the tone picking up in pace to match my breathing--

My fingers are a dark silhouette against the light above. They dip and sway, in constant motion, letting in too much light. Light that highlights a droplet that hangs suspended in the air, falling, falling, until it's not. Hot against my cheek and, before I can stop it, in my mouth; the metallic tang of blood bittersweet.

I choke. Slammed back into my body, into the smell of blood and antiseptic and drugs, I fight to sit up. Legs too tangled and arms a mass of nerves that don't seem to listen to reason; it's a miracle that I'm even able to realize there's an IV in my elbow, let alone rip it free. Tears clawing at the back of my eyes as I'm already crying, *they found me, they found me and they're going to hurt me and I have to get out--*

I don't even hear the man get close, but a hand presses me to the bed, firm yet gentle at the same time. A scream presses at the back of my throat, eager to be free as I thrash.

His voice doesn't seem to waver. "Calm down, everything's fine. You're safe. But you'll hurt yourself if you keep this up."

My gaze darts to the left, the right. White. There's so much white. A machine, the source of the beeping, has my heartbeat displayed as it flashes across the screen.

Needles and scalpels flash in the low light, always followed by screams or wails. Faces hidden in shadow loom high above, voices morphed into monstrous trills, incessant just like their probing--

"Can you hear me? I'm a doctor. You're okay. I promise. Just breathe."

Blood drips onto a pristine white floor. Polished shoes stepping over the growing puddles to get closer to the metal table where I lay.

My weak flailing comes to an abrupt halt. Half on my side and half curled in on myself as I use the angle to push his hand away. *If I behaved, he wouldn't hurt me.*

You know it's a lie.

But I'm at his mercy, so the only thing I can do is obey and wait. Wait as the face above me begins to clear, peering up between wild strands of hair plastered against fevered cheeks. There's no blood. There are no shadows. Just bright, concerned eyes and lips that were turned down in a firm frown that didn't seem to suit his laugh lines.

"That's it... you're safe, okay? You're at the hospital in Logan County."

He stares at me expectantly, the vivid blue a fist around my throat that keeps my voice from uttering so much as a peep. I shake my head instead.

His frown gets deeper and I have to use all of my willpower not to flinch. “You don’t remember? You were about seven miles out, up in the mountains. You ran out onto a road in a panic and almost got hit by a car.”

It comes back in fragmented pieces. The woods and their murmuring trees. The darkness. The chase. The metal beast bearing down on me.

“A... car?” My voice is too scratchy, too weak.

“Yes... a car.” His brows draw together, the hand that once rested over my heart retreating to run through his hair. “Can you tell me your name, Miss?”

“___-! *Come on! We have to go!*”

The voices whispering in my mind promise an answer, resting right there on the ghost of a memory, the images and feelings brewing in the storm in my chest. But the longer I run forward, the quicker it spins away, leaving me grasping at nothing but the twisted remains of torn-down foundations.

“I don’t know.” Swallowing, I wait for the rebuke, already turning my head down, away from any incoming strikes.

They never come.

Instead, he straightens and slides his hands into his pockets. There’s no mistaking the look in his gaze now. Pity. “Do you remember anything? Like how you got out into the woods or how you got so hurt?”

Hurt-? Gaze flying down, everything suddenly makes sense. Why I can’t move my arms very well and why my head screams with the slightest of movements. Bandages decorate my skin, the edges just revealing pale skin burned red, flecked with scabs. The damage is extensive, starting at the top of my abdomen and going beneath the blanket, which has bunched around my waist in my panic.

The doctor, again, sighs. Nodding to himself, “Alright, I’ll take that as a no... Well, I’ll be in later to check on you, so try and get some rest, okay? You need it.”

Part of me wants to argue and say that I don't want to be alone. The smell of what can only be disinfectant is starting to make my stomach churn, and I swear the white walls are beginning to close in on every side. But a much larger part of me, the one still fighting back the images of blooded lab coats and cruel smiles, refuses to have him in the room any longer.

I manage a nod. He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes, gesturing to a box I haven't noticed before, on a chair that's been pushed up close to the side of the bed.

"Just so you know, everything we found on you is in that. Like your clothes and whatnot."

And, just like that, he left. His departure takes every little bit of tension from my body as my eyes flutter shut, lungs heaving a sigh of relief before I settle back into the pillows. The images seem to fade away too, for a little while, flickers here and there carrying the sound of familiar voices. It becomes almost like a game, seeing how many I can pull from my mind without being able to place them.

The cocky croon, one that many might find irritating, but not me. Never me. It's easing, almost embarrassing, how quickly the low tone steals the tension from my shoulders. Then there's the soft singing, lyrical with a heaping handful of pride. Always there to offer any encouragement, always there to chase away any harm, and always there as a soothing balm to any pain.

I file them away as if by some miracle they might return, bringing with them names so that I can finally fill in the holes they've left behind.

We're running. Pushing our small legs to their limits as red lights flash overhead, a siren blaring just loud enough to cover the pounding of our hearts. The lights are out (the circuit breaker had been drenched in water before this daring escape). I can just make out two shapes ahead of me, one close enough to touch, my hand clasped between much warmer fingers. She looks back, violet eyes glinting in the darkness, nearly glowing as she says something, lost to the ruckus.

Somewhere behind us, a door slams open. We run even faster. The girl in front - I can just make out her long hair - trips. I never see what got in her way. A hand shoots out of the shadows, yanking her into a broad chest even as she kicks and screams. The rest of us skid to a halt, waiting. Watching.

The man's grip tightens enough that the girl cries out.

Letting go of the hand, I step forward. He lets her go, shoving her away as thin, clawed fingers wrap around my arm.

Chapter 3

Turns out all hospitals are the same. Too cold, too quiet, though every now and then a nurse and her cart rattle by my door, snapping me back from the edge of a dream dyed red. I had just gotten used to the incessant beeping, too. At first, I wanted to thank her, but after the fifth time, the only thing I felt was irritation. It's still too bright; the wall lamp above my head is sickly translucent, dim but not dim enough to quell the pounding throb behind my eyelids.

I try to roll onto my side, an escape attempt already bound to fail when it feels like someone's reached in and rearranged my ribcage. But I give a good jerk anyway, just to be sure momentum isn't what I'm missing. The IV stuck in my arm gives a sharp little yank, *fucking piece of-*

All I want to do is sleep, but I can't. Even with whatever medication they've given me--which is enough to make my tongue feel suspiciously like a slug--all I can do is think back to the officers who've been using my room like a podium for their incompetence. There were so many of them, yet they'd only brought back vacant explanations and excuses. They hadn't found anything else on the mountain; the sheer number of miles they would've had to cover kept them at the mouth of the woods and that's it. There were too many nooks and crannies they would've had to investigate and the person who insisted they were in danger was already "safe and sound" in their custody. They couldn't find the spot I'd woken up in. They couldn't find the weird facility I keep seeing every time I let exhaustion creep up on me.

Through a door that's barely hanging on by a single hinge, there's a tunnel, intact except for the rocks and filth that rain down with every shuddering heave of the ground.

Somewhere in the distance, a shrieking howl carries on the wind, warbling and chillingly similar to a sob.

Pressing the heel of my palms into my eyes, I shove myself into a sitting position, ignoring the shaky little exhale that comes with torn skin stretching too far in the wrong direction. Could they do *anything*? Why did they even have their jobs in the first place when all they were capable of doing was patting the end of my bed and reminding me, in that *patronizing* tone masked as sympathy, that what I was seeing wasn't real. How many times had they

explained to me that this hospital was the only thing similar to what I was describing and that they'd never seen me before?

A clearing surrounded by a wall of starlight, crystalline and undulating in the fading rays of a dying sun. There's a woman standing at its center, slacks stained with blood and streaks of mud.

I couldn't make this up if I tried! But even the sight of the crash was meaningless. There was no sign of anybody else, there was no *man* hiding in the trees. Only the shattered remains of the car that hit me and they were all too eager to talk about that, even showing me the photos of the wreck. Its "bumper" and "headlights" were scattered to the four winds while the hood was bent inwards on itself, nevermind that all their terms were going right over my head. They were just excited that a girl somehow managed to survive a head-on collision with a vehicle and was still in one piece. I wasn't deaf to their whispers, no matter how far away they huddled; it's really hard to miss it when someone says you should have died.

Apparently, they'd never seen anything like it. The car hit me going over fifty miles per hour; while I don't understand what that means, not fully, it sounds bad. Sounds painful. Sounds perfect for fracturing a few ribs and sending me flying in the process.

But dead?

I'm most certainly not dead. And I'm not crazy either; I don't feel crazy.

"Says the girl with shrapnel in her foot." There's a flame glowing between the girl's fingers. It burns brighter as she scans me over, and it's taking everything I have to keep limping forward and pretend my leg isn't seconds away from giving out.

Flicking the blankets back, it takes less than a moment to pinpoint the scar on the underside of my heel. It's jagged and white along the edges, but pink and irritated everywhere else. Fresh and, dare I say it, brand new.

It's proof enough that I'm sane, that the images in my head aren't trying to lead me astray. But what else is there? It's clear that no one else is going to do anything, but how am I supposed to prove something that's scattered into so many puzzle pieces that I can't even hope to guess what's missing?

My focus drifts to the box the doctor left behind earlier, still sitting in the chair next to my bed. I'd honestly forgotten about it, what with everything--and everyone--else I'd had to deal with throughout the day. It couldn't hurt to look, they were my possessions, whatever they were, and while they didn't explain anything to the people who found me... That didn't mean they couldn't jog a memory loose, a face or name or *something*.

Pulling my thumb away from my lips, I pick away at the rest of the nail I'd already bitten to the quick, shifting to properly reach and pull the cardboard into my lap.

My stomach rolls. There's so much blood. The clothes inside are black, but it doesn't hide the lighter splotches of grayish-red marring almost every inch of the fabric; I don't think anything could. It's subtle, but it's *everywhere*. The shirt looks so small crumpled up next to the baggy pair of cargo pants. I try not to picture myself in its place: curled up, knees to my heart as my life pours into the grass one vital ounce at a time. Was that how the doctors had found me? Or had it been the nurses? Or the one in the car?

