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DAUGHTERS
OF DELIRIUM

T A I N T E D Q U E E N S B O O K O N E



Table of Contents

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30
- 31
- 32
- 33
- 34

35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50

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Daughters of Delirium
Tainted Queens Book One
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Dedicated to
the lost black girls searching for magic.

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Table of Contents

[1](#)
[2](#)
[3](#)
[4](#)
[5](#)
[6](#)
[7](#)
[8](#)
[9](#)
[10](#)
[11](#)
[12](#)
[13](#)
[14](#)
[15](#)
[16](#)
[17](#)
[18](#)
[19](#)
[20](#)
[21](#)
[22](#)
[23](#)
[24](#)
[25](#)
[26](#)
[27](#)
[28](#)
[29](#)
[30](#)
[31](#)
[32](#)
[33](#)
[34](#)
[35](#)

[36](#)
[37](#)
[38](#)
[39](#)
[40](#)
[41](#)
[42](#)
[43](#)
[44](#)
[45](#)
[46](#)
[47](#)
[48](#)
[49](#)
[50](#)
[51](#)
[52](#)

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1

Raven rubbed at the jagged scars on her neck. Her eyes were locked on the blue flyer in front of her. *They actually used the clip art image of a schoolhouse*, she thought. The administration still saw them as a bunch of children. She frowned and pulled her hand away.

Rufus high school was having yet another parent-teacher conference.

Once again, Raven had to make up an excuse as to why her father wouldn't be able to attend. Michael was sure to be busy with work. There was always a case to solve or a criminal to catch. Why bother telling him when he just forgets?

No one would question her mother's absence. They would all give Raven that knowing sympathetic look she hated and move on.

"Raven."

Raven turned to see Tiffany walking toward her. Tiffany had a tall lean figure with a confident stride. The overhead light caught on the tips of her blonde ombre hair giving her a golden halo. She smiled at Raven, a picture perfect smile.

Raven smiled back. "Hey, Tif."

"Whatcha staring at?" Tiffany's eyes followed Raven's gaze to the bulletin board.

Raven turned her back to the board hoping to block the flyer. "Nothing."

Tiffany, who was at least three inches taller, had no problem looking past Raven to see the flyer. She glanced back at Raven and smiled. "My parents aren't coming either. Ma's working and dad's-" Tiffany paused, her smile shrinking for only a second, "Dad's just not feeling too hot."

Raven sighed, shoulders sinking. She turned back to the board. "I'm not worried. This won't be the first parent teacher conference I miss the extra credit points for."

In all her years at Rufus High, her father had only ever attended one parent-teacher conference. During her sophomore year, her father had taken off work to meet with her teachers after learning she'd nearly failed all of her classes. Since then she'd maintained her grade point average, doing everything to avoid unwanted attention. The last thing she needed was to have another sit down with the principal. If she was told one more time how *understandable* her situation was she'd lose it.

"I mean it's stupid. We're high school seniors. What's the point of having a conference anyway?" Raven asked.

Tiffany shrugged. "They probably just want to make sure we all make it to graduation so they can kick us out."

"They don't have to kick. I'll run if I have to."

"Girl, I'll be an Olympic gold medalist," Tiffany laughed.

"You guys ready?" Dion asked coming up behind them. He stood with his backpack and coat. His skin was coco brown and eyes hazel. There was a splattering of acne across his forehead that had started to clear in recent years. The atom tattoo that peeked beneath the sleeve of his blue polo, reminded her of jimmy neutron. Of the three, Dion was always the last to be dismissed. Spanish club had a tendency to run late.

"Yup, let's blow this popsicle stand." Tiffany looped her arm through Raven's.

Together they made their way out of the building, passing rows of pea green lockers and empty classrooms.

A gust of cold wind greeted them as they stepped outside. The late autumn leaves swirled around them. Normally the leaves were a beautiful sight but the rain left them sullen and covered in muck. Raven looked up. The trees were almost bare, their dark brown limbs crueler in their slumber.

Tiffany shivered against Raven's arm.

Dion rubbed his hands together and blew into them. "They said this is supposed to be one of our coldest winters yet,"

Raven looked back up at the sky. The gray clouds were like angry cotton balls blotting out the sunlight. She pulled the zipper of her pale yellow jacket higher. Later she would have to remember to stop by the mall

and pick up some more winter clothes, which would put another strain on her budget, but it was a necessity.

“I can believe that,” Tiffany said rubbing her arms for warmth. “It’s not even winter and it’s already colder than a witch’s tit.”

Tiffany wore a pleated black skirt and ankle boots. Goosebumps ran all along her legs.

Raven looked down at her worn down black dickeys. They were a size too big and needed to be belted in order to stay on her hips but they kept her warm. In the winter, when it got really cold, she’d be able to add an extra layer under them.

Dion pulled out the keys to his truck. “Why do people say that?” He looked back at Tiffany. “Are we all just supposed to assume that witches have cold tits?”

“Don’t know and, more importantly, don’t care. I just want to get inside before my own tits freeze off.”

Tiffany moved to the passenger side of Dion’s black 2013 F-150. Dion went over to the driver’s side and flashed Tiffany a dimpled smile.

“Doubt it. Fat keeps the body warm and judging by the size of those things you should be good.” Dion joked as he unlocked the doors.

Tiffany flipped him the middle finger before opening her door and getting in.

Raven took the back seat. She stared out the window as Dion drove, watching as graffiti covered buildings passed by. Growing up in Detroit, MI she’d become accustomed to seeing them. She liked the look of them. Some were well-crafted pieces of art while other looked like crude renditions straight from a child’s sketchbook. The buildings were old. Some abandoned with broken windows and missing parts, but as a whole to stubborn to fall down. There was beauty in their combination, a sight that was often bitter sweet.

“Earth to Raven,” Tiffany called from the front seat.

Raven turned from her window. Tiffany eyed her from the visor mirror, her dark brown eyes focused on Raven’s.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” Raven asked.

Tiffany turned around in the leather seat. “We should go out. It’s your eighteenth birthday. Staying at home is no way to celebrate adulthood.”

“It’s just another year, not really that big of a deal.”

“Of course it’s a big deal. As of today, you are an adult. Do you know what that means?”

“I can buy a lottery ticket?”

“Or a pack of cancer sticks,” Dion added, thumbs drumming against the steering wheel.

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “It *means* that for the first time in your life you are in complete control. No one can tell you what to do. You’re free to make your own decisions.”

Raven’s birthday meant more to Tiffany than it did to her. For Raven, birthdays could never be quite what they use to be, but she tried to enjoy Tiffany’s excitement.

“Then let my first official adult decision be to go home and spend the rest of the day with my friends,” Raven said.

Tiffany let out a frustrated sigh. She dropped back in her seat refraining from making any further arguments.

Raven’s eyes lingered on Tiffany. She knew Tiffany missed her more outgoing days. Back then she’d been an exuberant ball of energy with an imagination worth wild. Sometimes when Raven looked back on her past self it felt like she was staring at another person.

“You know, I think she’s got a point,” Dion said looking at Raven threw his rearview mirror. “Who needs a big party when you’ve got two of the world’s most awesome people around you.”

Dion winked and Raven smiled. He always had her back. Sometimes Raven thought they got along better because he didn’t know her before the incident. This version of her was the only one he’d ever known and he never expected more.

It only took fifteen minutes for them to make it back to Raven’s house. She lived on a decent street. The only abandoned house had been vacated seven years ago. The older woman who’d lived there passed. Raven watched as the once beautiful home fell to ruin, noting the changes each day. Overgrown weeds in the gutters flooded the foundation. Bricks slowly shifting sideways, the chimney bent like an old man’s back. Not everything had to be alive to die.

The lights in Raven’s house were off. Her father’s car was missing from the driveway. He was still at work.

Dion pulled into the driveway and they got out of the car. Raven waved to her neighbors Mr. and Mr. Rinly as they carried groceries towards their house. They were an old black couple that'd lived in the same house for years. The couple smiled and nodded as they entered their home. The oldest Mr. Rinly had a granddaughter Raven used to play with but she'd stopped visiting after the move. Some relationships weren't meant to last.

Raven pulled out her keys and unlocked the door. The door creaked on hinges that were older than she. Raven stepped in and her friends followed. Tiffany walked into the kitchen and Dion went straight for the living room. Raven locked the door and kicked off her gym shoes. She followed Dion to the living room. When she made it there Dion was already flipping through the channels.

Raven plopped down on the couch, sitting with her legs folded on the lumpy cushion. The couch was given to them after her grandmother passed. No matter what she did, she couldn't get rid of the cat smell. Grandma Loran was the definition of a crazy cat lady. After the kids moved out, she started collecting strays like a bad habit. Raven's mother had always used her allergies as an excuse not to visit, but Raven had a feeling it was the smell more than the fur that agitated her sinuses. An unkempt house was her mother's worst nightmare.

Tiffany rustled around in the kitchen, looking through their cabinets. "Your dad left a note. It says he'll be back late," Tiffany yelled.

"Big surprise," Raven said. Her father was rarely home. They were water and oil, every conversation ending with a bitter taste. He would rather spend his time with someone else and that was fine by Raven.

Tiffany walked into the room carrying a bottle of champagne and three glasses. She held them up in the air. "Let the celebrating began."

"Oh god, Tif, no," Raven said.

"Come on, Rae. You're like two years past legal in France and we *have* to celebrate at least a little."

Raven shook her head smiling. "We're French now?"

"Oui." Tiffany filled the glasses and passed them around. When everyone had their glass filled, Tiffany held hers up. "To my girl, the strong-willed independent badass."

Raven smiled, not the exact words she would use to describe herself, but she appreciated the sentiment. Their glasses clinked and they sat back

on the couch drinking and joking. At some point in the night, her fake smile had turned genuine. Tiffany made fun of Mr. Anberg's nasally voice giving such a perfect impression that Raven laughed until her side hurt.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Tiffany said in her normal voice. She pulled a small card out of her pink purse and handed it to Raven. "I know you said you didn't want anything but I've been meaning to give you this for a while."

After a slight hesitation, Raven opened up the card. Inside she found a twenty-five dollar gift card to their favorite ice cream shop. Raven's grin stretched across her face. Tiffany had an unhealthy obsession with the place. It amazed Raven that her friend could eat so much ice cream and still have such a slender waist. If Raven so much as thought of sweets, she was liable to gain a pound.

"Don't overthink it. This is really just another way for me to get you to treat me to ice cream."

"Thanks, Tif."

Raven leaned over and hugged Tiffany, breathing in the scent of her lavender and honey soap. Raven had given her a bottle of soap along with some hello kitty nail polish on her eleventh birthday. The nail polish ran out but Tiffany fell in love with the scent of the soap. She always had a bottle of it at home. In their time apart Raven had missed that smell. Tiffany's arms wrapped around Raven, holding her tight.

"Hey, I thought you said you didn't want anything." Dion hung a lazy arm over Raven's shoulder.

Tiffany shot him a death glare. "Idiot, girls always want presents. Even when we say we don't, we do."

"Chill cranky, I was just joking." Dion reached into his backpack and pulled out a small black box. "I saw it and thought of you. The stones are probably fake but I thought you might like it." He handed the box to Raven.

Raven knew she would love his gift. She hadn't planned on receiving anything but she should have known better with her friends. They were too good for her.

Raven leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Dion."

"Hey, why does he get a kiss? You don't even know what's in there. It could be a bunch of toenail clippings," Tiffany said.

“What, are you jealous? Because if you are I can give you a big ol’ kiss right now.” Raven teased, leaning over to Tiffany with puckered lips.

Tiffany quickly pushed her away. “Eww, gross, no!” Tiffany tilted her head as far away from Raven as possible.

Raven laughed again before pulling back.

Tiffany’s face scrunched up with a look of disgust. “Remind me again why I’m friends with you two.”

“Because without us your life would have no meaning,” Raven said.

“Whatever, just open up the damn box already.”

Raven did as her friend told her. Inside the box, she found a golden ring. She pulled the ring out and examined it. A diamond sat in the middle with smaller ones encircling it. Two rubies sat on both sides of the diamonds. Gold and black hearts linked together to create the band of the ring. The metal was slightly tarnished but overall it looked rather expensive.