The ground explodes underneath my feet. Someone's screaming, the world is spinning, flames licking at my legs as I leap away--it's more of a stumble, but at least I make it. There's a red spray alongside the brick chunks that are flying into the air, the dirt raining down, and while I don't know who it was, I know I was the lucky one in this exchange.

I have to squeeze my eyes shut as I push the clothes to the very corner of the box. Shaky fingers ghost over the bare cardboard on the bottom, bumpy with dirt, dust, and unknown grime, and I bite back the urge to chuckle. *Of course, there's nothing*. How I managed to get my hopes up was beyond me.

But the slightest caress of something cold keeps me from pulling my hand back. I'm expecting a coin, or maybe even a watch like the one my doctor wears, but what I draw out is a little black teardrop on a thin piece of string. It's heavier than it looks, smooth, and its surface is reminiscent of the deepest part of a lake. Still and dark, its depths could hold fast to whatever prey it snatched beneath its waves. The moonlight shimmers over its face and it's an entertaining game, turning the little crystal this way and that to see how the light plays over its surface. It's almost hypnotic and somehow I know it's real. Deep down, I know that I should try to scratch it, smash it and see if it shatters--as glass would--but any urge to try and peel back the secrets the

gem is hiding escapes me, at least for the moment. The gleam is easing, the chilly caress soothing the burn that's been eating away at my veins since I first woke up in bandages.

I bring the string over my head, letting it fall into place over my breastbone. Shivers race down my spine, spreading an icy numbness in their wake that should be terrifying. *Should be*, being the keywords, but all I can do is sigh and let it steal away any tension. The pain in my ribs slowly disappears, the drill in my head stops its persistent squeal. The only thing left is a gentle pull that leads me down into the gloom of the gem's surface.

A warm pair of arms pull me close and I know I don't have to worry about the pain anymore. His voice is soft, easing. "I won't let anything happen to you."

I'm just as quick. "I won't let anything happen to you either, sir knight~"

Comfort I've never forgotten, the darkness is peaceful, empty. It swallows everything in its path, taking away sound, sight, and breath. Its chill arms snake their way through my veins, stealing the smallest hint of hope, desire, or motivation. It should be scary to watch the world bleed free of its color... but all I can do is lean back and let it take me.

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Chapter 4

A mass of bodies line the cobblestone streets, blood flowing between the bricks like crimson mortar, leaving the road tacky in weather that's given way to ashy snow. In utter silence, each step is a sudden blast that rocks even the bravest to their core, but I don't bother a glance at the dead alleys on either side. There's just the woman waiting at the end of the debris, with her sweet smile and long nails that never fail to remind me of claws.

The ambient noise of the hospital has faded. I try to remember if it was ever there. If the moment between visitors was filled with nurses walking to and from, the heaving effort of the AC, or the rain pelting against the window. Watching raindrops streak down the glass, there's a flash of lightning and the trees are trembling as what can only be thunder shakes the building. It travels through my skin, a sensation I know to be sound yet isn't, the static of a limb that you've neglected for far too long.

That probably means I should go to sleep.

But with your brain playing hopscotch with every what-if it can think of, that's not really possible, now is it?

I'm not sure if I want to smile or laugh so I do both, thumb making another pass along the edge of my necklace.

I content myself with watching the downpour, rain racing down the glass in thick sheets when lightning breaks again. This flash lasts longer, a dance that lights up the world beyond the trees: the mountain that looms in the distance, angry, vengeful, a reminder that it might yet find a way to reach me. The cars down below were no longer the roaring beast from the forest; these were silent shells waiting for their owners to return. My face, reflected back at me, is bruised and slack-jawed, ignorant of the figure standing in the shadows right behind her.

Golden walls match an equally golden dress. Long hallways of marble, pristine, extend in either direction. Outside, the gardens bloom in the midday sun. Her voice cuts through bird song like a knife.

I jerk forward as the light dies, surprised that when I crash to the floor it's the IV getting yanked free that hurts, not my knees hitting the tile. I know it's not a nurse, know that even with my hearing being on the fritz, once they saw I was awake they would've approached. Probably gotten angry about the mess of blankets the bed's been twisted into or at least made an effort to give me more morphine, more anything to finally knock me out.

I start to stand, or scream, or make for the door, but my legs are tangled in the sheets I'd brought with me and cold fingers are tight around my shoulder. *Too fast*, but then they squeeze, ghosting my neck and I choke back any sound that wants to burst free.

The words are nothing but a whisper, surprisingly gentle. "There you are... I've been looking everywhere for you."

White dress, bare feet, wild hair. My hand feels tiny, encompassed even in her dainty, doll-like fingers, and she's too warm. My palm keeps getting sweaty. I want to wipe it off, but when I try to pull away she swats my arm.

"You can't just run off like that. You don't want to hurt anybody, do you?"

"Who are you?" I hate that my voice breaks at the end, that my arms won't move to shake her off, that the most I can do is lean away when she drags her nail along my cheek. It's getting harder to breathe--the air is filled with a perfume that's gone stale. Rose? Or Jasmine? I can't tell. Her touch leaks into my veins, my lungs, my heart, where it takes root and smothers the constant rhythm.

But she stops, pulling away like I've burned her. "You don't remember?"

It's enough of a leash that I can finally find some semblance of strength, putting that final bit of distance between us and stumbling around-

Sharp golden eyes are set between even sharper cheekbones, stained with soot. They glow, pulsing in the night, a beacon to any lost souls wandering in the rubble. The skirt of her ball gown lays cut and discarded over the body of one so unfortunate.

Her gaze is just as bright as it was then, pinning me in place, but if she cares for my shock it doesn't show. It's blinding, the only light with the storm blotting out the moon (but when

did the lamp over the bed go out?). I try to clear my mind and fail, tripping over my own tongue. “I... I have bits and pieces, but that’s it. I don’t remember anything really--not this, you, I mean.”

A frown joins the smoke that still stains her skin. She won’t stop staring, probably thinking about all the ways she could piece together my memories if she could pry them open and see what’s inside. I fight the urge to bow my head, but there’s nowhere to hide that those eyes won’t find me.

But, for just a second, her attention drops to the little gem, nestled safely atop the swaths of bandages. “We don’t have time for this.”

My hair stands on end, a hand drifting to tuck the necklace away,

“What are you waiting for? Run the tests.” It’s too hot. Lights blur overhead; we’re moving too fast. My throat stings with the acid tang of vomit. Someone’s crying.

“I’m sorry...”

Someone leans over, her face swimming into focus.

“Listen, I’m sorry I don’t remember, but stumbling around isn’t nearly as fun as you seem to think it is, I didn’t do this--”

She doesn’t let me finish. A single step forward and her outline shimmers, setting off a chain reaction. Her legs refract first, a blur of color separated from her body, leading to more breadcrumbs left behind in her wake, an arm here, a torso there, only reconnecting once she’s stopped, one hand still piecing itself back together on my cheek, the other around my wrist. A smug smile stretches across her face, folding the beauty into something ugly, wrinkles tearing at her eyes and lips.

“I wouldn’t do that. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“How did you-?” It’s a stammer, but this time I don’t hesitate to try and yank myself away. It’s of no use, her arms, while thin and wiry, are stronger than they look.

She clicks her tongue, “Now, now. That’s no way to thank somebody, is it?” Up close, her breath smells of rot and I have to swallow down a gag.

“What the *hell* are you talking about?”

“My, you really don’t remember anything, do you?” She squeezes my wrist, digging her nails into the skin and humming when I shout. There’s a dim hope, even as I look down, that someone outside this little corner of the hospital will hear, come running; there’s no way they wouldn’t have heard. But things are already so much more complicated than I ever thought. It’s of no surprise that the world keeps its silence, a barrier between normality, glowing eyes, and shadows that lick at your fingers.

“Close your eyes and concentrate.”

Nerve endings sizzle, chilled past any means of survival, while darkness heaves to life in the corners. Creatures that lumber with heavy steps that make no sound and wispy tendrils that fly through the air, leaving paths of frost in their wake.

At the center of it all, the crystal sits, gleaming. The light casts long silhouettes along my torso, the ghosts of twisting strands that break from its surface, reaching greedily for anything within its gravitational pull. I’m only an inch away, can feel the ice itching to lunge, latch on and spread... Part of me aches to let it. I’m held back by some silly sense of self-preservation (the gem is right there, sitting on my chest. If it was going to hurt me, wouldn’t it have done so by now?) and by the woman’s hand, still clamped tight.

“There, see? I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you.” Her thumb makes light circles over my cheek, guiding me into her bosom.

“What’s going on?” I should be more concerned about how slurred my words are, how her eyes seem brighter than before, how they sear through my flesh, thoughts, soul.

Her voice rings with a smile, “I’m doing what I do best! If you don’t remember, I’ll just have to show you!” Fingers tangle their way into my hair, a stroke turned yank halfway through. “I didn’t send you here so you could sit on your ass.”

She barely glances our way, face pulling into the familiar sneer, but for once she doesn’t have time to berate. The wails are growing in the distance and she’s already shaking, pale from

the strength it's taking to sustain her magic, and I realize it's the end. For her, for our home. For everything.

Good riddance.

The void fills itself, a name branding itself into place. "Your highness?" a squeak of shame, accompanied by heat that crawls all the way to my ears.

"Good to know we're making progress..." She searches the expression, looking for something only she knew and, when she doesn't find it, shrugs. "And that I'll be missed."

"Your highness, I'm so sorry-! I didn't mean-!" I can't stumble over myself enough, but nothing can take back the lies we both hear in my voice, the relief. Because she *is* dead. She stinks of it, of mildew, and dust, and worms that bury their way into your flesh, making homes in your organs while what remains melts away into bone. Her eyes, even with their shine, are glazed over with a sheen of white. She'd cropped her hair when the fighting went from murder in the streets to bombs and debris, but now there are bald spots, a showcase to time's constant march.

I backpedal and she laughs, a croak that rattles in a partially disintegrated ribcage, "I know; I don't exactly look my best. But what do you expect?" She cocks her head to the side, that same smile growing longer, eating its way through her nose, ears, cheeks, eyes, until it's the totality of her face and smothers the last of her light, sending the room back to darkness.

"...Go." The Queen gets the word out from between clenched teeth. We stare at each other for a long moment, our history laid out at our feet, a gaping wound, and there are no goodbyes strong enough to mend the gap.

"You did this to me, Scarlett. And now you want to forget?"

Chapter 5

I'm all lanky arms and twisted legs. I trip over nothing, or I smash into the bed, or my feet are caught by the blankets still strewn across the floor. It's too dark to tell; the shadows have grown thick, to the point I have to claw through them, so when my hands come up for the next desperate pass I see the stains left behind under my nails. A discoloration that infects the veins, one that's spreading, down my fingers and into the palm of my hands.

The Queen starts to laugh, a heaving cough that comes from above and below. One that fills her diseased lungs and erupts in a puff of smoke and dust. "You're still running. You know what you have to do."

I squeeze my eyes shut, lunging in the direction of the door. Or where I hoped the door was. I could've sworn it was this way. The Queen hacks harder. *You did this. You did this to me.*

"Leave me alone!" I swing around, shoving at nothing, tears ready to fall as my knees give out. *I didn't mean to. I never meant to hurt anyone- please!*

But my body doesn't sink into the gloom gnawing at my heels. Instead, there's warmth, soft arms, and the distinct smell of lavender. "Honey--honey! There's no one here!"

I reach, one hand working against me while the other begins to shove. They are confused; I am confused. To shove her away means safety; if there's distance then she can't touch you, she can't hurt you.

Wrong, always wrong. She can always hurt you. You have to-

But for some reason, I hold tight. On my hands and knees, I bury my face in her chest and wait, like somehow this one act will shake her, keep her from dragging me away, under the dirt where my skin will turn grey, will fill with holes for worms to feed and roots to fill. I want to beg, scream, cry; I don't want to go with her. But my throat is sealed.

Her hands find my cheeks and I *burn*. Flinching away, but she keeps me still and turns my face to the light.

Light?

“Look at me. You’re not there anymore. They can’t hurt you. You’re safe.” She’s small, round face, a thin nose. Glasses. The Queen doesn’t have glasses.

Wilting, I sink into her shoulder, eyes still darting from one corner to the other. The only shadows are the ones cast by the overhead light, small and unassuming as they sit and gather. But there’s no blood, no bone, and the smell of decay is slowly melting away into the harsh tang of antiseptic.

My lungs suck in air like they’ve never tasted it before.

“That’s it. Deep breaths.” Her heart beats strong, even, while mine races, eager to implode. She rubs circles into my back as if to guide it back to equilibrium and, by some miracle, I feel it working. A lethargy seeping into the overworked muscles, a gaping hole numbed and beginning to s mended as I exhale.

“What’s your name?” It’s a croak, but I can speak again. I’m not blubbering, I’m not cowering in fear. If my entire body didn’t feel like the flavorless jello they brought me for dinner, I’d be embarrassed; I’m curled up on this woman’s lap like she’s my mother. As it is, she’s a stranger and the remains of my tears are hot on my cheeks, hotter than any blush.

But all she does is smile, slowly tucking what I can only assume is a wild piece of hair behind my ear. “I’m Danice Branson. I’m a night nurse.” She gestures to the door, the one that’s still half open from her entry. The one that’s on the opposite side of the room from where I ended up, the one that teases me with the empty, bright hallway on the other side. Sound filters in; a crying baby, shoes squeaking on marble, running water. “I heard you callin’ out and making a huge fuss. When I came in you were backed up against the wall. I don’t have much trainin’ in calming people down, but you were gonna hurt yourself if I didn’t step in.”

“No-! Uh. Thank you.” I at least have the dignity to bow my head, finally scooting up and off of her as carefully as I can without shoving a foot into her abdomen. It proves more difficult than expected when my limbs are connected with nerves made of fuzz, but I succeed. With flying colors too, I might add--I catch myself the one time I lose my balance.

Only when she sees that I’m sitting, crooked and in a half-lean against the wall, does she move to stand, every motion measured. I’m as grateful as I can be that she’s being so gentle. The

world is in high definition--I blink and the edges blur, then refocus, then blur again. A sea of saturated colors made worse by the overwhelming concentration of white. Branson looms, an offer outstretched to help me to my feet, but when I meet her eyes they're glowing.

“Come now, let's get you back to bed and I'll get you some water. That'll help.”

A blink and it's gone, but the image remains. Picks away at the back of my mind, the paranoia festering, pooling, ready to pounce.

“No matter what, if they ask you something, if they tell you to do something, you have to say yes, understand?”

I nod, even though I'm perfectly content to stay on the tile, which is so cold it might be searing snowflakes into my ass. But she grins, so it's the right response, and she hauls me up without any more pretense. My feet nearly leave the floor; she's a lot stronger than she looks, which makes the shamble toward the bed that much easier since she practically carries me there.

“There we go. Now, you make yourself comfortable and I'll be right back. We'll get you some water and somethin' to help ya sleep. Dr. Shipley will be back to check you over in the morning, so we can't have you exhausted, now can we?”

I shake my head, though the idea of being poked and prodded sounds like the ninth ring of Hell no one ever bothers to discuss. She pats my arm and heads for the door, only hesitating right before she flicks off the lights.

Glancing up, then back at me, she winks. “I'll leave those on, hm? Just till I get back.”

Why? I'm not scared of the dark, I want to insist. In fact, my eyes are throbbing and the ache is starting to spread--a sharp pain pressing at my temples. But thunder rumbles, rattling the window in its frame, and I squeak out an, “Okay,” instead. A few more minutes wouldn't hurt anything.

But really, how long does it take to get water? One minute turns to five, then fifteen, and I'm not patient enough to endure the constant drumming against my skull, to sit still while fluorescents carve patterns into my retinas. I shuffle, stand, and start to pace. Not once does my path align with the light switch.

*“If you’re not careful, she’ll find us. We have to be extra, **extra** quiet, okay?”*

I murmur an agreement to a voice that belongs to no one, the voice that likes to sing, the voice with small hands and violet eyes.

What do we do if she does find us? I want to ask.

But we’re both too small to have any answers, and as the oldest maybe I should be the one who knows.

But nothing makes sense. The Queen was here when she should be dead. Dead where? Dead how? The man with red eyes, surely. Had to be. But on the mountain? She was filthy, half decomposed--

“We’ve searched high and low. It’s like you dropped outta the sky. We didn’t see any sign of anyone else, Ma’am.”

Then maybe an animal got to her? A scavenger doesn’t know the difference between a murder and its next meal. All it would’ve had to do was drag the body into some underbrush, into a cave, away from prying eyes, away from the search teams.

“On the count of three, we run. You know what to do. Just like we practiced.”

Except I don’t know, and how do I explain it to someone whose name I can’t even remember? But she starts her countdown and I pause, holding my breath because each second is a second lost and with one wrong move I may forget this, forget her, forever.

“One. Two... Three!” Little feet slap against the floor, and for some reason, this hallway is much longer than it seemed before. She doesn’t hesitate, flames bright between her fingers as she rushes the men clad in black, faceless, empty voids in a world only lit up by the red emergency lights.

But even so, it shouldn’t be this dark, there shouldn’t be this many of them, they shouldn’t have their weapons out. Not this soon. I can barely make out the door we need to get through. It’s too far, we can’t make it.

She screams, an explosion following in her wake. I bite my tongue and lunge around a whip aimed for my waist. We can do it. Together. If we can get that far, can get out, we win. We've beaten their game. No more tests. No more punishments. We can go up top and do normal training. We can go home.

I find myself at the window, staring out into a world where the sun only stains the horizon in theory. The rain has lessened and the wind isn't howling anymore, but storm clouds continue to roll through the sky, promising violence, but never telling when.

Is there even a point in going home, in asking these questions when I only have my name, a first name, and nothing else? Would anyone welcome me? Would I cry, would I have a revelation, would it all come flooding back? Or would we simply stare at one another, nothing more than strangers, me and this girl with violet eyes, who rushes in head first and lets me bring up the rear because she doesn't want me to get hurt?

Putting a hand on the glass, I rest my forehead against it. The cold seeps into my skin, into the racing thoughts, slows them--

She's too far ahead of me. Her legs have always been stronger, but I don't have the heart to tell her to wait. She's been planning this for weeks, months, and I know that's the reason she's not by my side, grasping my hand, yanking me along like always. She wants out, can nearly taste it even though it's been so long, and she'll burn down anything or anyone who stands in her path this time.

It makes perfect sense that I would be the thing holding her back. My fingers are thin to match my arms, weak, sickly. There's some defined musculature if you look close enough, but you really have to look and look *hard*. The ache of my ribs ground me here even as smoke taints the air.

The Queen said I was running and she was right. I was running. I'm still running. I don't know how to stop, how to fight, how to protect.

I tell myself she's too scared for me to get caught in the crossfire when I trip and she just keeps running. When she's prying at the door and yelling at me to get up, to hurry, and then she's racing back with that look on her face and I can't be the reason she's hurt.

Not again.

I roll on my back and summon all the energy I have, feeling the neurons elongate, misfire, shatter.

There's a knock at the window. It's so quiet, so out of place on the fourth floor, I do nothing but blink, still stuck somewhere else.

It's two feet long, lithe, almost a snake but not (seeing as snakes don't fly, and they most certainly don't knock on windows). It has no eyes, but it does have a mouth. One that's filled with mist, that drips from its fangs like potent venom, the same foggy haze that drips off its body and coats the air around it.

We stare at one another. I contemplate backing away, shutting the curtain, but it seems to realize what I'm thinking, floating forward to tap against the glass once more. A soft request if there ever was one.

"O...kay?" Considering the pleasant chat I just had with a dead Queen, how bad could a shadow be? It waits patiently as I work the latch, doing little flips whenever I start to slow, whenever I stare for too long. I have to giggle, even if I might be losing my mind--it's kinda cute.