“Whoa Dion, I thought you’d at least wait till after graduation to propose,” Tiffany said.

“It’s not like that,” Dion said. “I saw it and thought she might like it. I-I didn’t mean...”

“No, it’s okay. You were right Dion. I don’t own a lot of jewelry but this ring is beautiful. Where did you find it?” Raven asked as she put on the ring.

Dion relaxed. He smirked at Tiffany, to which she rolled her eyes. When he looked back at Raven his smile was warmer. “Me and my aunt went to the flea market last week. One of the ladies there was selling a bunch of rings and old pendants. Something about that one just stuck out.”

“Well, I love it. It looks unique.” Raven held up her hand. The gems sparkled in the light. She smiled. The ring looked perfect on her. The gold of the band complemented her brown skin. She’d been worried about the fit but the ring was sized to perfection.

“I thought you might like that. The lady that I bought it from told me that older jewelry is better because it has a soul. It sounded weird but I thought it be your kind of weird.”

Raven thanked him again. They spent the rest of their time watching movies. There was only one argument that night, which for them was a good thing. They sat on the cream rug flipping through Netflix’s movie

selection. Tiffany wanted to watch Love and Basketball again but Dion refused.

Raven leaned back against the sofa munching on salty popcorn and enjoying the sounds of their voices. Her house was quiet when they were gone; it creaked and moaned saddened by the silence. She did her best to ignore it, but some nights it kept her awake. Even as she sat with her friends, she knew what awaited her in the dark of her room.

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2

They were halfway through their third movie when Dion got a text from his mother. She reminded him to pick up his little sister from practice. Dion told Raven that he would have to leave and Tiffany decided to catch a ride home.

Saddened to see them go, Raven stood to walk her two friends to the door. Crumbs of popcorn that had fallen into her lap tumbled to the carpet. She dusted off her pants and followed behind them.

When they reached the door, Tiffany wrapped her arms around Raven pulling her into another hug. “I could spend the night if you want. You don’t have to be alone.”

“Nah, I know Nana is in town and you don’t get to see her that often. You two need time together. I’ll be fine.”

They shared one final hug. When Tiffany let go, Raven turned to hug Dion. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tight. He was surprisingly strong for someone who spent most of his day sitting in a computer chair. When they let go Raven waved goodbye. She watched them climb into the truck. The engine roared to life and she waved again as they pulled off.

Once they were gone Raven walked back inside of her house. She leaned against the door and let out a sigh.

“Alone again,” Raven whispered into the dim hallway. She made her way to the shower. Raven noticed how stiff and tired her body was as she undressed.

Is this what the tin man felt like when Dorothy found him?

Her bones were rusted metal.

The marble tile was cold against her feet. She pushed back the blue curtain and turned on the faucet. The pipes clanked before the showerhead began spitting out water. Raven waited for the water to heat before stepping in. Hot water rained down on her skin but she could barely feel it. In the quiet of her shower, Raven's thoughts spoke louder.

Her fingers pulled through the tangles of her hair but eventually, they found their way back down to her neck. She grazed her scar again and the one memory she'd been trying to suppress the whole day came rushing back to her.

Raven watched in horror. Blood dripped down her mother's arm and onto the carpet, soaking it in crimson. Her nails clawed deeper into the wounded flesh. Raven's heart thundered in her chest at the surreal sight.

Raven reached out and grabbed her mother's arm. "Stop it, mama. Stop it." She tried to sound brave but her voice broke. Tears blurred her vision and ran down her face. She didn't remember when she started to cry but she couldn't stop.

Her mother's body relaxed, no longer fighting back, as she stared into her daughter's eyes. "I can't stop, baby. I thought I got away, but they're still coming. No one can stop them." Tears swelled in her mother's brown eyes. "Once they're here, they'll set our whole world on fire."

"Mama." Part of Raven sensed what was happening. The look in her mother's eyes, the blood on her arm, she knew her mother's problems weren't just physical. No one else had been inside the house with her when this happened, which could only mean one thing.

"It's them!" Her mother stressed as if Raven should have known who they were. When Raven said nothing, her mother tried again. Her bloody hand gripped Raven's sleeve and pulled her closer. "It's them, Raven. You remember them, don't you? The ones that filled your dreams with screams... the wonderful... monsters."

Her mother's face twisted, full lips drawing out into a smile. She no longer looked like herself. Gone was the beautiful caring woman she'd always known. The crazed look in her brown eyes frightened Raven to the core. She tilted her head back and laughed, her cackle echoing off every corner of the room.

“Mama, please stop it. Mama, you’re scaring me!” Raven tugged back but her mother’s grip was too tight. She could feel her heart racing inside her chest as more tears slipped from her eyes.

Her mother’s head snapped forward. Her lips curled into a wicked grin. “Oh, sweet, Raven. I fear I’ve gone mad.”

Raven could still hear her mother’s words. The memory blurred after that point. She wouldn’t allow herself to go any further, but she knew how it ended. Raven had the evidence of her mother’s attack written on her face. Some of the scarring had healed over time but not all.

Lost in her thoughts, Raven didn’t notice the water had gone cold. She turned it off. Her body shivered but she felt disconnected from the cold. Raven stepped out of the shower and wrapped the large towel around her body, her toes wiggled against the mat.

Five years had passed since that night. When Raven’s father returned, he’d found them in his room. Raven all scratched up and his wife bleeding to death. He called for an ambulance, something Raven should have done when she first entered the room. Her mother woke up inside of the hospital a few hours later, horrified by what she’d done. They sent her to several different doctors before finally locking her away.

Raven moved with her father back to the city, their time in suburbia forever tainted by the horrors of the incident. She was the one who first asked to visit her mother. Her father refused. The therapist had told him it would be too traumatic for Raven, but Raven didn’t let that deter her. Denise More was her mother and she’d be damned if she let the woman who’d given birth to her rot away alone in a ward.

She told him he could not keep her away. He didn’t understand why Raven would want to see her after all that had happened.

“Because I need to understand,” Raven had shouted during one of their more heated debates. Not knowing why was the hardest part. Her therapist told her it was because she had trouble correlating the attack with the attacker but Raven knew it was more than that. Loving mothers didn’t turn into crazy women overnight.

Yours did. A voice hissed in the back of her mind.

“Raven,” her father called from downstairs, snapping her out of her thoughts. She hadn’t heard him come in.

He'd only just gotten off his shift. Raven could hear him shuffling downstairs as he moved around the kitchen looking for something to eat.

"I'm up here," Raven yelled.

"Okay... just checking," her father yelled back.

It was quiet afterward, the soft drip of the showerhead echoing in the bathroom.

That was the most they would talk today, which was for the best.

Raven could barely stomach being around her father and it always proved more difficult around this time of year. He was far from innocent in the destruction of their family. In that, they'd all played their role.

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3

The Heart Queensland

Lu stared at the mangled bodies. Their limbs were twisted in unnatural directions and faces masked with horror. The air in the room had a fowl stench, coppery and wrong. Blood stained the walls and floor, dripping down from the ceiling. Too much for just two bodies. She'd rushed from her chamber in nothing but her white nightgown when she heard the screaming and rustling footsteps. Now blood coated the bottom of her feet. The wet stickiness was warm against her flesh.

Lu stood too shocked to move. The horrific scene before her seemed unreal. Her brain tried to process the situation but she couldn't think straight. Nothing made sense.

One of the maids stifled a cry. She'd been the source of the screaming. The sound was enough to shake Lu from her trance.

"What happened here?" Lu asked, still facing the carnage. Her voice didn't sound right. It lacked the proper amount of emotion. She thought she must still be in shock.

"I came to prepare a bath for the queen, but-" The maid's voice cracked and she paused to sniffle.

"But what?" Lu asked. She turned to face the maid. The maid was a young pretty woman with smooth caramel skin and sad doe eyes. The king's pick, no doubt. He'd always liked the weak ones.

"I noticed something was off about the guards. When I got closer I noticed the blood on their armor and that they weren't moving, my lady. I

called for help but when I opened the door they were already dead.” The maid started to cry again.

Lu’s fist clenched at her sides. Her nails pinched into her palms and she focused on the sting of it, drowning out the sound of the girl’s cries. Turning, she looked at the guards standing on the other side of the room.

“Where is the Jack?” Lu asked, “Why was he not here to protect his queen and king?”

One of the knights stepped forward from the group. The other’s parted to let him through. He stood almost a head taller than the other guards and wore shiny black armor with a red and white cape. On the back of the cape, there’d be a grouping of hearts that matched his ranking. The same went for the rest of the guards who wore their castle uniform. Only those that ranked seven and up were allowed to serve in the inner walls of the castle.

“The Jack of Heart was found dead not too far from the queen’s chamber,” said the tall knight.

This can’t be happening, Lu thought.

The king, queen, and jack, were all killed in one night. Never before had the queensland been so vulnerable. The queen and the jack were supposed to be the strongest members of their court. This wasn’t supposed to be possible. Lu felt the urge to run. She was faster than all of them. It would be nothing for her to escape. She knew the castle and how to hide in the places they’d never look to find.

But running would mean leaving the Heart defenseless. She’d known this time would come but she’d never expected it to happen this soon. If Leo were here he’d be able to handle it. Her brother always knew the right thing to say to calm her, but Leo had gone to collect seeds. He wouldn’t hear of their parents’ death for another week.

Regardless, this was not his responsibility.

“How?” Lu asked, hoping no one heard the tremble in her voice.

“We believed that the previous Jack of Heart perished while trying to protect the king and queen,” the knight answered. “Someone had been hiding in wait. He went after Jack first. We can’t be sure but it looks like poison. Once the Jack was out of the way, the killer came for the king and queen.”

“Who is he?” Lu asked.

The man's eyes fell to the floor. "We don't know"

"You don't know?" Shock, confusion, and fear over her parent's death were quickly turning into anger as the panic rose inside her chest. "How can you not know? Someone was strong enough to defeat our king, queen, and jack. They slip past our defenses without any detection. How?"

The knight did not have a response for her.

"This cannot happen. You have to have some idea of who is responsible. This is the Heart. We are the strongest queensland known to this realm."

"Princess-"

"We are meant to be impenetrable, defenders of the light. How then is it that we are defeated by one man?" Lu was almost shaking with anger. Attempts to calm her would only intensify her outrage. This was not the time to be placated.

"Forgive us, princess, for we have failed you," the knight said. He dropped down to one knee and bowed his head. The other guards followed his movement.

Lu looked down on them. "You want my forgiveness, but I am not the one you failed."

I am not the one who is dead, Lu thought. She turned back around. The king and queen's bodies still lay broken on the floor. Her anger faded back into fear as she looked at them.

"For these grievances you will answer to the people, we all will." Life without her parents did not scare the princess. Their relationship had never been so close. Lu did not know the feel of her mother's hug or the look of her father's smile. She could count on her fingers the number of times she'd seen her parents in the previous year. Only two involved any conversation. She would not miss what she never had.

What the princess feared was a queensland without its rulers. Soon the entire queensland would know of their deaths. They needed to take control of the situation less the queensland fall completely apart. She glanced around her parent's chamber. Besides the bodies and blood, nothing seemed out of place. The bed was made and the fireplace was fading to embers. The glass doors to the balcony were open when she came in. Their killer could have escaped through there but everything else was left untouched. Why? Where were the signs of struggle?

“Bring me the Jack’s apprentice,” Lu ordered, turning back toward the guards.

“I am the one the previous Jack named as his apprentice,” the knight she’d spoken to before said. “I came as soon as I heard the scream.”

Lu eyed the tall man over again. She knew of the Jack’s apprentice but she’d never been given the chance to meet him. His helmet kept his face hidden and eyes shadowed. She glanced past the man toward the other guards. “The rest of you take care of the bodies. They will need to be wrapped and prepared for the wall. Make sure the hall is cleared. No one gets in and no one gets out. One of you will help this maid back to her bedchamber. She will not be allowed to leave until I clear her.”

Lu turned to the maid, her eyes narrowing. The maid bowed her head and averted her eyes from the princess’s glare.