But the moment it's free to do so, it darts inside and it's not the only one. They swarm over the lip of the window seal, twisting up and around my body, stealing close to my face. I yelp and start to stumble backward, but they form a wall to catch me, setting me upright and rubbing against my cheeks as if to say, *it's alright. We won't hurt you. We're here to help.*

"Scarlett stop!" She's screaming, but I can barely hear her. In one hand, my gem shines, brighter and brighter, so hot it's cold. In the other a ball of mist swirls. My veins have turned black, spiraling up my arms as the skin splits. Blood seeps out from underneath my nails and drips from my nose.

The men have scattered like ants. Some are limping, some are sprinting, and some lay still. There are still too many able to move, still too many close to her, still too many that could maim and hurt and kill--

But with a roar, a monster heaves itself into existence, little wisps blazing after it. Feeding it. Until it towers over them, me, her, it's head brushing the ceiling, and when it steps the entire building shakes. The entire world.

“You... You’re *mine*?” While a question, I already have the answer when I look down, when I see the start of darkened veins blooming at my wrists. They answer anyway, in a slew of elaborate twists and spins.

One nuzzles its way under my chin, then bolts out the window. It turns, swims back and forth, up and down, further out above the cars. *Come. Follow.* The others swell in agreement.

I only hesitate to think. Nurse Branson will come back to find me gone, but what’s the point in staying? A few bruised ribs? A few burns? A check-up with Dr. Shipley or another interview with the police so I can tell them what?

Hey, I can summon shadows and control them. No biggie.

Something tells me they’d think it was a huge biggie, and I really don’t feel like getting carted away to wherever it is they drag the craziest parts of their population.

At the end of the day, it’s a rather simple decision. Even from an amnesiac's point of view, there’s nothing they can do except treat the external wounds. If the man with red eyes is out there (and he is, but it’s not like I actively have to find him), then chances are the girl with violet eyes is too. Or maybe others.

So no more running and no more hiding. I’m taking the lead this time.

“We’re all born with supernovas for atoms. You... you hold a single galaxy in the palm of your hand, and you don’t even know it.”

Chapter 6

It's an easy descent, like drifting through a dream on a cloud of freshly fallen snow. I'm cradled from the wind and the rain, from the leaves that dance their wild swing, and from the bursts of newborn sunlight that find the tiniest holes to pierce through the veil of cloud cover. Even if someone were to look out their window, I'm not afraid of being seen, of hearing their cries touch the air as they point, as they begin to cower. The only thing they'll see is a shape drifting through the corner of their vision, one second there, the next not, and they'll think, *it must've been a bird. Yes, a bird.* Then, rolling over, they'll return to sleep.

Or, you know, whatever people in hospitals do this early in the morning.

I snicker, leaning forward at the very moment the shadows start to tilt. The little ones, still worried, send a few of their brothers to slip under my arms, to brace my weight as my feet finally touch pavement. They needn't have worried--for the first time since I woke, I don't ache, my muscles don't pull the wrong way, and my brain doesn't rock against the confines of my skull. My body is in alignment, despite the hole in my memories. I've found my start, the reason to start searching. Though, now that I'm down here, I'm starting to realize I probably should've grabbed my clothes.

The breeze cuts through the hospital gown like a newly-sharpened blade rends flesh, peeling it back from the bone and leaving it exposed. My arms are poor protection, gooseflesh following after shivers that wrack my body down to my toes. The shadows twist, faster and faster, possibly angry, but I'd be more inclined to say worried by the one that refuses to leave my shoulders, curled around my neck like it might offer the smallest amount of warmth. It must not know that it's colder than the mist drifting through the trees or a river that's been frozen for so long, no one remembers what lies underneath. Still, I stroke its head, a small thanks, while shooting a glance up at my opened window.

From here, the hospital is much dingier than I would've given it credit for. It's tall, square, old, too old probably--like I could knock it over with one carefully placed bump. The bricks are brown, similar to a stain you'd find on the underside of a rug after a spill has dried, molded, and solidified into something more. My room is one of seven still lit, besides the

entrance a little ways down the lot. There's really no point in going back (I don't want to go back), since Branson could at last return from her water excursion and the fact that the clothes were filthy anyway. Dirt was one thing. My own dried blood? A whole other munus. But still, walking around like this would only draw attention, would scream escapee. Getting locked away the first time was an accident, out of my control. No one could hold it against me. The second would mean intent. There would be punishments, sirens, rough hands. I couldn't let that happen. Not again.

My gaze slides to the nearest car, hulking now that I'm up close, but significantly less terrifying without the growl and squeal of its tires. A little bit of charity never hurt anyone, right? There had to be something useful inside; the doctors in the lab always carried extras. Extra pens, extra paper, extra shoes, extra coats. There was never an end to the things needing to be replaced. Besides, *if* I found anything, I could always return it and there'd be no problem.

I wave off a tug at my sleeve, flashing a smile at my own genius, "Wait a minute. Let me look for something, alright?" There's the need to speak slowly, to make sure they understand, but some immediately perk up while others continue to swirl. *Good enough.*

But the first step is blocked by a heaving mass, a quiet hiss filling the air. *No. They'll know. They always know.*

How? I answer back. *Why does it matter? They won't find me.* I give them my best glare, put my hands on my hips to really let the demand sink in. "Now, be good and let me-!"

They stream across the ground, a relentless tide that rolls in with no concern for my frantic tip-toeing that never seems to reach dry land. "H-hey! Stop it!"

They foam at my feet, slither up my legs, submerge my torso, *No. They'll know. We help.*

"Know what?!" A near shriek I barely have the mind to muffle. It *tickles*. Soft feathers brushing, everywhere, under my skin--I reach down to grab, to start pulling them off, and my hand comes away dark, dripping.

We fix.

How about you don't? A tiny plea, even though I know they won't hurt me. I know this, but I keep trying to remove them, to save myself from the itching, but they slip through my fingers, dart away at the last second. I'd be scared if it hurt--it doesn't--but there's so many of them, squirming, writhing. More than I remember.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a deep breath. I hold it. They're at my collarbone now but they've stopped rising. I tell myself they're sinking, even if I can't really tell. *Not much longer.*

Not much longer, they parrot right back.

"Why won't you tell me what you're doing?" It's a gasp. I've tilted my head back--a person drowning, kicking away from the deep they can't quite find the strength to continue fighting.

Surprise. Helping. They sound so excited. It's a pity it's a tad bit overwhelming, whatever this gift is.

But then it stops. The crawling melts away, first a whisper, then back to nothing. The first thing to cross my mind; *Oh, thank the stars.* The second is an acute worry that I've offended them.

You're welcome!

If they can't understand context clues, then I'm certainly not going to help them. But with the next gust of wind, I realize what they've done. My gaze snaps down to take in the jeans, the shirt, the jacket. They have a shimmery quality--the same as the light playing off the shadow's scales--but the longer I watch the quicker it fades until it's completely gone.

I level them with a glare that only seems to make them giddy. "You're amazing." The sarcasm is there, but it doesn't take away from the layer of truth on top. They don't notice anyway, a whirlpool of motion as I shake like a dog, wanting to be rid of the fuzz they've left behind that still lingers in my nerves. It doesn't take much, but still. We're gonna have to work on our communication skills before this happens again. I don't have to worry about freezing to death, though. Or making a scene. Progress! Can't argue with progress!

I pat down my hair, just in case, before jerking my head in the general direction of the trees. “Come on; if you guys are coming then we can’t exactly walk in the middle of the street.” I’m in no hurry to return to the wilderness, but the few steps it would take to conceal us in the underbrush is the perfect middle ground between the road and the incline that would take us into the mountain above. I didn’t quite feel like climbing yet, anyway.

They don’t answer but they speed ahead when I start moving, so I’m assuming they mean; *race you there*, based on the massive lurch in that general direction. I let them have this one, giving my legs time to stretch. I do have to try a *small* jog. Just to see if I can handle it after the accident and being confined to a bed for the larger part of 48 hours.

It feels... great. Again, I’m surprised at the lack of pain in my ribs, but even when I poke there’s nothing. A knot in my heart loosens, lightens, and I laugh.

The little ones circle back, egg me on. *Faster. You can go faster.*

I’m tempted to obey, but I’m not sure I want to know where this energy ends. So, keeping to my steady pace, I let them enjoy themselves instead, watching their twirls and dives. We have a long night ahead; no destination, no food, no water. The red-eyed man haunts these woods somewhere, so I need to find shelter, somewhere no one will ask questions. Safe and quiet. A map would be nice, but I’m not even sure where to start looking for that.

One step at a time, I tell myself. Where there’s a hospital, there are people, and where there are people, there’s a town. A village. Maybe even a city. All roads lead back to civilization, so it only makes sense that... *Route 10?* I eye the sign, squinting through the darkness. It has to go somewhere as well.

But what I don’t expect is to turn the corner and see lights in the distance. My room in Logan Regional faces the mountain, faces what I can only assume to be the front side of the building considering the name hangs above a pair of double doors, huge and glowing. The back side is a straight drop into murky waters--a river that runs parallel to the length of the foundation, supported by long pillars, some of which hit the bank and others that plunge right through to the river bed. I thought there’d be a steep mountain road to traverse, one with trees that close in on

every side, where anything could be waiting above to pounce down and snatch you away--this is not the road from that night.

Safe? The little ones gather, peering over the edge, then swimming back to my side.

“I suppose.” Stepping up, I peer as they did. The roar of crickets and frogs is deafening, lightning bugs drifting back and forth among long stalks that break from craggy cliffs. There’s no way I could slide down on my butt; I’d end up in a roll, bash my skull in, and be lost to the currents hiding in the waves. Crossing here saves me time, though.

I eye what’s left of Route 10. It looks like a good thirty-minute walk to the bridge, if I ran... well, I’m not sure. It’s about a mile and a half out. Which means it would be another thirty minutes back to the business fronts, houses, crosswalks, and gardens. It’s not a large town, but it’s not small either--length-wise, I can see where people must drive in, where they must enter the center of town, and where they must make the final exit. I’m sure it’s one of those places where everybody knows everybody--which is even worse. Blending in is going to be impossible. I need to be out of sight once day breaks. I couldn’t count on the storm anymore--it’s finally passed, even if the sky is still streaked with the remains of clouds darkened with unshed rain. There’s more sunlight branching out over the treetops, pink and yellow, yellow and orange.

Bad. The shadows hiss, curling in on themselves while their tails retract and their bodies thin. *Not much longer.*

My mouth runs dry. I hate how much sense that makes. I can control shadows, sure, but what *else* controls shadows? The fucking sun. *Good going, Scarlett. Shoulda figured that out sooner.* We really don’t have time to be standing around then.

“Can you help me over there?” The point is firm; it’s not really a question. The little ones don’t mind the order, though. In fact, it seems to energize them, and they fly into action--they swarm, lift, and carry with no hesitation. Without drifting too close to the water below, we stay relatively even with the bank on the other side. They can’t seem to go much faster than the slow descent from the window before, but there’s a touch of speed to their drifting now, a push that gets us to the other side in half the time. We have a simple touch down in the weeds, on the edge of blacktop that’s cracked and filled with potholes.

“Okay.” I give a sharp clap, but all the confidence I’d felt has waned as I shoot a glance up and down the street. There isn’t much to take in. A two-lane road with a stretch of tightly packed buildings. There are offshoots, little alleys that probably lead to the back doors of broken-down corner stores. Little pockets of trash skitter along the sidewalks followed closely by a thin layer of dust that somehow survived the deluge from above. Everything might as well be deserted but further down, where yellowed grass pops into existence behind dirty chain-link fences, there are houses with the lights on. Where faint voices echo from within, tinged with the undeniable static of a radio. It smells like smoke, like rain, like dirt and mud.

I will admit, I never said it had to be a *prospering* town. I’m not exactly in the position to judge, either.

Eyeing a crack in the pavement that’s, quite possibly, larger than my foot, I clear my throat and try to ignore how the dust works its way inside, “Any ideas gang?”

The shadows shift, press close. *Away.*

“Very helpful.” Left it is, away from the people in their homes, starting to stir, and deeper into the sleeping town. Main Street, according to a thin, green sign. There has to be something useful, something we can pick up or someplace we can settle down until tomorrow night. Preferably someplace dark; I don’t want the shadows to disappear completely. There’s too much to figure out, too much that could go wrong if I’m left on my own.

We pass a Hotel Pioneer, a Nixon Furniture Company, and a body shop. The Hotel brings pause despite being boarded up, but when I peer through a grime-covered window I realize the furniture’s been removed. That there’s nothing but cans and cigarettes, tarps and paint brushes, shattered glass and smashed dreams. It’s an option for sure, though I’d need the shadows to help me pry my way inside. Now for supplies... my focus slips to the body shop. I don’t know what I’m expecting to see behind the glass; legs proudly on display, arms hung from the ceiling, or a full-fledged human, stuck floating in a tube, but there are only tires and gleaming pieces of metal.

So far, so useless, I think, muttering a curse under my breath. I shouldn't have left the hospital without more to go off of, more information at least. This was unknown territory--what was I *doing*?

Away. The little ones have begun to shove, their attempts at herding despite their shrinking size. A rush of wind tears through the street, kicking up stray papers and sending them careening through the air, along with the few straggling shadows that have split from the majority. They never make it back. Cartwheeling, they sail right into open patches of sunlight, dissipating in a pop of black smoke.

"Hey, everyone gather in. We have to stick together now." There's a door down the street that's blown open, slamming back and forth--someone's sure to show up any second to check on it. I could almost swear the lights, which flash between red and green for some inane reason, are going to go flying off. They're banging together, the discord creating a symphony with the high-pitched whine that bounces underneath. A child's whistle, but it's distorted. Far too low.

I pause even as my heart worms its way into my throat. Scanning the street in front of me, then slowly spinning to do the same with what lies behind. The shadows are wild, yanking, pushing, pulling--but they've grown too weak. I stand tall, even though the sound only gets closer, taking on a staticky quality, becoming a growl. The hair on my arms stands on end, hands curling into fists and it's only then that I realize they're shaking. There's the intense urge to vomit, *it's not possible*, and I want to have time to ask myself what's not possible but there isn't any left.

The noise stops.

The crickets start to chirp once more, the frogs picking up their song. Heat beats its way into my skin, my lungs, trying to warm away the panic.

Please. You have to leave. It's the first solid sentence I think I've heard them say, but I'm more eager to listen to them than make comment. There will be time for supplies later; we need to get inside the hotel, to get off the street-

It slams into me before I can even register what *it* is. My face slams into the ground and I feel my lip split, taste the hot, sweet tang of blood. My ribs creak under the weight. Something

sharp is pressing at the base of my skull, so close to the rushing beat of my pulse, too close. I try to kick, but the thing contorts. I shove and its body gives under my touch. Its hand comes down on my head, pressing me deeper into the dirt, and it wails, crying out in agony even as it pins me in place.

I can't breathe. It's too heavy, my chest is compressed, my throat is too tight. There's no path for air to travel. Working my hands underneath me, I try to shove myself upwards--it shoves back and what little oxygen I had left gets kicked out. Black spots dance in the corner of my vision, then in the center. Nerves flicker like brief supernovas, then smoldering embers, then empty ashes.

I really shouldn't have left that hospital. A silly thought, but I can't feel my legs. I know the shadows must be ramming the side of the beast--my head is twisted at an angle so if I peel an eye open I can see them swarming--but all it takes is a single swipe for them to burst. They disappear, one by one, and I know. There's no getting out of here.

Tears prick, ready to fall even as my struggles die. Really, what was I expecting? To wander off, wounded, after being hunted down. I should've given it more time; the police would've found the others; would've found the man with the red eyes. Everything would have been over then.

How was I supposed to compete against this?

"We won't always be there to help you." Why we decided to climb to the top of the tallest orange tree in the orchard was a mystery. We'd raced up the hill, taunting each other, challenges thrown back and forth even though we knew we were supposed to be on guard duty tonight. She sandwiched me between her and the trunk. "Because I'd lost", she said--it was really because I was the shortest, the smallest.

The weakest too, apparently. But it's the ghost of her warmth that finally sends me over the edge. It's the close press of her body, the ghost of her fingers entwined with mine, that brings comfort, that steals the tension from my shoulders despite my best attempts to get it to stay. I want to apologize, tell her I was coming, but I failed. I always failed--*I'm so sorry.*

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” She ruffles my hair, the girl with purple eyes, that easy, teasing smile on her face. I’d slipped, nearly fallen, and she caught me before I could slam my head on a branch. I could’ve saved myself, but I’d known that with her there I didn’t have to worry.

Hope is a blissfully ignorant emotion. It crops up like a disease, a weed that you can tug on all you want, but it’s incapable of realizing she’s not coming. It’s the childish desire compared to adult logic. I have no shadows, no strength, no nothing.

*“You know better than anyone, Scarlett. You’re a powerhouse--they just don’t want you to know it. We were given these powers for a reason. **You** were given your powers for a reason. Trust them, listen to them, and you’ll always be okay.”*

“Okay” has to be a synonym for suffocating, but I had promised no more running. If I died here, I would never remember her name, remember how we met, remember how we were separated, remember who she *was*. Important. She was important. And something tells me that she would be angry if she saw me giving up.

We couldn’t have that. I’d hate for her to find out.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I use what strength I have left to shove an arm underneath my body, working it up to my neck. It’s scalding, so cold it’s impossible to touch but I do, and there’s a pulse, a spasm that runs up my arm and down the length of my spine. The creature on my back shifts, leaning down. Something warm and wet drips onto the back of my neck, splattering through my hair.

I choke on a whimper. *Okay, little ones. Now’s the time for you to help out. We can’t die yet. Not like this.*

Like I’d let you die. It’s about time.

They flock to the scene in waves, surging over the rooftops and crawling over the ground. The sun beats down, its pressure immense and constant, pulling sweat down my brow. It isn’t enough to stop the constant volley, though. The shadows ram into the monster and throw it off

kilter, setting me free with a gasp of beautiful, delicious air. I suck it down in great gulps as if I've never been granted the privilege, coughing up a cloud of dust as I scramble to my feet.

The beast is trapped, twisting and clawing in a cyclone of shadows. It cuts down five and ten more take their place. I can barely see the thing through the cloud of darkness, but the little breaks reveal a mass, vaguely humanoid if not for the fact that it's see-through. There's the smallest hint of a gaping mouth in the towering form, of elongated hands that end in curved claws, of *red eyes*.

He did this? It's the same shade as the one in my memories, the same eerie glow. I glance over my shoulder, somehow afraid I'd see him waiting at the end of the street, but it's just me and the beast, me and the shadows. Shouldn't there be someone else out by now?

Pay attention. It's firm, chastizing, and I snap back to attention.

"Right, sorry." I wasn't sure to who I was apologizing, but I had the sense to bow my head and look rightfully ashamed. The monster wails, thrashing out at the wall that keeps it at bay, and I find myself planting my feet.

A shadow breaks off from the group, larger than the rest. Swimming over, its skin bubbling in the direct sunlight, it bumps against my cheek.

Do what feels right, it says, and vanishes into a wisp of black mist.

My gaze drops to my hands, to the calloused fingertips and the palms covered in tiny scars. The hands of a worker, a caretaker... a fighter. Except I don't remember the girl they belong to. They're my hands, but they're not. What feels right? What doesn't feel right?

"Trust yourself." The purple-eyed girl whispers. But it's not helpful. The old me knew what to do, she must've. She had these powers, she must've mastered them, used them to her advantage. Who knows what she accomplished?

The monster lashes out and this time it breaks through, stealing a step before it's once again consumed. The shadows don't miss a second--not like me. They blow out, then converge, blocking, taking the onslaught with ease. The next roar shakes the ground, a thin wail that pierces my eardrums and sends a spike of pain through my abdomen.

“Trust your powers, then.”

“Oh, to hell with it.” It’s a low growl. I don’t know what feels right. I may never know what feels right. Right now, I wasn’t the Scarlett of the past. The only thing I was going to trust was the fact that I wasn’t letting that thing hurt me again.

My hand shoots out at the same moment I start running forward, hand outstretched and reaching. Empty until it wasn’t, grip falling right into place on the hilt of a blade, but I don’t stop to contemplate. The shadows have split, making way for me, letting the beast come lumbering through, but even as it rears back it’s too late. I’ve leaped by the time it should’ve slashed, plunging the blade down into the center of its chest, where the fog is the most condensed.