“You understand the importance of silence, do you not?” Lu asked.

The maid nodded, but bobbing, she kept her eyes on the floor.

“Then don’t speak a word to anyone,” Lu gestured to one of the guards, “Or he will cut your tongue out and serve it to you on a platter.”

Words her mother would have said, Lu assumed. Lu watched as the girl began to tremble. She hoped that fear would be enough to keep her mouth shut. Power was the ability to strike fear into the hearts of the enemy, knowledge of this chafed at Lu’s skin; that power was hers now.

She turned her attention away from the maid in favor of the other guards. “Go now.”

The guards bent at the waist, offering a bow before snapping into action.

Lu turned back toward the previous Jack’s apprentice. “Do you know what comes next?”

“As the queen's only daughter and heir, the throne belongs to you now. You must pick the next members of the royal bond in order to gain full control. I am the Jack’s apprentice. I have trained under him making me the most viable option to fulfill his role. I would give my life to serve you, but the final say must be yours, princess.”

The royal bonds were an important part of every queen’s rule. They’d been tradition since the start of the queensland. Each bond served an important role in strengthening the queen’s power. The Jack of Heart protected the queen and led her army. With the assassination of her

parents, people would be expecting her to bond with a powerful Jack as soon as possible. Doing so would ensure the stability of her queensland. This attack might mean the possibility of an all out war. She would need a strong Jack by her side.

“You haven’t completed training yet, have you?” Lu asked. The last Jack’s apprentice died only a year ago. She’d watched the funeral parade from her chamber window and burnt a red feather for him in the church’s light. He’d fallen while accompanying her mother on a mission. The new one would barely have trained enough to cover the basics.

“I may not have finished training, but while I worked with the previous Jack, I learned many things. It will be hard to find someone with my level of skill and training,” the knight said.

His point was valid, though perhaps arrogant. Little skill was better than no skill. Even if he wasn’t fully trained as a Jack, he was still a soldier in her mother’s army. To be selected to train meant that he’d showed a skill set other soldiers had lacked. The whispers she’d heard about the new apprentice painted an impressive picture, the question was if the real thing could live up to the stories.

“You sound rather confident,” Lu said taking a step forward, “Remove your helmet.”

Lu wanted to be able to look him in the eye.

The knight removed his black horned helmet. He looked young despite his thick beard. His round face was boyish and dark skin smooth. Black braids twisted past his shoulders and his full lips held a gentle curve. His amber eyes were what made him look more mature. They were hard set, sharp and intelligent.

He’s not from the Heart.

Everyone from the heart queensland was born with bright red eyes, a gift from the goddess after Lolakia’s blessing. It made spotting foreigners easy.

“How old are you?” Lu asked.

“Sixteen.”

Lu’s brows rose at the statement. She’d not thought the previous Jack to pick someone so young to be his pupil. The boy must have been highly skilled in order to move through the ranks so quickly.

A young Jack for a young queen.

Lu herself was only fourteen years old and now she would be the ruler of an entire queensland. Every choice she made would have an impact on the people of the Heart.

My people, Lu reminded herself, because they were hers now. She'd watched the people of her inner city from the castle wall. Seen mothers and children, husbands and wives, friends and lovers-- all of them going about their lives, trusting that the crown would keep them safe. They needed protecting. They needed someone better than her, but she was all they had.

"How does an outsider find his way into such high ranking?" Lu asked.

The knight held her gaze, showing no signs of agitation at her remarks. "I may not have been born to this land but my heart has always resided here. I would do anything to protect it and its people."

"Will you be able to stand by your words in the face of an unknown enemy? He killed our queen. Will you bring justice to this land at all cost?"

"We live and die for our queensland. I would never turn my back on her," the knight said.

Lu knew the man would be her Jack the moment he stepped forward as the apprentice. She didn't have enough time to find another candidate. This would be a sloppy makeshift arrangement, but if done correctly it would be just the thing the queensland needed to make it through.

"What is your name?" Lu asked.

"Domicin."

Lu hesitated for a moment. Trusting people didn't come naturally to her. From what she observed everyone in the court had an agenda. Something they wanted. Something to die for. Something to kill for.

"Lulana Heart, first daughter to the queen, Princess of the Heart," Lu said. This was the last time she would speak her name. Soon, no one would remember that she ever had one.

After her coronation, her name would be wiped out of existence. Any text that included it would be destroyed and any memory of it erased.

Forsaking a name to fulfill a higher calling was something every queen of her line was expected to do. Lu's eyes again returned to where her mother had laid. The other guards had already taken the body away, but she could still see its imprint in the blood against the marble floor. All her life Lu had only known her as the queen.

Perhaps that was part of the reason they were never close. Her mother was too busy being queen to stop and be something else. Lu had never truly known her mother and now she never would.

Lu looked back up at Domicin. Her name wasn't something she was meant to hold onto but she found it hard to let go.

I am no one, Lu told herself. She would repeat the words until they became real.

"From now on we are nameless. If you will be my Jack of Heart then I will be your queen," Lu said.

She held out her hand. Her words made everything feel more real. Surrounded in this room of blood and death she gave up a part of herself.

Domicin bent down on his knee ignoring the blood. He placed the back of her hand against his forehead. When he pulled back he looked Lu in the eyes. "My life belongs to my queen and my queensland. You have my sword and strength, use it at your will."

The moment the words left his mouth Lu felt something inside her change. Warmth coursed through her body, strengthening her. She could feel every muscle coil with untapped energy. On the outside, she still looked the same but there was a hidden power inside her now. Their bond was complete, now only two more to go. Already she was beginning to change.

Lu looked back at Domicin. They were partners and strangers. Together they would stand on the battlefields. She was entrusting him with her life. By binding their fates, she'd allowed his strength to become her own.

"Do not fail me," Lu said.

"I won't."

Lu took a step back from him. Her heel slipped against wet floor and her arms flailed. She fell forward. Domicin reached out his arms to catch her and the bottom of her dress brushed the floor coloring itself red. Her heart pounded in her chest and her hands shook.

"My queen," Domicin said as he held onto her.

Lu pushed herself up, ripping away from Domicin. Her dress stuck below her knees, the blood seeping through the fabric staining her legs. She held herself perfectly still. "Gather the men. The bells will ring and soon everyone will know their queen has died. We must control the narrative.

I'll need them to be prepared." Lu did not look at Domicin. The room

overloaded her senses; the feeling, smell, and sight of it were all too much. She would not last much longer.

“Yes, my queen.”

Domicin stepped aside. Lu moved forward to the door, her dress sticking to her legs and her feet sticking to the floor. A drop of blood splattered down on her forehead, trailing red between her brows. Lu looked up at the high arching ceiling. A red crescent smile ripped across the wooden arch. Another drop fell hitting Lu’s cheek.

The old queen was dead. Long live the new.

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4

Raven's alarm squawked like a wounded duck. She reached over, her hand slapping against the clock a few times before finding the right button to silence it. With the alarm off, she turned back over in bed. She stared up at her eggshell ceiling. Last night she'd tossed and turned awakening before the sunrise from a nightmare. Her dream was hard to recall, but the fear of it followed her into the waking world.

Raven pushed the covers off. Her gray tank top was twisted out of place and she took a moment to adjust it. Nightmares weren't uncommon for her. Most were about her mother. She'd relived that night a thousand times in her dreams. If Raven could not recall this dream then maybe that was for the best.

She planted her feet on the plush carpet and felt the chill of her room. The window was open, left ajar overnight. Branches rustled outside the screen. Michigan was a state of trees. They'd once grown untamed and even in cities like Detroit, they retained their wild spirit, overtaking the abandoned and forgotten. The one outside her window was old, limbs stretching up disturbing the cable lines whenever the wind blew as if to remind the world that it was still here. The shadows of the branches stretched out like claws inside her room.

Raven rubbed her eyes and felt something scratch against her lid. She pulled her hand back.

The ring glittered in the rays of morning light. She'd almost forgotten about it. Dion said the ring stood out and she supposed he was right. It was enchanting. She wondered how much he'd paid. Even if the gems were fake, it still looked expensive. The longer Raven looked at the ring the harder it was to turn away.

Raven's phone buzzed on her nightstand. She turned her attention away from the ring in favor of her cell phone. Tiffany's name with the emoji of the two girls dancing next to it flashed across the screen. Raven slid her finger over the screen and answered.

"Hey girl hey," Tiffany sang.

"Hey, Tif. What's got you in such a good mood?" Raven asked, her voice carrying the rough grumble of someone who'd slept for centuries.

"Nana wants to take me to get breakfast. She said to ask if you want to come. We can pick you up on the way."

Raven thought about the cold pop tart she normally had for breakfast. Her stomach growled in defiance. She would have to leave earlier than planned but at least she'd eat real food.

"Sure, tell Nana I said thanks," Raven said.

"Okay, we should be there in fifteen."

They said goodbye to each other before hanging up the phone. Raven rushed to get ready. She slipped on a blue polo, black dickeys, and black converse. Her wild dark curls fought against her as she tried to get them into a bun. She gave up hope as the last bobby pin fell to the ground and let the rebellious curls hang where they pleased.

Once Raven finished, she moved to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and washed her face. As her soapy hand approached the scarred side of her face she hesitated. Raven turned her cheek to the mirror. She studied the marks. Her fingers ran down the jagged lines tracing the same pattern her mother had torn into her. When her fingers reached her collar she stopped.

Raven pulled her hand back, eyes falling to the rushing faucet. Water swirled around the blue sink dropping into the dark drain. Raven continued to wash, her eyes avoiding the mirror. When she fished she turned off the light and made her way down to the first level.

Nana's car pulled up a few minutes later. Raven swung her backpack over her shoulder and locked the door.

Tiffany's head stuck out the passenger window of nana's blue minivan. "Buenos días, chica."

Raven smiled and opened the door to the back seat. The car smelled like peach cobbler, a smell Raven instantly linked to Nana. Her mother, even in her better years, had never been much of a cook. Tiffany's mother

was decent but she rarely had time to prepare a meal working two jobs. Most of their experience in the kitchen came from cooking Thanksgiving dinner with Nana.

She sat in the backseat pushing the wrestling action figure and game cartridges over to the other side. “Hey, nana,” Raven greeted the older woman in the front.

Nana looked back at Raven and smiled, her honey brown eyes held a soft twinkle. Raven hoped that when she was nana’s age she’d be able to look as good as the woman in front of her. Nana’s light brown skin hadn’t aged a bit. The long gray dreadlocks she held wrapped in scarves were one of the few things that let people know she was over the age of forty.

“Hey baby, how you been,” Nana greeted. Her voice had the rasp and cadence of a jazz singer.

“Good, Nana,” Raven answered, “You look like you’re doing better.”

Nana chuckled. “I don’t know about that. Yancy and the twins have been running me up a wall.”

Raven’s smile widened. Yancy was Nana’s youngest daughter. When she’d dropped out of grad school pregnant with twins Nana moved down south to help out. From the stories Raven heard, the two boys were more than a handful.

Raven caught a glimpse of Tiffany rolling her eyes. Her smile faltered.

The car took on an uncomfortable silence. Tiffany blamed her aunty and cousins for taking her nana away. The year nana moved was the same year Raven left. Raven watched Tiffany from the backseat wanting to say something but didn’t know what.

An old Beyoncé song started to play on the radio, one of Tiffany’s favorites. It started as a simple hum but by the time the chorus came around again they were both singing along. All thoughts of Tiffany’s relatives were forgotten. They sang off key not caring who heard. Nana laughed and joined in. By the time they made it to the restaurant Raven’s throat was sore.

They sat down at a booth near the window. The smell of fried eggs, buttermilk pancakes, and coffee filled the air. Raven flipped through the menu focusing in on the prices. Her mouth salivated when she saw the

blueberry waffles but she chose the buttermilk pancakes that were a dollar cheaper.

As they ate their meals nana notice the ring on Raven's finger.

"Oh my, how lovely," Nana said taking Raven's hand in hers.

Raven glanced down at the ring. "Dion picked it out for me."

"I always said that boy was sweet on you."

Tiffany snickered. Raven kicked her under the table but that only made Tiffany laugh harder.