The creature buckles, collapsing in on itself in an agglomeration of limbs turned tendrils, which wriggle along the ground before dissipating. My knife is buried in the center of the street, still pinning a lump of the floundering mass in place. I swallow, heave a shuddering breath, and twist. There’s a pop, followed by a flash of white and a squeal that reverberates right down to the base of my skull. I watch what remains of the beast burn away, watch it smoke and writhe until it’s nothing more than a scorch mark on the pavement. Then, and only then, do I let go.

“Fucking bitch,” I wheeze, tipping my head back to stare at the open sky, so pale and blue. So peaceful compared to the heat in my veins, the dizziness that’s spinning the ground beneath my hands.

But I can’t help a smile when a shadow closes the distance, nuzzles at my cheek and wipes away the river of blood escaping from my nose. “Thank you, little one.”

You did good, it’s a soft murmur, easing. For two seconds I allow my mind to disguise it as my friend’s voice, despite being a touch too low. My body feels two seconds away from collapsing, but I feel like jumping, like tossing my head back and letting out a cry of my own. I’m my own person, this me, right here. I want to tell her, the person I used to be, that I’ve lived up to whatever image she left behind--to the scars and the pain and the powers. I picture her, the scrawny girl with little hands in a bandage-wrapped body, and I take her by the shoulders. I’ve won, you see? We can do this. *I can do this.*

But the wailing I hear isn't my own. It's in the distance, a cacophony of the damned that grows, multiplies, and sings until it's everywhere. The shadows are frantic, *Run*, they say, like I'm not already trying to shove myself to my feet, but my body is unwieldy. It lurches forward and they have to catch me, support my legs until they can find their balance.

The first monster lumbers around the corner, followed by another, and then another, a sea of darkness that washes in aimlessly. The roars of the original echo in the back of my mind. The damn thing had called for *backup*.

One Year Before The Fall

“Your highness.”

It’s late when Queen Halianna summons us, so my voice carries up the high-chambered walls thanks to the distinct lack of servants and aristocrats within the corners of the room. The only other sound is the crunch of my knee joint grinding in its socket, a harsh twang to my bow, and I make a mental note to stretch the moment this meeting is over--or at least visit the palace healers. Rein reaches forward to steady me, a hand ghosting the small of my back, a disciplinary waiting to happen, but the Queen says nothing. She doesn’t even look up. She’s too busy gawking at the man who’s center stage, the entrance hall filled to the brim with his chuckle; the embers of a dying fire, the last drags of wind over a calm plain.

Rein pulls away only when she’s certain I’m not going to tumble over into the floor--which was never a concern--but by the glare she’s leveling the training field is officially off-limits for the evening. Fair enough, considering it’s already difficult to beat her in a swordfight without a leg that doesn’t want to work properly. Then again, we may have to retreat to the arena for a little while, if only to avoid an infraction. Halianna would have to look our way eventually and here were, covered in filth. We’d be lucky if we didn’t get a night in the stocks. She’s the image of perfection, as usual: her skin shimmers like the marble beneath our feet, hours of scrubbing in both accounts, surely. Her hair is tied back, half up, half down and the golden locks flow past her shoulders and into her lap. She’s wearing the dress she only dons when she specifically wishes to garner male attention, but despite her attempts to push her bust out the man doesn’t so much as offer a glance downward--which earns him a little more respect in my book. She’s like the fancy parrots she keeps in her gardens, the ones that fluff up to twice their size and prance around.

Ah yes, the strongest woman in the universe everyone.

By Rein’s giggle, I know I’m not the only one making the same connections, but unfortunately, I don’t think either of us have mastered the techniques required to keep laughter below a whisper. Halianna’s gaze snaps to where we stand still bent in our formal half-bow, and for a moment we’re frozen under the glow of molten starshine. Her mouth pulls into thin white

lines as she sits back, ramrod straight, clearing her throat and leaving the two of us to wince as we wait for the strike. A raised hand or the blast of her magic--either would mean buffing the floors, but the real question is whether or not we'll be the stain that's getting erased.

“Ah, girls! There you are,” but her voice is kind, honey-sweet, and she gestures us forward. Rein and I only hesitate because this must be a trap; no one is allowed to approach the throne except for the royal family, not even the guards. She only waves again, more insistent. “Come now, I won't bite. We have a visitor!” There's no arguing, not when the eggshells under our feet are shattered and broken already. Anything more and we'd be risking far too much.

We climb the first two steps before calling it quits, finding it safer within the middle ground. Too close and she might change her mind, too far away and she might think we're disobeying. She sighs, but it seems to meet her expectations, plus it keeps the mud on our pants a good six feet away from her gown. She never could stand the smell of the barn, of horse manure, or of hay that's been left out in the sun for too long. Any closer and she might start sneezing all over her fancy guest.

My eyes flick to our company. He has yet to turn around, but he's tall, taller than any Prismanian I've ever met at least, or any Earthling for that matter. He seems older, but I've never been the best judge of age, so my best guess would be somewhere in his fifties. I guess solely based on his hair, thick and grey, with patches that are lighter toward the top. Rein, who has made her way to the spot next to me, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, elbows me in the way that means: stop staring.

I oblige, if only because I don't want her teasing me for being overly curious again.

The Queen is all smiles, all business... for the most part. Standing, she sweeps the unnecessarily long train of her gown to the other side of her seat and holds out her hand. “Thank you for being so patient.”

I feel Rein's fake gagging, fighting down a grin as he takes Halianna's offer, stooping down to leave a brushing kiss on her fingers. “Of course, I don't mind at all. We had a very... enlightening conversation.” His voice is low, but not so low that it verges on a growl. It's almost

nasally, a little unpleasant, and highly forgettable if I wasn't watching the Queen of the known Universe swoon like a story-book schoolgirl.

Touching his shoulder, she motions in our direction. "These girls will be your escorts for your time here. Girls, this is Disperitus. He's a noble from the Outskirts; be sure to make him feel welcomed."

Rein and I glance at each other--she **has** gone mad.

"Your highness, your generosity has been welcoming enough." What generosity, I want to ask. The tariffs and trade bans on your people? Do those count as generosity where you come from? But he's already turning on the glossy tip of his wing-tipped shoes, "I thank you for the guard detail, but I assure you it isn't needed."

Red flares under the light of the chandelier, wine that swishes back and forth within the glass cage of his gaze. It pours down, over my arms, my chest, my waist, my legs. The corners of his lips pull up into a tiny smirk. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

The gem, once resting so comfortably against my collarbone, flares to life.

We haven't said a word to each other since then. He said he wanted to retreat to his room and drop off his luggage. We complied, despite the fact that all he has is a tiny carry-on, barely large enough to fit one day's worth of clothes. Rein refuses to leave my side, so close I'm positive I can feel her flames threatening to weld us together. There isn't much I can do to soothe her, not when my magic is already in my veins, so cold it's molten lava, crawling from one organ to the next and leaving only shards of frost in its wake. Not when I'd already had to slip my gloves on to prevent him from seeing the black spider webbing out across my skin. It's already beginning to itch, which means it's cracking. Which means-

I dab away a drop of blood before it has the chance to escape.

It's a practiced motion, one I've had to do for as long as I can remember. Bring your hands together, give a small swipe of your pinkie, and go still... but I'm not paying attention--not like I should be.

Disperitus hasn't looked away since the gloves went on, even as he sorts through the bag, even as he sits down on the edge of the bed to lay out a stack of papers on the side table (the top labeled 'confidential'). I've had nobles ask questions in the past; oddities are the lifeblood of humanity and incongruities make up the kindling for the fire in their brains. Curiosity can't thrive without the unknown. But there's a difference between interest and hunger, between the staring and pointing and the sunny grins paired with lingering touches.

Acceptance is only a fine line away from what will surely kill you.

The summer heat meanders throughout the room, sweat making the palms of my hands slick, and still, I shiver. It's hard not to breathe, but I'm afraid that if I do a cloud of fog would bellow out, giving away the icicles coating the back of my throat, the shadows coagulating on my tongue. Rein is inching, scooting, crossing the distance to press our arms together in an attempt to spread her fire into my ice, to melt the panic.

Control it. Just a little while longer. The voice echoes in between my own racing thoughts, so quiet. I nod anyway. It was always the calmest between the two of us--it hasn't led me wrong yet.

But it's hard to focus when Disperitus is watching, is waiting; for a slip-up, for loose lips to spill secrets untold for the decades I'd been alive.

"You." Neither of us were expecting him to speak. Rein jumps, so focused on easing my racing heart, she doesn't notice him standing, doesn't notice the way he's eyeing her fingers, the way they brush against mine.

I step in front of her, blocking the electricity in his gaze from finding its intended target. "Me, Sir?"

"No, not you." He softens, vermilion eyes pulsing, glowing, a heart with no capillaries or arteries.

That's not possible, the voice hisses, soft and low as it draws out every syllable. It's a caress this time, a fog that smothers other thoughts and I have to beat it back, shaking my head. It makes sense, though. It has to be just a trick of the light.

“No, not you. Your guardian. I wish to speak with you--in private, of course.”

There's no reason you should say no.

Of course not.

Rein's holding onto the back of my shirt, where he can't see. She tugs like I used to on those late nights back in the facility thousands of miles beneath our feet. She wants to run. Something is wrong. It's not, though. I need to tell her, yet my lips are glued shut. I'm floating above us, and there we are, as children, as adults, side by side, on the verge of a cliff, dangling over frothing waves.

But there's no reason to say no. He's not going to hurt us.

“Rein, I'll be alright. Wait outside, will you?” My voice sounds strangely flat in my own ears. She tugs again, harder this time.

“Are you sure?”

“Your princess said to remove yourself. You should listen.” It is in no way a suggestion. Disperitus has pulled himself to his full height--over six feet, going on seven--fingers tight on the head of his cane, a crystal skull, with craggy, empty sockets.

The world spins beneath my feet. Poison piles thick on the tip of my tongue. I need to speak, to say: Rein is my guardian, you do not talk to her that way.

But you won't get answers if she doesn't leave.

How do you know who I am?