"It's not like that Nana. It was a birthday gift," Raven said.

"Raven honey, a boy only buys jewelry like this for a woman he's interested in."

Raven sighed. It was pointless to try to convince nana that their relationship was platonic. Once the woman got an idea into her head, it never left. Nana had probably already started planning the wedding.

"I think Dion is a fine young man. You two should do nice together." Nana nodded as if giving her blessing to the engagement.

"I agree," Tiffany said, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

Raven glared at her friend but Tiffany remained unfazed. Raven thought about kicking her again but a more devious idea popped into her head.

"Hey, Nana, when was the last time you talked to Jamal? Maybe the next time you come you could bring him up with you." Raven glanced over at Tiffany with a smile.

Nana's face lit up as she launched into the new topic. Jamal lived next door to Yancy. From the stories they'd been told, he was the town's golden boy. Played on the football team and sang in the church choir, the whole shebang. Nana was convinced he was Tiffany's soul mate. She'd talked about him whenever she visited.

Raven fought back a laugh as she watched her friend's face. Tiffany smiled and nodded but Raven knew the girl was mentally rolling her eyes. Golden boys weren't Tiffany's type. The idea of settling down with anyone made Tiffany uncomfortable. She pretended to care for her nana's sake.

They were halfway finished with their meal when the first drop of water splattered against the window; by the time they finished it was a full down pour.

“This weather is the blues,” Nana said as she turned up the windshield wipers. They were all a little wet by the time they made it back to the van.

“Michigan, if you don’t like the weather just wait ten minutes,” Tiffany said.

Nana shook her head. “This is what I don’t miss.”

Raven looked at her window. It was covered in raindrops. They raced to the bottom leaving wet trails in their wake. She looked up at the gray sky and saw a streak of lightening, electric white against a dark gray background.

“God’s crying again. He’s seen too much of the world today.” Her mother’s brown eyes stared up into the distance. Rain poured down from the sky. Raven and her mother stood at their screen door watching as god’s tears bathed the earth. The wind was strong enough to make her pigtails sway. Raven looked at her mother. She seemed to be some place far away, but then those brown eyes turned on Raven and she smiled. “Seems even god gets sad sometimes.”

Nana’s car pulled into the school parking lot. Just looking at the red brick building twisted Raven’s stomach into knots. Tiffany was the first one out of the car. She stood by the car, teal umbrella in hand. Raven reached for the door but Nana's voice stopped her.

“Raven, can I talk to you for a second?” Nana asked.

Raven glanced at Tiffany. She had her cellphone out, the screen illuminated as she scrolled. Raven glanced back at the older woman. “What’s wrong, Nana?”

Nana’s eyes were full of conflict but then she smiled and it disappeared. “Have you heard anything about your mother?”

Raven’s shoulders slumped as she felt herself growing smaller. Memory of her last visit to the hospital tormented Raven. The bloody room, her mother screams, and the nurse’s hands against Raven’s shoulders as he tried to hold her back, she remembered it all. Raven shut her eyes to the memory.

“They say her visitations are canceled until further notice. She had another episode and attacked a doctor. I think...” Raven paused. The word seemed to stick in her throat. Nana waited patiently for her to continue.

“She doesn’t like it there. It’s getting worse and they’re not helping. Whatever the doctors are doing isn’t working.” Raven hadn’t wanted to admit that her mother’s condition was worsening. She’d kept it bottled up inside of her since leaving the clinic.

Nana reached back and placed her hand on Raven’s. “You’ve always been strong, Raven, and I’ve always thought of you as my own grandbaby. You and Tiffany been like sisters since y’all was little girls. No matter what happens, you two stick together, ya hear me. You’ll need each other for what’s coming next.”

Raven couldn’t speak, her tears choked at the back of her throat, so she nodded instead. What would happen next was an abstract concept.

Right now was all she had and it was hard enough. Raven couldn’t worry about the future when she was losing control of the present. Day by day and second by second, that’s how she survived.

“Good girl. Now put a smile on your face. Those kids out there are like piranhas they attack the moment they smell blood,” Nana said.

Raven took a few deep breaths and did as Nana instructed. With her smile in place, she opened the door to join Tiffany outside the car. Rain pelted down on her before she ducked under Tiffany’s umbrella. Smashed together they both waved to Nana as she pulled off.

Tiffany pulled Raven closer, offering a reassuring smile. “Ready for another great day in the American teenage penitentiary?”

“No.”

“Too bad.”

They held onto the umbrella as they made their way to the front door.

Rufus High School wasn’t the nicest charter school but it wasn’t the poorest either. Their halls were made of pea green lockers and checkerboard tiles. There were a few kids from the slightly wealthier families that had enough money to add variety to their dress but for the most part, they all looked the same in their blue and black dress code.

Tiffany’s umbrella dripped down on the tile swinging back and forth as they walked. The floor was slick with muddy water that other students had tracked inside. Raven did her best not to fall.

She noticed several of the students whispering and giggling as she passed. She ignored them. During the past four years, Raven became used

to being treated like a social pariah. She stopped in front of her locker. “Psycho Bitch” had been spray painted there, snot yellow against a pea green. More laughter came from the students standing near by.

Raven sighed. She wished people would at least try to be original. She’d been called that more times than she cared to remember.

“Guess that’s partly my fault,” Tiffany said.

Raven opened her locker and placed her backpack inside. “Nah, he’s just mad I broke his nose.”

The hit had shocked both Raven and the boy. She’d thrown the punch but hadn’t really expected it to do much damage. Her therapist encouraged her to take up boxing as a healthy emotional release. She’d gone to a few classes but never thought she’d use her moves in the real world.

“True, but that probably wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t got so wasted at that party,” Tiffany said.

“Being drunk doesn’t give him the right to put his hands on you.” Raven slammed her locker close. She might not have anticipated causing that much damage but she didn’t regret it either. He had it coming.

Last week Tiffany had surpassed her drinking limit. Raven received a drunken text begging for her to come pick Tiffany up. She agreed. It was almost two in the morning but she didn’t like the idea of her drunk friend wondering the streets. Her father had been working another late night so no one stopped her from using the car. When she’d finally made it there, Tiffany was getting felt up by one of their school’s basketball players.

Tiffany shrugged. She was trying to brush it off like it wasn’t a big deal, which pissed Raven off. She didn’t understand why Tiffany wasn’t more upset. Raven saw the bruises around Tiffany’s wrist. If it were Raven, she’d never hang out with him or his friends ever again.

If it were you, you never would have gone out, her inner voice added.

Raven sighed again. She tried not to judge Tiffany’s other friends, realizing that Tiffany had the right to make her own choices. At first, she wanted to report the incident but Tiffany declined.

Raven didn’t fully understand, but she let it go. They trusted each other to keep their secrets and Tiffany had helped Raven hide her fair share of bruises. Her mother never meant to hurt her, but if she tried to explain

that out loud no one would understand. The episodes came randomly, never as intense as the incident, but every now and then a grip was too tight or nails bit too deep. Tiffany's makeup expertise made marks fade into obscurity and she kept the questioning to a minimum.

"The look on his face after you hit him was pretty funny." Tiffany chuckled breaking the tension.

Raven smiled back at her. "Boys like him need to be knocked around every now and then."

"Boys like who?" Dion strolled up behind them and swung an arm over Raven's shoulders. Raven remembered the conversation she had with Nana during breakfast. Chuckling, she pushed the idea away. She couldn't think of him that way, Dion was just Dion, her sweet best friend who'd grow up to marry someone worth his affections. Probably some prim and proper politician's daughter.

Tiffany rolled her eyes at Dion. "Boys like you who jump in conversations without invitation."

"Oh but Tee, you're just so warm and inviting. What man could resist wanting to talk to you."

Tiffany glared at him when he pinched her cheek. Raven could sense her friends preparing to launch into another argument. She pulled away with a wave.

"Well, I should get to class before this gets ugly," Raven said.

She left them behind at her locker. Her first few classes went by in a slight fog. A lack of sleep made her thinking slow and after leaving each class she found it hard to remember the material that had been covered. She felt exhaustion pulling her under like quicksand. The more she fought the harder it was to resist.

Raven had two more classes until school was over. After that, she'd drink a whole bottle of sugar and caffeine. She grinned at the thought. If she could just make it through the day then that would be a good start. Second by second and hour by hour, that was how Raven got through life. Whatever horrors her future held would have to wait.

5

The Heart Queensland

Lu stood outside her mother's door, her control slowly slipping away as she fought to keep her mask in place. Panic stirred inside of her but she squashed it down. The king and queen were dead; she was not. She had to keep moving. The people needed her and this night was far from over.

"Princess."

Lu turned to see who called for her. A man approached. From the look of his pale skin, one might have made the mistake of thinking he suffered from the same affliction as Lu, but his hair was also a colorless white. His red irises were the only colorful part of his face. They appeared bigger and brighter than normal eyes. He dressed in formal garbs, white trousers and a red double-breasted jacket. The heart sigil on his left breast told her that he was a member of her royal court. The band on his left arm, an image of an eye inside of an "A", marked him as an Ace.

The Ace was another member of the queen's royal bond. He worked as an adviser; one of the most important roles in the royal bond, guiding the queensland in it's every move. He was the man behind the crown.

Lu knew who he was. She'd seen him before, walking around the castle. They had a name for him but she struggled to remember what it was.

He stopped in front of Lu. "Princess, I heard about what happened." The man's face was a mixture of panic and concern.

"Rabbit," Lu said before she could stop herself.

People whispered stories about him. Not all of what they said had been kind. She hadn't stopped to consider the insult the name carried. Though they did not undergo the same ritual as the queen to completely erase their names, it was tradition to only refer to the Jack and Ace by their

titles. When he was in her mother's services every person who called him Rabbit had been a slight against his position.

Something dark flashed behind the man's eyes. "Actually, I'd prefer if you called me Ramor."

Lu eyed him. Ramor was the only one from her mother's royal bond still living, not that it was a surprise. The Ace, although important, was only an adviser. He was of little threat if forced into a physical battle. Most Aces died of old age or execution from failure to uphold their duty. Of all the positions to hold within the royal bond it had the highest life expectancy. Still, it was odd that he'd only just arrived.

Lu took a moment to further inspect him. He'd missed a button of his shirt and his hair was tousled all over his head. The pale skin under his eyes had darkened. He was a man who did not see much sleep. Her eyes glanced over the rest of his body. He was tall like Domicin but his skinny body looked frail.

No, not a threat at all.

"Why did it take you so long to arrive? As a member of the royal bond, you should have felt the shift in power when the queen passed. You know that she is dead. Why are you only arriving now?"

"I was handling business on behalf of your mother outside of Kai. There was a discrepancy with the soil rotation in the Mondock garden. I road back as soon as I felt the shift. I'm sorry you had to deal with this alone, princess."

Lu would have to check into his story later. She shook her head. "It does not matter now. Their bodies have already been taken to the wall for their final preparation."

Even in death, the royal family would protect the queensland. Whatever was left of their blood would be painted on the wall. The power of the bloodline would strengthen their border. Magically infused with the blood of their ancestors the wall kept their enemies at bay. Their bodies would also be apart of the ritual. Encased inside the wall, their final service to the queensland would be complete.

"Go with Domicin," Lu said gesturing toward Domicin who stood next to her. "I selected him to be the new Jack of Hearts. It will become official after the coronation. Help him prepare for my announcement."

Ramor turned to Domicin. He looked him up and down before bending his head in a slight bow. Domicin did the same. In appearances, they were as opposite as night and day.

Lu turned to leave. Her business there was complete.

“Wait, princess,” Ramor called out.

Lu jerked to a stop and turned back around. “What?”

She wanted to return to her room and be done with this. Ramor had been Ace for as long as her mother had been queen. He knew better than her how to arrange the castle for this.

“With the death of your parents our ties with the other queenslands will become increasingly important,” Ramor said.

Lu knew that he was referring to her engagement to the Red Prince. Part of the treaty between the three queenslands was the marriage between the Red Prince and the heir to the Heart throne. Her parents’ death made the engagement official.

“How soon can we get the message to the Reds,” Lu asked.

“The message has already been sent. This marriage has been arranged since before you were born. The Red Prince will be heading this way as soon as they receive word.”

Lu nodded. She’d never met the Red Prince before, many had hoped for a more suitable match with the birth of a second daughter to take Lu’s place, but she’d heard of his queensland. When Lu was younger she would often hear people making snide remarks. If Lu didn’t finish her food she was called wasteful like a Red. After practice if she complained about being sore, Meshi forced her into more push-ups, vowing that she would not have a soft Red princess as her student. Most people in the queensland seemed to think ill of them, old wounds that had never healed from when one queensland became two.

The treaty between the three queenslands stood on shaky ground. People still spoke of the assassination attempts on Lolakia, their first blessed queen. Red extremists had tried every way possible to end Lolakia’s life after she left her title and position in the Red court behind. Though The Red Queen later spoke against the attacks most still speculated the crown’s involvement.

Lu struggled to understand why her parents wanted an alliance with them. There had to be easier ways to secure wealth than to deal with those

who still considered themselves superior. Lu often wondered about these things as she grew older but it was not her place to question. She was to be silent, speaking only when spoken to, lest she remind the world of her presence.

“Good. Is there anything else?” Lu asked.

Ramor glanced down at Lu’s dress. The blood was starting to dry. “No, princess. Anything else can wait until after the coronation.” He pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to Lu. She remembered the blood that dripped down from the ceiling onto her face and what she must look like. Lu wiped at her face. When she brought the handkerchief back down she saw that it was stained red. Her hand tightened around the fabric.

The coronation. The moment when Lu would be declared queen. Her mother’s responsibilities would officially become hers. Lu’s palms dampen. Anxiety swelled inside her chest, but her expression remained neutral.

Lu looked back up at Ramor. “Very well then, I will see you both in the northern hall shortly.”

“I will escort you back to your chamber, my queen,” Domicin said, stepping forward.

“That will not be necessary. I can get there on my own.”

“It is too much of a risk, your grace. The killer has yet to be caught. Your safety is of the utmost importance.”

Lu had grown accustomed to protecting herself. The court had ignored her for most of her life, dust to be swept under the rug. They’d given her the title of princess and some of the luxuries that had come with it, but she’d always known they’d been waiting for another. People prayed to the goddess for the birth of the second daughter, one that would be healthy and untainted. Lu lived her life in the shadows of the unborn.

Never had she thought of herself as important to the queenland, but the old queen was dead and the second daughter had not come. The bloodline would not allow a male heir to take control in the west; the goddess would not permit it. Lu was the queenland’s only option. They followed the order of the original three blessed children.

“He’s right, princess. You are the protector of the queenland now. You must survive this night and the many more to come,” Ramor said.

Lu looked at them both. Their eyes were on her full of expectations. She could feel the weight of it crushing against her lungs making it hard to breathe.

Lu bit her lip and nodded to Domicin. "Come."

Ramor bowed to them both, his fist balled over his heart. When he rose they went their separate ways.

Lu watched him disappear down the hallway. She turned to leave. Domicin walked behind her as silent as a shadow.

The eastern halls were empty and the walk long. Moonlight shined through the windows illuminating the paintings on the wall. The paintings were all of women. They were all dressed in red and wore the royal crown. The paintings marked the end of the queen's reign. Lu spent her whole life staring at them but now they seem different. Their eyes seemed to judge her as she passed by.

You're not strong enough to rule. They whispered. You are not the daughter we desired.

Lu stopped, shaking her head of the thoughts. Her eyes glanced over her shoulder. A trail of bloody footprints followed behind her. She stared down at her pale feet. Dark red blood stained the skin between her toes. Her parents' blood. Images of their bodies swam around her head. The queen's eyes were removed. Two dark holes stared into oblivion. Her father's mouth hung open as blood trickled down his face into his black beard.

Bile rose, acidy on her tongue, but she swallowed it. Her hands clenched the pendant around her neck. The pendant was shaped like the goddess, a body of curves and a spiked crown head. She prayed to her for strength. *Not now*, she reminded herself.

Not now. Not when you've got people depending on you.

"My queen?"

Lu let go of her pendant and nodded. She did not risk looking at Domicin. They began walking again, candlelight flickering in the darkness. She chanted the words inside her head until she made it to her door. Lu wanted nothing more than to rip her gown off and bathe until clean. She wanted to soak this night from her memories, drowning out the images.

She turned back to Domicin.

He stared down at her with his honey eyes. “Be well, my queen. This night too, no matter the horrors, shall pass.” Domicin offered a bow and she turned away.

Lu did not look at him as he rose to leave. She needed to be back inside her room, behind closed doors where the world could not touch her. Alone in the dark, she belonged to no one, but by the time the goddess graced the skies with her presence next morn, Lu would belong to everyone else but herself.

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6

Third period was held in a room that smelled of mildew and chalk. The old building often leaked during thunderstorms. Raven tried to focus. Her eyes stared blankly at the blackboard. Rain pelted the windows as Mr. Otulo lectured on about derivatives, his monotone voice mixing in to create the perfect lullaby. Raven blinked a few times. Each time her eyes closed it became harder to open them again. The sound of Mr. Otulo's voice seemed to drift farther away.

Raven forced her eyes open wide. She looked ahead at the board and saw that Mr. Otulo had written down another formula for the exam.

Pencil in hand, she copied down the formula into her notes. The paper she was taking notes on looked even more sparse than normal. After twenty minutes of lecture, she only had five lines worth of notes. She was going to hate herself come test time.

Raven yawned. When she looked down at her notes again the formula was gone, replaced with text.

THE PAST IS LOST

Raven blinked again. The formula was back on her paper looking as though it had never left. She rubbed at her eyes. This was what happened when she stayed up too late. Sleep was too tempting. Resting her eyes for a moment, she decided, might be for the best. She placed her elbow on the desk and laid her head down with her pencil still hovering over the notebook. Her eyes slid shut. The warm dark blanket of sleep reached up to wrap around her.

Raven opened her eyes again. She stood in the middle of a dimly lit corridor. In front of her was a wall lined with large framed paintings. The women in the paintings were dressed in red gowns that matched their eyes and hair. Raven stared at the paintings. Their skin varied in shades of brown

but majority seemed to have a caramel coloring. They each wore the same golden crown atop their head and a regal look in their eyes. Women who were both stunning and terrifying.

Their eyes seemed to watch her. These strong proud women made Raven feel minuscule in comparison. For a moment Raven thought she might be shrinking, but no, it was the paintings. They grew larger on the wall, stretching up towards the ceiling and down to the floor.

Raven took a step back. She turned her head to the canvas on her left. It was painted a solid black. Looking at it was like staring into a bottomless cavern. Not a flat surface but a hole to drown in.

“*Raven,*” a voice hissed in her ear.

Raven’s attention snapped down the hall. It seemed to stretch on forever into the darkness, but she was sure that the voice had come from that direction.

“Raven,” the voice called again. Raven turned her head to the other side of the hall. It too stretched on infinitely. Fear trembled up her spine. Someone was in the darkness calling to her. She could feel them in the prickling of her skin. They’d been waiting for her all this time.

“Raven!” Mr. Otulo barked.

Raven jerked awake. She was back in the classroom. Her fellow students snickered as Mr. Otulo glared daggers down at her. His bushy gray brows scrunching together and wrinkling his forehead.

“If what I’m saying is too boring to you maybe you should take it up with the principle,” Mr. Otulo said.

“Mr. Otulo I-“

“No excuses, Ms. More. Leave now and stop wasting time for those who actually value what I have to say.”

Embarrassed, Raven stood from her desk and gathered her things. She made her way out of the classroom feeling their eyes track her the whole time. Raven hated when she did anything to draw their attention. She didn’t want to be their entertainment.

The door closed behind Raven and she let out a sigh. Was it too much to ask for one single day where nothing went wrong?

7

The Heart Queensland

The goddess's morning light washed into Lu's room bathing it in the soft glow. When she woke it was not as an orphan. It took time for the death of her parents to sink in. Lu laid in bed replaying all of last night inside her mind. She stared up at her canopy. Sown into the red cloth was the bleeding red heart and golden crown of her queensland.

The heart is strong, She thought.

Lu turned over and sat up. Before her feet could even touch the floor the door of her chamber opened. A gray haired woman dressed in a dull gray gown stepped inside. She looked at Lu, her jade green eyes swollen and red. Tears stained her cheeks.

"Oh Lu," the woman said, her eyes brimmed with tears.

Lu stood and turned to look at the woman. "They are in the goddess's embrace now. Ever peace greets them."

The woman closed her eyes forcing tears down her cheeks. Pain swelled inside of her chest. Her shoulders slumped and lips frowned.

"I'm sorry, Eleaa," Lu said.

Before Eleaa had come to work under Lu she'd served her mother. In many ways Eleaa's relationship with the old queen was closer than Lu's had ever been. Eleaa knew her mother before she wore the crown.

Lu doubted she'd ever properly grieve for her mother but she felt for Eleaa's loss. She felt for the people's loss.

"Don't apologize to me," Eleaa said waving her off, "You're the one who needs the apology. What wicked cards fate has played, terrible, just

terrible.“

“I’m not the first child to lose their parents to the wicked ways of this world and I won't be the last, but I need your help, Eleaa. I need to be strong for this queenland and I need you to be strong with me. Can you do that, Eleaa?”

Eleaa nodded.

“Help me with my dress,” Lu said moving toward the mirror.

“Yes, princess. Right away.”

Eleaa moved around the room preparing the princess’s outfit. Last night she’d soaked for hours trying to wash the blood from her skin. She’d watched her bath water turn a murky red. Eleaa tied Lu’s corset, pulling the strings taught around her slender waist. The gown Lu dressed in was a deep red garnished in black and gold. Black straps crisscrossed her chest reaching up to a spiked black necklace. The crinoline of her skirt pushed her hips out past her shoulders. Far more dress than girl.

When Eleaa finished Lu’s dress she began to work on her hair. Eleaa pulled the silky black strands and twisted them up. She lined Lu’s eyes in gold and black making them appear sharper. Lu’s lips were painted a wine red and the dark circles under Lu’s eyes were concealed. Lu’s skin now looked like fine porcelain. Eleaa was quick and efficient in her work. Lu watched as her reflection transformed from a sickly girl to a woman that could strike fear into the hearts of her enemies.

After Eleaa finished Lu stepped back from the mirror. She watched her reflection. Today all eyes would be on her. Unease crept into her heart. If anything went wrong the people of the Heart would never forgive her.

Lu caught a glimpse of Eleaa staring at her in the mirror. She turned to her.

“You look like her,” Eleaa said in a quiet voice.

The words struck Lu. The ideal that anyone could compare her to her mother was laughable. She looked fearsome, yes, but never in the way her mother had. Never in away that would strike both fear and desire into the hearts of many. Even her own mother might have question her origin were she not birth from her own womb.

Lu didn’t want Eleaa to see the emotion her words had stirred inside her. A mask of calm confidence fell over her face. Looking like a queen

wouldn't be enough. She needed to act like one. Lu stepped out of her chamber.

Domicin waited outside her door. He stepped forward and for a moment she was surprised to see him there.

"Blessed morn, my queen," Domicin said dipping into a bow.

As he rose Lu looked him over. His armor had been cleaned and shined for the coronation. He held his helmet in his arms showing off a recently trim beard. Lu saw what she'd failed to notice that night; Domicin was handsome.

She frowned, not entirely sure why this disappointed her, but appearances were important to both of them. In this time of unrest, the queensland's people needed to be reassured that their rulers are capable of leading them down the true path. Together they would become the backbone and strength of this queensland.

Domicin held out his arm and she took it. They made their way down the hall, her long gown sweeping the ground as she walked. The clicking of her heels echoed off the hall walls. Once again they passed the paintings.

Lu stopped in front of her mother's portraiture. She was one of the most beautiful paintings in the castle. Full shoulders and a thick brow, her mother held a perfect symmetry. Her fiery red eyes stared down at Lu. Lu had always known she'd never be able to match her mother's looks.

As a baby, Lu had been very sickly. Her mother had been bitten by the Inkia fly when she was pregnant. The taint of the Inkia was unnoticeable in the mother but left the children who survived forever marked.