Rein needs to leave.

Nobody knows.

You know what you need to do.

“Rein, go on. I’ll be fine.” I can’t look away, my body won’t move on its own. Everything is too distant. Rein gives a third, timid tug--something is wrong, please--before she lets go. She wouldn’t go far, I know. It’s enough to keep her from insisting, from risking the wrath of Halianna. A simple talk isn’t worth such a harsh punishment. He isn’t going to hurt me. There’s no reason to say no.

“I’ll be right outside.” Rein must slink out, her shoulders curled up and around her neck, hand resting on the hilt of her blade strapped securely at waist level. I can see it so clearly, yet I don’t turn to look. Content to stand, and wait, and watch his ruby eyes swim until the door makes a final thud throughout the room (I’ve never seen eyes that could change like that before). There was no reason to be afraid; one cry and she’d swoop in, setting everything ablaze.

That won't be necessary, you'll see.

My head tilts, suddenly too heavy to hold up, a pinch that starts at the base of my skull and expands outward. I manage to blink: once, twice, and finally, I’m able to find the will that disappeared, rubbing away the haze at the edge of my vision.

“What-” My throat is tight, words alien in my mouth. I have to start over again. “What did you want to talk about?” I meant for it to be more professional, but I sound like a child who’s been woken up too early by a noisy servant.

“Nothing too serious, I’m afraid. But it does only pertain to the two of us.” He chuckles, all too amused at my confusion in a way that would normally make my blood boil.

To my own horror, I feel my cheeks start to warm. “How did you know about-”

“Your genealogy?” He clicks his tongue, “Your mother is a fool. I’ve known her for a long while. Your existence is one of her worst-kept secrets.” He gestures to the balcony where sunlight is beginning to stream in, long arcs that stretch between us, chasms of light that seem impenetrable. “Will you accompany me outside or would you rather we speak in here?”

My power curls in on itself, hiding away even as it eagerly grasps for the onset of darkness. I have the sense to say, “Here, please,” even as the voice whispers,

It wouldn't hurt.

By his smile, it's the right answer; wide and strangely proud. The pressure in my ears, in the back of my brain, dissipates. I look around as if I've never seen a guest bedroom before, haven't cleaned them a thousand times before, haven't spent a night locked away in one--too afraid of what might happen if I was found in my own room, my own bed. Who might decide to drag me away.

Disperitus taps his cane on the floor. "Then we can begin."

"Begin?" I don't know if I should be watching him or trying to follow the noise; it's growing, bending, warping, a knock turned midway into a wail, almost human, that of a baby, but not. "What is that?"

"I can guess what Halianna has told you of worlds beyond this one. Of your power." He's ignoring my question, crossing the space between us, the light and the dark, the powers that be and shouldn't be. This isn't possible, yet the gem atop his cane smokes, a hazy glow at its center. He shouldn't have that, *can't* have that.

His smile goes a tad bit too wide as he holds out his hand, pointing to a corner of the room that's heaving, moaning, eyes made of hell fire peering out of darkness made real. Frost snakes across the ground wherever a clawed hand smacks down.

"Remind you of anything?" Disperitus breathes, but he doesn't have to speak. Whisps drift up to the ceiling, writhing, swirling, twisting. Familiar shapes that may lack the scales, the sentience, and the playful pushes, but they're the same. The monster in the corner drags itself into the light, unbothered, and gasps a pitiful sound. Its body is translucent, a shadow that leaves the sun overcast as it makes its way in front of us, beginning to grow, to tower.

Disperitus puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, his voice softer now. "You and I aren't so different, Scarlett. She's lied to you. There are things I can teach you, things that they could never begin to understand."

I look up. His eyes are pulsing again, matching the rhythm of the drum in my head--he's like me. There's somebody out there who's like me, who knows how to control this, *fix* this.

I pull my gloves off. “Show me.”

Chapter 7

I run with no destination in mind and pray to no god in particular; they've already joined the churning mass of greedy claws nipping at my heels. At first, there had been ten, twenty, but then from every side street, they'd poured out. Dark corners crawled to life, moaning and tearing, rippling with ecstasy at the mere thought of destruction. Houses, the ones filled with radio static, the ones silent with sleep, the ones with half-open doors, the ones with the lawn gnomes darkened with mold--their walls splinter as the beasts within escape. I glance back only once, when the road is still a straight shot into nothingness, into the steep inclines and deeper wastes that belong to mountains and evergreens.

They've faded together, hooves grinding the asphalt into soot with each shuddering pass. Cavernous jaws now twisted into tusks that reach for the sky in a tangled disarray. They--it--bows its head and charges, and it's all I can do to force my legs faster, my shadows infusing with the muscle, the bone, the blood. Scenery flashes by too quickly and blood is flooding from every pore, but I have no choice. The mile between us keeps getting shorter.

But magic has a habit of making you blind. I have no way of seeing the first body until I've already tripped over it.

Four Months Before The Fall

“Do you even know what you’re doing?!” Rein is angrier than I’ve ever seen her before and that’s saying a lot. Her knuckles are white around the grip of her sword and she keeps her back turned to me, like somehow it’ll hide the fact that her shoulders are near to her ears--higher maybe. She refuses to look at me, refuses to acknowledge the little shadows floating around my head, content creatures that nuzzle into my neck and flinch when she first smacked them away.

“Of course I do.”

“No, you see Scarlett. That’s just it. You don’t.” The harsh drag of the whetstone cuts between us. “You don’t even know who he *is*.”

“He’s like me-”

“*No, he’s not.*” She breathes the words, long and slow, as if it’s taking everything she has not to release her fire along with them. “Nobody is like you, least of all him.” A short glance over her shoulder and all the pretense falls away. She didn’t follow me down here to sharpen her sword. I wasn’t here to polish my shield. The glow at my breastbone shimmers over the ground, like the reflection of water at twilight, when the birdsong has died away in the momentary lull before the sun finally falls.

I tell myself not to cry, surprised when the tears are actually a gnarled root, dried and rotten in the back of my throat. “What will it take for you to realize he’s helped me, Rein? I’m better, more controlled, and I can finally use my magic like I want to.”

“You didn’t need your magic!” She whips around, still holding the sword, the tip pointed directly at my heart. The violet I love swirls into an indigo I’ve only ever seen directed at enemies, at the Queen, at Disperitus. Never at me. “You know better than anyone! It hurts you, it

always hurt you! How many times have I had to patch you back together after an experiment gone wrong? How many times, Scarlett?!”

“That hasn’t happened in months! Since we were children, Rein! I’m fine, look!” I yank a sleeve up, revealing wrists free of darkened veins or flaky skin. I’m not bleeding from under my nails and while she can’t tell, my heart doesn’t squeeze or skip that extra beat. Everything is normal. *I’m* normal. “Why can’t you just be happy for me?”

She doesn’t bother to answer. “We were teaching you control, Scarlett. You’re one of the best soldiers in the entire army. You’ve beaten the commander twice. You don’t need it.”

I freeze and she seems to catch on just a second too late. The way her voice bent upwards, higher-pitched, *a plea*.

“Are you scared of me?” One by one, the shadows blink out, drifting to the ceiling in little clouds of smoke. It’s difficult to see, but she flinches with every disappearance, and suddenly I’m all the more aware of the sword, the single lunge it would take for her to sever me through.

“I’ve never been afraid of you.”

“You’re *lying* to me?” Asked like a question--it’s not one. Incredulous. “Rein--”

“Scarlett, don’t you understand what you’ve done?” Her voice finally breaks. She squeezes her eyes shut, whether because the words pain her or because she can’t bare to look at me, I don’t know. I’m not sure it matters. “You’ve *killed* people.”

I stumble back, right into the wall of assorted armor that clamors and echoes, my thoughts a match to the discordance. My hand drifts to the gem, where warmth is giving way to the familiar chill of my younger years. Didn’t she understand anything? “They were hurting us. We were kids. I didn’t-” Didn’t know any better? When I knew the outcome of those

experiments and the Queen's curiosities could end in death if I didn't prevail. If Rein didn't meet every expectation. If the bond that tied us together, princess and guardian, didn't hold up to every trial and test and inane evaluation.

"But you still killed people. You couldn't control it, no matter how hard they pushed us, and even when I begged you to stop you wouldn't listen." Her lips curl into something that's like a smirk but isn't one as she steps forward, blade resting against my shirt, soft enough not to draw blood, but I can feel the strength of her arms waiting. One wrong move, the flicker of a shadow in the corner of her eye, and it would be over.

Now it's I who won't meet her gaze. I would've rather she stabbed me by now. "Did you, of all people, think that if I ignored this it would go away? Get better?" Years ago, we had insisted on saying that we had always been friends. That it had always been Rein and me vs. the world. It felt like that, after all this time. We'd held hands, played together, fought together. Truthfully, we'd had no choice in the matter. I was hers to protect, and she was mine in equal measure, but it was easier to forget that way. We loved each other (I thought we loved each other, but I can't tell any longer, not when she's looking at me that way). Our first kiss was a marker to the beginning of a very long and intensive rehearsal of forgetting, of burying secrets until the only ones who could possibly find them were ghosts long passed.

I thought she trusted me. She was right, I had killed. But never would I allow myself to harm her.

"I've done everything I can to *make* you better." It's a whisper, no matter how frustrated, no matter how much she wants to walk out and leave me here on my own.

Staring at her, I wonder how long she's felt this way. If Disperitus and his appearance was the start, or if she's harbored such feelings during every slip-up, every moment she discovered

me in the dark, magic swirling in the palm of my hand. I can barely force myself to shake my head. “Not once have I asked you to do that.” All I wanted was a friend. My magic was my problem--did I want guidance? Of course. But wanting her to fix it? I’ve wanted encouragement, advice maybe. When had she misunderstood? Or had she--was this the mission she’d taken on when knighted? Was this what her honor hinged on?

Dammit, all.

Shoving the blade away, it cuts cotton but not flesh, and I see a brief flicker of the old Rein, the one I know would lay down her life before hurting me. “You know... you used to tell me to trust my magic. To trust myself.” Spitting the words feels good only because I can tell they hurt. Her body sags in on itself. Her sword swings uselessly down to her side. I tell myself it’s only fair; if this entire thing has been a lie, I can’t be the sole entity torn to pieces in the collapse.