With every passing year, Lu's health improved but the effects were irreversible. Her body was mostly bone; an unattractive trait in a society that preferred those with solid muscular builds. The hair from her head turned black as night and skin as pale as milk. Compared to the redheaded and brown skinned queen before her, she was an oddity. When people first saw Lu they thought she was a ghost.

She'd been born with the black rose, a pretty name for a tangled dark mass that marked her skin, located on her lower back where it could be hidden. Other's had not been so lucky.

Once her brother told her the story of a boy born with the black rose over his left eye. According to Lecive, the mother had been so horrified she'd drowned him in the creek. His body bloated and eaten by the fishes, no one dare touch him fearing his taint might rub off.

Lu knew it would be hard for the people to accept a queen that looked so ...different.

I'll make them accept me. I'll be the best queen this queensland has ever known, Lu promised herself.

“Ready?” Domicin asked.

Lu nodded, looking away from the painting of her mother. Next to it hung an empty frame. Its black canvas seemed almost ominous. The blank space was the promised end to every queen story.

One day you will join us, the paintings whispered to her. *One day soon.*

8

The principal's office was on the other side of the building. Raven walked down the halls at a slow pace. There was no point in rushing. She had no intentions of returning to Mr. Otulo's class before the end of the period. Principle Alcester probably wouldn't be happy to see her again. She'd done well this year in avoiding the old woman. They'd only had to meet twice, a record for Raven.

A shuffling noise came from one of the classrooms. Raven stopped and turned towards the door. The lights were off but as she stepped closer she could hear hushed voices coming from inside. She couldn't make out what was being said but one of the voices sounded upset.

Not wanting to get involved, Raven turned away. The door flew open and knocked her to the ground. Raven landed hard on her elbow. Pain shot up through her arm. She clenched her teeth trying to hold back the groan. Raven looked down at her arm. Despite the pain of the fall, her skin was unmarked. She rubbed at it hoping to sooth the ache.

"Watch it," a voice said.

Raven pushed herself up and turned to glare at the person holding the door. Olivia Johnson stood in the doorway, arms folded and maroon lips twisted into a frown. After seeing that it was Olivia who knocked her down Raven was no longer surprised by the rude remark.

Olivia was one of those girls who got off on making others feel bad. Her relative attractiveness and economic status only added fuel to the fire. She wasn't queen bee but she was pretty high up on the social pyramid. Her ranking fell somewhere within the top ten percentile. In simple terms, Olivia was the typical stuck up mean girl.

"You know most people apologize after injuring someone." Raven stood, dusting herself off. Educating Olivia in how to be a proper human

being was pointless but the words were out before Raven could stop them.

Raven scrunched up her nose. The lavender choked smell of cannabis wafted out into the hallway. She'd heard about a group of kids getting high at school, but it seemed stupid to her. Why take the risk of getting caught on school grounds.

"What the hell were you even doing in front of the door? Are you some type of stalker?" Olivia asked.

"Don't flatter yourself."

A boy moved into view behind Olivia. He looked at Raven. She knew his face but she couldn't recall his name. He was handsome, chestnut skin with deep brown eyes and a square jaw. His tall frame was what you would expect from someone on the basketball team. Raven had seen him play a few games. He wasn't good enough to go pros but one or two colleges might have been willing to throw him a scholarship.

"What's going on here?" The boy asked looking at the two girls.

Olivia glared down at Raven. "The freak was eavesdropping."

"I know you think that you're that important to me, but you're really not," Raven said.

Raven turned to leave the two behind. Olivia hissed something behind her back but it was too low for her to hear. Raven rolled her eyes.

"Let's just leave, we shouldn't even be here in the first place," the boy said to Olivia.

"Seriously Drake, you really can kill a buzz."

Raven heard Olivia's marching footsteps as she stormed off in the other direction. The boy's name must have been Drake. Raven's brain recognized it the moment she'd heard it. She didn't feel bad about forgetting. He probably didn't know her name so why waste time trying to learn his.

Raven continued on her way to the principal's office. She hoped the meeting wouldn't be too long. If she was lucky, Principle Alcester would just give her a detention and send her on her way. Worse case scenario she'd try to convince Raven to talk to someone again.

Sometimes Raven hated the fact that her mother used to be a teacher. Old coworkers who'd never once visited her mother in the hospital pretended like they knew everything about Raven's situation. Principle Alcester worked at the same elementary school as her mother. They'd been

friendly but after the incident, Principle Alcester began to see Raven as her own personal responsibility.

Raven opened the glass door to the office. Betty, the old gray woman at the front desk, didn't even look up as Raven walked past. Principle Alcester's office was the first one on the right. Her door was open and Raven stepped inside.

Principle Alcester's pixie cut was the only visible part of her head as she scribbled something down on a piece of paper. Her desk was always covered in stacks of paperwork.

Raven cleared her throat.

Principle Alcester looked up. "Oh no," Her eyes widened filling with dread as she stared at Raven, "What happened this time?"

Raven's lips pinched together in a tight smile. "I fell asleep in Mr. Otulo's class."

"And?"

"And he sent me here."

"Oh." The surprise in Principle Alcester's voice was obvious. She'd been expecting something along the lines of a kid with a busted lip or another nervous breakdown.

Principle Alcester waved her closer. "Take a seat."

Raven sat down in one of the plastic chairs across from the principle's desk. She shifted trying to get comfortable but it was impossible. Classrooms weren't the only things suffering from budget cuts.

Principle Alcester shifted forward in her chair placing folded hands on the desk. "Have you been getting enough sleep?"

Raven shrugged. "About the same amount as every other teenager in this building."

"Raven, sleep is an important part of mental health."

"Right, because the only thing the mentally ill need is a good eight hours rest and all their problems will magically disappear."

"Raven," Principle Alcester sighed, "Is this something I should speak to your father about?"

"No, you should just give me the detention like you would any other kid."

Raven could hear the hostility leaking into her voice. She knew it wouldn't solve anything to get snappy with the principle but she hated

being treated different from everyone else.

“The other students don’t have your situation and they aren’t constantly in and out of my office.”

“Don’t call my dad, “ Raven said and then through gritted teeth added, “Please.”

Raven couldn’t look at her. As bad as the situation was, her father would only make it worse.

A moment of silence passed between them before Principle Alcester spoke again. “Are you taking your meds regularly?”

“Yes, I was just tired, that’s all.”

Principle Alcester stared at Raven. Raven could feel her eyes on her. She felt like an ant under the hot rays of a magnifying glass, but no matter how long she stared her down, Raven wasn’t going to change her answer.

“Fine,” Principle Alcester said reaching for the yellow slips on her desk, “Mr. Otulo holds after school tutoring on Mondays and Wednesdays. Go to one of them within the next two weeks and we’ll call it even.”

Raven stood and took the paper from Principle Alcester. She turned to leave but Principle Alcester stopped her.

“You know I only want the best for you, Raven. You’re like a daughter to me.”

Raven’s hands balled into tight fist. Fire lit inside of her dark brown eyes as she glared straight ahead.

“Thanks, but I already have a mother. I don’t need another,” Raven said.

She pushed open the door and left the office before Principle Alcester could say another word. She wasn’t Principle Alcester’s problem to solve. Raven didn’t need her. She didn’t need anyone.

9

The Heart Queensland

The high arching double doors of the royal church stood in front of Lu. Handcrafted oak from eastern artisans, invaluable after the east and west trade band. It was a rare and beautiful piece. Carved into the wood was an intricate design of the goddess's ascension. At the bottom of the door was the world of darkness, singed dark tendrils stretched up trying to entrap the innocents. At the top of the door was the goddess herself shining down on the world in all of her glory.

Her light stopped the darkness from spreading. From her, the three had been born as saviors. They were carved into the wood with their hands held at the center of the door. Two daughters and a son sent to bring her light into the realms of man. One to the east and two to the west.

Above the door was written the words of the west.

Trust in the Church

Loyalty to the Queen

Faith in the Goddess

They were the words every child of the west knew by heart, no matter which of the three queensland one hailed from. It was the first thing that had been taught to Lu in her lessons. She'd written and spoken them over a million times until they became ingrained in her heart and soul. Without all three their queensland would fall.

"It all changes beyond this door," Domicin said.

Lu looked over at him. Her hand was still atop his arm, but his eyes were on the door. He didn't show it in his expression but she wondered if his heart raced the same way hers did.

"Change can be good." Lu looked ahead at the door. "Sometimes it is necessary to move forward."

Domicin placed his hand atop of hers. “Then let us be changed for the better.” He squeezed her hand before letting go.

Lu drew in a deep breath and nodded. Domicin looked at the two guards who stood stationed in front of the doors. He nodded to them and they pushed the doors open. Light slipped in through the gape of the opening doors.

Lu’s eyes burned from the brightness but she fought off the urge to look away. She held her head high as she took her first step through the door.

The royal church was a grand place built of mostly high arching wood beams and glass. The size was larger than any other church within the queensland. The sixth queen had remodeled the temple during the Iodon period building the holy space large enough to fit all the inhabitants of the inner city. Placed where it would receive the most goddess glow year round, it was one of the most sacred places in the heart queensland.

The temple was a place full of greenery. Vines stretched up and wrapped around the wooden beams, their white petal flowers serving as decoration. A wooden alter was built at the back of the temple, hand crafted wood from the ashia tree. The window behind it was a masterpiece of stained glass reflecting an array of colors. The image depicted a woman kneeling with the crown floating above her head in a golden light.

The moment the doors opened all stood to behold the princess. People from all over the land dressed in their finery. Most wore the dark red of the heart queensland but others dressed in an assortment of exotic robes. Lu saw a woman standing to her right dressed in nothing but a sheer white fabric that had been draped about her body. The only things that hid the woman’s modesty were the green vines that raced up the delicate fabric. The man standing next to her dressed in a similar manner. Lu looked away feeling her cheeks warm.

Domicin placed his hand over hers as they walked together down the aisle. People bowed as she passed. Lu recognized the faces of nobility. Even dressed in their finest she could tell the difference between her people and the people of The Red Queensland. One man dressed in bright red wore so much gold and ruby that the goddess glow reflecting off of him was blinding. No one of the Heart would ever dress in such a flashy manner.

Lu tried to keep her focus on what was ahead. They reached the front of the alter. A woman with skin as brown as umber stood in front of them. She wore the same sheer white fabric as the other woman draped over her shoulders but underneath she wore a solid white dress that flowed down her body like water. Her kinky white hair was shaved on the right revealing the swirling mark of her priesthood. The side that was not shaven came down in a long ponytail that hung over her shoulder. A silver band wrapped around her head with a single white jewel hanging in the middle, marking her as White Queensland royalty.

“I am princess Ethareal, sister to the White Queen,” the woman said with a bow.

Lu removed her hand from Domicin’s arm folding them in front of her. “We welcome you into the heart queensland, Princess Ethareal.”

Ethareal smiled, her beauty, radiant. “The last time I saw you, Princess of Heart, you were new to this world. I’d been traveling through the lands when I heard of your birth. I asked your queen for the rights to perform your first blessing. It’s the goddess’s design that I be here again to ask the right to welcome you into the world again as a queen to your people.”

Lu looked at Ramor who stood behind Princess Ethareal, unsure of what was appropriate in this situation. He nodded at her. Lu looked back at the princess.

“I would be honored,” Lu said.

She walked up the last stair and turned back to face her people. In the front row she found those of the highest nobility. Her eldest brother Lecive sat to her right. He smiled when their eyes met. She looked away from him, refusing to allow him to anger her on this important day.

Lu saw teacher Meshi sitting three rows back. The older woman gave a slight nod. Lu couldn’t see Eleaa but she knew she was somewhere watching. There were other faces in the crowded she’d seen before but never interacted with. How queer that she should be standing before them now.

“In the light of the goddess we are born a new. As one queen passes another is born to fulfill the roll. She is the blessed. Through her protection we find salvation and through her mercy, redemption,” Ethareal said. Her voice boomed off the glass walls.

From the corner of her eye Lu saw Ethareal grab the golden dagger. She swallowed back her nerves and held her hands tighter.

Ethareal stepped in front of Lu. “Be still, princess,” Ethareal whispered.

Lu didn’t flinch as the blade cut across her forehead. She listened to the rhythmic sounds of Ethareal’s chanting. Her hum buzzed the air around them and sent chills down Lu’s arms. Blood dripped down between Lu’s brows running along her nose.

Ethareal pulled back. She replaced the dagger with a cold rag wiping away the blood from Lu’s face.

“The third eye has been opened,” Ethareal announced, “may she be blessed.”

Lu tilted her head back. The goddess’s glow hit the center of the ceiling and reflected in one bright ray down to her forehead. She closed her eyes.

Goddess, protect me.

“It is time,” Ethareal said.

Lu opened her eyes. She didn’t feel any different. Doubt swelled within her chest. It had been centuries since the goddess rejected a potential queen. Her claims to the throne were lost and she became the shame of the queensland. Lu couldn’t bear if that were to happen to her in front of everyone.

Lu tilted her head back down, fearing the worse. The church erupted into cheers. It worked. Lu let out a sigh of relief. She fought the urge to reach up and see if the skin had really healed.

“The third eye has been opened.” Ethareal announced, “She who sees the truth-”

“Knows the faces of evil,” the crowd finished for her.

Ethareal turned to face Lu. “The goddess sees through you now and judges all. Kneel before her princess and rise again reborn.”

Lu sank down on her knees and lowered her head. Upon her head they placed the crown. She could feel the weight of it pressing down. Though it had a gold coloring the metal of it had been forged on mountain Dormidain, the highest point in the west, and blessed by the high order. There was power inside a queen’s crown.

“Princess ##### is dead.” Lu’s name came out as a grating shriek that made several people in the crowd wince.

The magic had already started to work. Lu would never hear her name uttered again. Her name and the girl she’d been were both dead now with no one to mourn their loss.

“Rise again queen of heart, stronger and wiser. Light made flesh and bone, blood and fire, wrath and mercy.”

Lu stood again. She stared out at her people with her head held high.

“Long live the Queen of Heart,” Ethareal said.

“Long live the queen,” they cried.

10

Raven sat down at the table closest to the window. She held her tea in her hand sipping it gingerly as she watched the people outside pass by. On Tuesday afternoons both Dion and Tiffany had after school meetings. Raven spent her time at a nearby coffee shop waiting for them to finish. Her meeting yesterday with Mr. Otulo had gone relatively well. She looked down at the assignment he'd given her.

Fifteen minutes of work and Raven was no closer towards solving the third problem. She chewed on her lip. No matter what she did she couldn't get the variables to cross out correctly. One look at the problem was probably all it would take for her friends to be able to solve it. She could always ask one of them for help but she was *always* asking.

Raven got another cup of tea. She'd settled back into her seat when the store door opened. Looking up she saw a familiar face. Drake held the door open for his friend. Their rumbustious laughter caught the attention of several others inside of the coffee shop. The boy next to Drake said something that made his smile brighten.

None of them noticed Raven sitting across the way. She turned herself so that she was facing more towards the window and continued her work.

Raven wanted to enjoy the peace of the coffee shop but the atmosphere had completely changed. Concentrating was already hard enough without the boys. They stood at the counter but their loud voices traveled throughout the whole café. She shot them a look of irritation but quickly turned back to her work. Pulling out her phone, she turned the music up loud enough to drown them out.

Dion's black truck pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later. Raven sighed and grabbed her things, preparing to leave. Just as she was about to reach the door, a shoulder collided into her side.

Raven stumbled. Hot tea sloshed out of the cup and onto her hand. She screamed. Reflexively she dropped the cup. More hot liquid splashed out onto her shoes and legs. Raven jumped back, still feeling the pain of the burn hot on her hand.

The boy who bumped into her laughed. “Uh-oh, didn’t see you there.”

Raven turned her head to see that it was the same boy from the party who had bumped into her. He smiled at her but his green eyes were full of loathing. It was the same look he’d given her after she’d punched him in the face. His friends were sitting in the booth behind him laughing at Raven’s humiliation. She saw Drake sitting with them, his eyes locked on her.

Raven glared back at them. Her chest burned with anger, but her eyes betrayed her. She could feel the tears starting to swell in her eyes. It made no sense to her that she should cry when angry but that was her body’s natural response.

Raven turned away from them. She took a deep breath. Her body trembled with the force of her anger. Raven clenched her fists at her sides, trying to regain control.

“I think you made her cry, Rashawn,” one of his friends teased behind him.

Rashawn took a step closer to Raven. “Is it true? Did I make you cry?” His finger trailed down Raven’s arm. “I thought you were supposed to be a tough chick.”

Raven snapped her attention back to him. She pushed against his chest. The move had been meant to put distance between them, but Rashawn fell back into his friends’ table. The table rocked back, cups falling to the ground. Rashawn sat with bits of donuts and ice coffee staining his shirt and hair. The cafe went silent.

Raven looked up and saw all eyes were pointed towards them. She looked back down at Rashawn, something cold settled into her chest. “Don’t ever put your hands on me.”

She left the boys staring slack jawed and marched out of the café.

Both Tiffany and Dion were already out of the truck when she made it outside. They looked prepared to intervene. Tiffany was the closest to the door. Raven took hold of her arm and pulled her back towards the truck.

“Come on,” Raven said, “I just want to get out of here.”

Tiffany seemed a little surprised but eventually started to follow Raven. They all got back into Dion's truck. Raven took the back seat wiping her cheeks where the tears had fallen. Taking a few more deep breaths the angry fire inside of her started to burn down. Without her anger, the sense of humiliation started to return. How could she have let them see her cry?

"How's your hand?" Dion asked, looking back at Raven through his rearview mirror.

Raven looked down at her hand. She'd almost forgotten about the pain of the burn. Her hand seemed fine. Not even one sign of blistering. She turned her hand over and saw her ring staring back up at her. The gems sparkled in the light, transfixing in there beauty. Something stirred inside of Raven's chest.

"Raven?" Dion asked.

Raven's head snapped back up. Her eyes connected with Dion's in the mirror.

"I'm fine," She answered.

"He's such an ass," Tiffany said, still seething in the front seat.

"They all are." Raven sat back in her seat. There was a reason why Dion and Tiffany were her only friends. Raven kept a negative view of the general student body. Once she'd been the girl people gravitated towards; now she seemed to repulse them with a single glance.

Raven stared out the window, silent for the rest of the car ride. When Dion pulled up to her house she unbuckled her seatbelt and slid out of the car. She waved to her friends as they turned to leave. Once they were gone, her hand fell to her side.

The house was empty. She'd expected as much. Raven dropped her backpack off on the couch. She walked over to the kitchen and washed her hands. Cold water poured down over her fingers. It was still surprising that her skin had survived the scold of the tea.

After drying her hands, Raven walked over to the refrigerator. The shelves were starting to look a little empty. She would have to go shopping again soon, which would require more money.

Plenty of that to go around these days.

Raven sighed and pulled out the chicken. She prepared to cook. A few of the spices were also running on a low. Raven did what she could

with her limited resources. When she finished she realized that she'd made too much for one person to eat. The proportions of cooking a single meal were often lost on her.

Raven stared at the left over food. There was enough left for her to make a plate for her father. Whenever he got off of work the first place he went was the kitchen to find something to eat. She could tell from the weight he'd put on that he hadn't been eating healthy enough. The buttons of his uniform were starting to pull around his stomach.

The last time he'd been to the doctor his blood pressure had been high. As far as Raven knew he hadn't taken any steps to lower it.

Raven almost pulled out another plate, but the action reminded her of her mother. Even though her mom had been a poor cook she always tried to have something ready for Raven's father when he got off of work. Raven thought of the last months before her mother's hospitalization and how many plates her father had let turn cold.

The memory of her mother preparing her father's place at the table was vivid in her mind. A soft smile would cross her mother's lips every time she caught Raven staring at the empty chair.

"Daddy'll be home soon." Her mother would promise. Even then Raven knew her mother didn't believe those words but she'd nod anyway.

Raven blinked the memory away. She squashed the pain swelling up inside of her chest and walked back over to the oven. Raven dumped the leftovers. Looking down at the waste bin she felt a twinge of regret. They didn't have money to waste on food, but sometimes when she was upset her body moved on its own.

Raven closed the lid and washed her dishes. When she finished Raven headed back up to her room. As she was walking up the stairs she thought she felt someone breeze past her. Her curls shifted in the wind and skin prickled. Raven turned. The staircase behind her was empty, as was the hall.

Raven waited, listening to the sounds of the house. She could hear the ticking sound of their radiator as it kicked on, pumping heat into the two-story home, but besides that there was nothing. Raven turned back around. She shook her head. No one was there. Whatever she'd felt must have been inside her mind.

Raven took a step up the stairs and then stopped. Somehow the thought she was imagining things was more disturbing than the ideal that someone had broken in.

Raven went into her bathroom. She grabbed her toothbrush and opened the medicine cabinet. The toothpaste was on the second shelf. Raven reached in to grab it but stopped. Her eyes glanced over at the medicine bottle. She reached for the orange tube.

The prescription sticker stared back up at Raven. One bottle of Xanax with her name on it. She popped the top and stared down at the pills inside. There were about thirty of the happy round pills. She poured half of them into the palm of her hand.

Raven looked down at her palm. One swallow and she'd be so high she'd never come down. As soon as the thought entered her head it left. She poured all the pills back in, save for one, which she popped in her mouth and swallowed down dry.

After placing the bottle back she closed the mirror. Raven stared at her reflection. She could see her mother's features, same broad nose and high cheekbones. Raven's full lips pulled back into a smile. She laughed, shoulders shaking and round cheeks pushed up, she allowed the laughter to vibrate through her. Her eyes remained on the mirror, making sure her expression remained authentic. Her laughter stopped abruptly and her face fell.

Good enough.

Raven's eyes drifted back to the scars. She tilted her head to the side stretching the scars into full view. She stared at them, loathing hardening her brown eyes to stone.

When the sight became too much to bear she looked away. Raven finished up inside of the bathroom and walked back to her room. She sat down on her bed and pulled out her phone to make a call. Seven different automatic voice answering machines later, she was redirected to a real person.

"Hello, I was just calling to check if visiting hours were available for my mom," Raven said, her voice taking on a phony high pitch.

"What's the patient's name?"

"Denise. Denise More."

“One second,” Raven listened to the sound of the woman typing as she looked up her mother’s information, “I’m sorry Ms. More, it would seem her doctor has prohibited visitation.”

“I know, I was just wondering if you could tell me when her restriction might be lifted.”

“There’s no way for us to know. Your mother has been flagged as a red case. If her visitations are restricted it’s because her doctor believes she is a danger to others as well as to herself.”

Raven’s grip tightened around the phone. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Ms. More?” The woman called.

“Yeah, um, thank you. If her status changes tell Dr. Renaud to give me a call.”

“Dr. Renaud is no longer your mother’s doctor.”

“What? Why not?”

Dr. Renaud had been overseeing her mother’s case since she moved to the new clinic. He was working with her the last time Raven visited. Highly certified and arrogant, he was a familiar pain in her backside.

“Dr. Renaud passed late last week. All his patients were shifted over to new doctors,” the woman said.

“Why wasn’t I notified?”

“We made sure to inform primary contacts for all his patients. Mr. More should have received the call sometime late last Saturday.”

Raven felt like throwing something. Every time she ran into a problem with getting information about her mother it was because her father was listed as the primary contact and not her.

He doesn’t care about her. He doesn’t care about either of us! Raven felt like shouting.

“Is there anything else you-“

Raven ended the call. She tossed her phone back against the pillows and it bounced down onto the bed. With her elbows on her knees and her palms covering her eyes, Raven took several deep breaths, fighting off the urge to cry.

“Goddammit,” Raven cursed.

She rubbed her eyes once before raising her head. All she wanted was to be able to see her mother. Raven missed being able to come home

and tell her mother about her day. Her mother would have been ready to fight after hearing about Rashawn and Raven would have to calm her down. Afterwards, her mother would say something comforting and kiss her forehead.

Raven's hands balled the sheets under her. She missed it. She missed every part of it.