The retreat to the south tower is a relief. Rein doesn’t come after and I don’t bother to invite her--not this time. For so long, I’ve tried to convince her to, so she could watch my growth and see it with her own eyes. Angry tears slide down my cheeks, persistent even after an aggressive swipe of my arm. I thought she’d be proud of me.

Time passes in a haze, the climb easier than it’s ever been before. I practically run up every flight of stairs till I reach the top, craving the gentle teaching Disperitus gave out. For once, I was grateful he had us train away all the way up here, where clouds hide all trespasses and the endless expanse of the sky fades into a blanket of stars and comets, into galaxies far beyond my comprehension. One day I’d leave this place. I’d get on a ship and fly away from all these rules. No more pressure. No more tests. I wouldn’t be a disappointment then, not to anybody.

“Please tell me we’re doing something new.” Practically kicking open the door, my brain doesn’t register what’s happening until he turns. The same smile on his face, so kind despite the grip he has around the servant’s throat. She’s still twitching, but she’s withered, skin an ashy grey that leaves her bones protruding. From her slack lips, a haze of black smoke spills and condenses. A wriggling hand tipped with sharp claws, followed shortly by thin rivulets of blood.

Disperitus drops her, letting the beast inside finish what it started. “I’ve prepared an entire lesson, actually.”

Chapter 8

The road has grown narrow. It's been a steady ascent and now the edge of the blacktop hangs precariously over the edge of a mountain, chunks spilling off into oblivion, into the river waiting far below. The monster has no qualms about running until the last option that remains is to jump off the edge of this forsaken planet--I am lost. My chance to hide faded out with the last dregs of civilization.

At first, there had been a smattering of buildings, houses with unkempt yards and rusted over swing sets. If Logan was a town running on fumes, then this place was the edge of a vacuum. The wilderness waits on every side to reclaim what rightfully belongs to it. Veins grasp at gutters and slither over rooftops. Paint peels in thick layers, littering the knee-high grass with lice-like chips. Several windows are covered in soot, old remnants of a fire that burned late into the night, long past the departure of any owners, all possessions left to smolder in search of bigger and better things.

Hiding meant giving up the chase, letting the magic die in my veins, and hoping the bleeding stopped before the creature caught up. As it was, every step leaves a bright calling card in the center of the pavement, drag marks from the leg that demands it be useless. My shadows lift it into the air after several minutes of desperate limping, a new burst of life that will last up till the next steep slope.

But even that specter is dwindling now. It hovers, there on the opposite side of the river. Shimmering in and out of focus, I spot the very last vestiges of civilization, hollow and neglected between the leaves. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barks--I'm not sure if it's a figment of my imagination, not when there's the deafening screech of a thousand souls ringing out over the hills.

The ground convulses under my feet, the very mountain alive as another section of the road peels away and plummets into the river. I have no choice. Turning to the sheer rockface to my left, I abandon the street and begin to climb.

Six Weeks Before The Fall

The laboratory is beyond all repair. It had once housed a hive of scientists, all working toward different breakthroughs. On the topmost floor, there was fruit that would never go bad. Then teleporters that could cross space and time consecutively--there was a running joke that the time travel would never work, as why had no one ever come back to speak of it?

But it was the lowest floors that no one mentioned. The deepest, darkest recesses, where they poked and prodded, shocked and cut, bend and broke. Here, the powers of an unknown princess grew ever stronger. Stronger than any of the other children born that same year, or the decade before, or the century before that. There were whispers that she might even surpass the Queen herself, but these were quickly extinguished (and those with loose lips taken away).

Kicking an old paperweight, I watch it roll across the loose vinyl. There's not a soul in sight, which is a relief in more ways than one. You can't even hear the bombs this far underground, only a thick silence. The single challenger to such a feat is the amount of dust on every surface, a solid inch at least. Every step sends a cloud of grime whirling into the air; I should've brought a mask. *Stupid girl.*

But really, what's the harm? Death by suffocation at the hands of a few dust bunnies would be a treat compared to the throws of war. I'd be one of the lucky ones--my spirit intact, healthy.

Shoving my hands into the sleeves of my fatigues, then into my armpits, I beg my body to catch up with our surroundings. Why did the central heating also have to be dead? The electricity was bad enough; I thought I'd grown used to taking the stairs.

Just a little further, the voices in the back of my mind whisper, behind their cage, and the brick wall, and every other foundation I'd made to keep them at bay.

“Shut it.” I already know where I’m going. There’s no need for them to act like they’re pulling any strings.

Shuffling past open doors, I offer a cursory glance inside each one despite knowing what I’d see. The scattered papers, the broken beakers, and the shriveled bodies with fingers grasping at something only they could see with their gaping eye sockets. The beam of my flashlight lances through the gloom, highlighting a single spiderweb clinging to the inside of a mouth forever frozen in mid-scream. I run the light over the corpse’s face. She had brown hair once, but now there are just wispy strands of musty yarn. Her name tag is gone, ripped free along with most of the skin along her collarbone. If she’s here, I used to know her. Was she the lab technician with the pretty smile or the doctor that thought electro-shock treatments would suppress my magic for good?

It doesn’t matter either way. They both ended up in the same place.

Pushing forward, I take two lefts and a right, ignoring the sign that says ‘Do Not Enter Unless Otherwise Permitted’ besides a quick salute of my middle finger. I can go where I damn well please, now.

Halianna’s office is just as pretentious as she is, even though the entire place looks like it’s been through six hurricanes. Gold trims line the floors, but somehow the gleam is significantly lessened when you start to notice the mold. It grows in dense lumps, covering the faces of ancestors in intricate artwork, women and men I remember from the history lessons my tutors used to force on me after the experiments had concluded for the day. There are statues with their limbs properly severed at each joint, some of the cuts clean, others jagged. One side of the room is completely lost to a ceiling that fell in weeks ago, when the sprinklers first went off,

when members of the staff remained, when the war was, *as The Queen claimed*, nothing more than a plague.

The carpet still holds most of the water, my shoes sinking into the wet fabric as I maneuver my way over to her old desk. Whatever I'm looking for, it's going to be in there--it has to be. This place was her vault, the only people who could breach this facility (before Disperitus and his monsters, at least) were those with her official seal. It makes sense that I wasn't the only thing she kept locked away down here.

I have to jiggle the first drawer to get it to open. Turns out there was little point--all the papers are soaked through, ink a translucent mess that ran down each and every page in long streaks. Moving to the second, I'm greeted by a similar sight.

“*Fuck-*” I've spent my life scrounging for answers while knowing that every single person in my life wants to hide them from me. It's not fair, but life isn't fair--but why can't I scream it anyway? Moving against the current is basically a promise that, once you look up, your goal will have vanished. Then, too tired to make your way back to shore, you'll be stranded till the next riptide carries you away.

I've always wanted to ask if people hear phantoms in dark hallways. It's true that the lack of light leaves your skin buzzing, eyes watching you from every doorway, and that footsteps carry in the emptiness.

It's more than that, though. Listen closely, slow down, and let your eyes fall shut. In the distance, another pair of steps will match your own, just a corner away. I've seen her once, years ago. A scarred back and a mess of tangled curls. Wide eyes and hands that clutch at a stained, white dress. Ever since, I've been trying to catch up, but no matter how fast or how far I run, I

can never catch up. She's always hidden, too scared to come out--an eternal game of hide and seek, one that will only end when the final fluorescent lamp flickers out.

I yank the third drawer straight off its hinges. There, resting in the very back, is a small, felt box.

I won't be dragged along. If I have to, I'll walk on water to finally figure out where I belong.

My Husband,

Have you found what we've been searching for? Our people--and I-- grow weary for the return of our king.

My Wife,

I apologize for the late response. It is difficult to find a courier this far into the Outskirts willing to travel so far. I, too, have missed you dearly.

Do not fret. I have found exactly what we need to progress with our plan. Come to the coordinates I list below. Please, do not forget your crystal~ We wouldn't want to postpone this ceremony any longer than necessary, now would we? I did swear that our highness would have all the power she's ever desired.



My Husband,

I do hope this letter reaches you in time, though I do not see why you decided to return to that backward planet. Have we not completed our business there many moons ago? But that is beside the point.

You must return to me. Please, Disperitus. The doctors say this pregnancy is taking its toll, but I know they are wrong. What we accomplished on that planet is protecting me from the worst of it, these powers we took. But the offspring growing inside me is different. Wrong.

I will send a ship to you. Come back to me.

This letter remains in its envelope, unlike the others. It was never sent.

Disperitus,

I know what you must think of me. Truth be told, if I had seen another way, I would have taken it. You were uncontrollable. You're magic--no. The magic *we* stole had consumed you. The man I married, the righteous king, vanished before my very eyes. I had no other choice.

The girl is following the same path as you. The magic she wields. I've only seen it once before, in your hands. It is different, in a way. Deadly, but she cannot create the same beasts as you. The truth remains the same, though. She doesn't know how to control it. The doctors cannot help. It is all I can do not to end this as we started it--perhaps she would find peace surrounded in the darkness?

I don't know what to do. She holds a single galaxy in the palm of her hand, and she doesn't even know it. I am afraid of the day she discovers the extent of her abilities. When she does... It won't be long before she decides to let it consume everything in her path.

My Wife,

Though, I suppose I have no right to call you by such a title any longer. You have all the reason to throw this letter away without ever opening it but, in case you have kept your merciful heart after all these years, I wish to give my most heartfelt apologies.

The man you last saw was not I. I do not know what overcame me, nor could I stop the transformations that have afflicted my body. The choices we make indeed haunt us and mine

most of all. Finding that community and the knowledge they possessed was supposed to be our salvation, the key to all the eminence we could ever wish to obtain. But having lost you, our daughter, my throne. I fought to regain my senses, Halianna.

Does this letter not speak for itself? The last time you saw me, I could not connect two thoughts, let alone recognize my love for you. Please, allow me an audience. I wish to return and set things right--I promise, I won't disappoint.

Chapter 9

In which Scarlett runs face first into Rein - Very short like Chap 8 & 9