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11

The Heart Queensland

The golden crown rested atop Lu's head. With her hair pulled back, the crown was just big enough to fit around her bun. It amazed Lu that such a small thing could hold so much power. Even now Lu could feel the weight of it pressing down on her.

She straightened her back and made a point of standing taller. A resolve set in her eyes. She would not crack under the weight of the crown. Her time to play the role of queen had come and she wouldn't fail.

"You keep standing all stiff like that and you'll mess your back up," Eleaa said entering the room.

Lu's body tensed before relaxing. Since her parents' death, her nerves had not been well. The murderer was still out there and no one would be safe until he was caught.

Lu turned away from the mirror.

"How are you this morning, my queen?" Eleaa asked.

"Queen?"

"Yes, unless the whole coronation was a dream, I do believe that is what you are now."

Lu looked to Eleaa. Despite being first-born daughter of the old queen Lu never truly believed there'd come a day when she would hold that title. She realized it would take some getting use to, especially coming from Eleaa.

"You seem troubled my child. What is it?" Eleaa asked.

"Do I look different, Eleaa?"

"What do you mean by different?"

"Do I look like a queen?"

Eleaa's brows crinkled as she gave Lu a confused look. "Of course you do. You wear the crown."

"Then is that all it means to be queen? To wear a crown?"

"No, one must also be blessed, which you have been."

"True, it's just..." Lu turned back to the mirror. There was no evidence of the mark Princess Ethareal carved into her forehead, almost as if it had never happened. "I've heard the stories. Queens from all ages tell of how their coronation changed them. They feel it in that moment. A connection with the goddess so strong they become something else, something better."

Eleaa walked over and placed her hands on Lu's shoulders. Their eyes caught in the mirror's reflection. "These are stories, my queen. Free to interpretation and embellishment. You mustn't worry yourself over something like that."

"But what if they had something I do not? What if they were the truly blessed and I am just--"

"Whatever doubts you have inside your head throw them out," Eleaa said turning Lu towards her, "I hate it when you beat yourself down like that. You are the queen the people have accepted. You are no less than the ones who came before you, do you understand?"

The stern tone of Eleaa's voice left no room for argument. Lu looked into her green eyes and saw that she'd meant every word. Even if no one else believed in her, Eleaa did.

Eleaa smiled and reached up to tuck a loose strand of Lu's hair back into place. "You worry because you do not feel different now but in time you will."

Eleaa's hand froze, her eyes saddening for a moment but then she blinked and it was gone. She turned away from Lu and Lu watched as Eleaa moved around her room.

"What was she like?" Lu asked in a low voice.

Lu's mother was the sixteenth Queen of Heart. She assumed power at age twenty, but before who had she been? Lu tried to picture her mother before she became queen. She couldn't imagine it. Lu wondered sometimes but lacked the confidence to ask.

Eleaa stopped. She looked at Lu but there was someone else she saw. For a moment time seemed to shift bringing the older woman back to

her younger years.

“What was she like before?” Lu asked again breaking Eleaa from her trance.

“Innocent.”

The word hung in the air between them. Lu didn't understand. She wanted to ask more but for some reason she couldn't. That old fear that had haunted her as a child returned. Her mother's back was always turned to her, always one step away.

Eleaa blinked. When she looked back at Lu she smiled. The tension in the air lessened. “She was strong like you, but not strong enough. You train here in the castle but out there is where you get most of your strength. You worry that you are not strong enough now, but that's okay, because soon you will be.”

Lu wanted to take comfort in Eleaa's words but doubt still weighed heavy on her mind. She couldn't wait to be strong when the people needed their queen now.

There was a knock at the door and they both turned. Eleaa rushed over to answer. When she returned, Ramor followed behind her. He looked as chaotic as he had the last time they met. Lu noted how his body never seemed to stay still. His hands twitched as he walked, red rabbit eyes shifting around the room. He looked at Lu and stilled.

Ramor bowed. “My Queen.”

“Ramor, what brings you here?” Lu asked.

Ramor rose, hands starting to fidget again. “I've come to escort you to your first council meeting. There is much we have to discuss.”

He held his arm out to Lu. She stared at it.

“I know where the council room is, Ramor. I do not need you to escort me,” Lu said.

Lu could make it to the council room blindfolded. Her whole life had been spent inside of the castle. She'd tolerated Domicin's company these past few days because he served a purpose. Ramor was an unnecessary inconvenience.

“My queen I am the Ace, head adviser to the queen. It is customary for the-“

“You were my mother's Ace. She gave you that position but she's dead now.”

Ramor seemed taken aback by Lu's response. His eyes widened and brows furrowed. "My queen, I was a loyal servant to your mother, as I am to you. Until you name a new Ace it is my duty to aid you as I did your mother."

"And did you make your way all the way over to my mother's chamber to walk her to each and every council meeting or is that something special you do for your queen now?"

Ramor did not answer.

Lu took a step closer to him. "I don't know you and until now, you made very little effort to know me. All I know is that you were the only member of the royal bond lucky enough to survive the attack. Why should I trust you?"

"Because if we start turning on each other now we risk losing everything. Your parents' death was a shock to us all but we must not let it divide us, my queen. That is exactly what our enemies would want, but you can not protect this queensland without help."

"No."

"No?" Ramor arched a brow at her flat response.

"No," Lu answered again. "That's not good enough. You don't bandage a wound before cutting out the rot and I will not give trust before it is earned. If your only argument for why I would trust you is united we stand divided we fall you're going to have to do better."

Until her parents' killer was found nothing was safe.

"What would you have me do, my queen? I have already told you where I was. What more do you want from me?"

"The head of the killer on a silver platter, if you please."

Lu moved past Ramor, stepping out into the marbled hallway. After the coronation the castle once again buzzed with life. The halls were brightened by the goddess's glow welcoming a new day. People moved all around, hurrying to get here and there. The general servants dressed in their black robes, a red stripe running down the middle and across the chest. Black scarves covered their noses and mouths making it impossible to tell the difference between men and women.

Lu heard the hurried footsteps of Ramor following behind her.

"My queen I can assure you I'm doing everything I can to find the person responsible," Ramor said when he caught up.

“Good, then I will be expecting results. Otherwise, your purpose here becomes even more questionable.”

They continued down the hallway. She looked at the people around her. The servants were immersed in their task and the nobility in their luxuries. Occasionally when they made eye contact with Lu they'd stop what they were doing and offer a bow. Once she'd pass by life continued as it pleased.

Lu found it all strangely normal. The purpose of the coronation was to help bring stability back to the queensland. Yet, it still surprised her how quick it happened. Her mother's body was still being prepared for its trip back to the goddess and a murderer was running free, but the people behaved as if it was just another day in the Heart.

“It's because they trust you, my queen, that they are able to return to their normal routines without fear,” Ramor said still walking behind her.

Lu glanced back at him. “Don't do that.”

Aces were said to be able to read the minds of the queens they were linked with. They of course did not possess the same gift as the queen, an Ace relying more on an intuitive understanding than a holy blessing, but still Lu found the whole concept disturbing. Hypocritical, maybe, but she didn't want anyone poking around inside of her head.

“It is the Ace's job to understand the thoughts of his queen,” Ramor said.

“You are not my Ace.”

Lu turned away from him and continued walking. She stopped in front of one of the windows. The inner city surrounded the castle. People of all walks of life lived and worked there. The city wasn't the largest but it was dense with life. During the light hours people flowed through the streets as rapid as the Medes current.

These were the people she'd sworn to protect, but from up high, they all looked like toy figures.

Lu looked towards the south, past the Kia river and farmland. She squinted but the red stonewall that blocked the southern edge of the queensland was barely visible from the castle. It was a thin dark red horizon. Her eyes lingered there for a moment. Though she could not see, Lu knew what waited beyond the wall.

The orcestral forest was a place of eternal night. No matter the time of day, the forest remained shrouded in darkness. Its barren trees twisted in sinister formations and a dense fog covered the ground ebbing like ocean waves. At its farthest reach the fog stopped a few inches from the wall's barrier.

“My queen? Is everything alright?” Ramor asked.

Lu looked away from the window and back at Ramor. “Have you ever been beyond?”

Ramor stopped fidgeting, hands going still. “Yes,” His expression darkened. “I have.”

“Before or after you became my mother's Ace?”

“Before.”

Lu looked Ramor up and down. He didn't seem like the type to survive. A frail man like him lacked the proper grit of the Heart Queensland, or so she'd thought.

“Was the priesthood not to your liking?” Lu asked.

“I never joined.”

Even more peculiar. One of the most important steps in becoming apart of the church was the passage beyond the wall. Outside of priesthood, there were very few reasons to make the journey.

Ramor looked down at his watch. “We should go my queen. We'll be late.”

“Yes,” Lu turned back around. She thought of the people of the council who awaited her. Not a single friend among them, but a plethora of enemies. “I wouldn't want to keep them waiting.”

12

Working at a movie theater seemed cool until Raven actually started working at a movie theater. For her, that lesson had been hard learned. The people were annoying, kids threw up, projectors malfunctioned and the bathrooms were unthinkable, but after two years of working at the theater Raven finally moved up to a level three manager. The pay increase was much needed but it also meant more responsibility.

After school on Fridays Raven traded her blue polo for a red button down. She stood behind the black counter clicking several buttons on the screen trying to get it to work. The computer wasn't printing tickets again. A line of angry people eyed her. The smell of sugar and buttery popcorn wafted out from the concession stands making her stomach grumble.

"I can't get it. Just use the other computer and we'll call the tech guy out tomorrow," Raven said to the blonde-haired girl standing next to her.

Raven moved from behind the counter. Cathy, Raven's manager, wouldn't be happy to hear the computer was out again, but there was nothing Raven could do. Computers weren't her forte and she wasn't going to be the one they blamed if it broke.

The crowd was starting to pick up. Friday night was rush hour. Kids from the city bussed out to see the latest blockbusters. Raven weaved her way through the clusters of bodies. She was halfway to the back office when someone called out for her. Raven looked back over her shoulder.

Tiffany stood behind her, with her arm wrapped around some boy. She'd also changed out of her school uniform; now dressed in a purple t-shirt and skintight jeans that looked brand new.

"Hey, Tif. What are you doing here?" Raven asked.

Tiffany pulled her arm away and shrugged. “Just hanging. How’s work?”

“Good. Who’s he?”

Raven looked over at the boy. His lip was snakebite pierced and his hair dyed blue. Shaded glasses hid his eyes as he searched the crowd. Just looking at him annoyed Raven.

What asshole wears glasses indoors?

Tiffany glanced at the boy. “Him? He’s no one. Just a bit of fun.”

“You know, if you want a free movie ticket, I can get you in at any time.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tiffany tilted her head to the side and smirked.

Raven smiled and shook her head. “I can’t with you.”

“Our movie should be over around ten but we can hang out for a bit if you need a ride back home.”

“I’m good. Enjoy your boy toy.”

“Alright then, if you’re sure.”

Raven nodded, sure that she didn’t want to be the third wheel when things started to get hot and heavy. The night bus system was insane but she’d grown accustomed.

“I’ll see yo...fuck me.” Raven’s eyes were on the door.

“What?”

Tiffany turned around and followed Raven’s eyes to the front entrance. Olivia, Drake, and Rashawn were making their way through the front door. A crowd of other students accompanied them. Drake’s arm draped over Olivia and he leaned down to kiss her cheek. When he pulled back he was smiling.

Looks like someone made up.

“God, I hate working here,” Raven said.

Tiffany turned back toward Raven. “Just ignore them. If they don’t see you they won’t say anything.”

“Pray they don’t see me then.”

Raven waved to Tiffany as she and the blue-haired boy headed towards the concessions. Raven glanced over at the group before shaking her head and continuing on her way.

As Raven expected Cathy was less than pleased with the broken computer. She sat in Cathy's cramped office listening to the older woman complain for a half an hour about kids and technology. The smell of dust and old perfume choked her senses. Raven rested her head on her hand massaging her temples as the headache settled in. When Cathy finished ranting she informed Raven that she'd put a work order in and dismissed her. Raven thanked her manager and left Cathy's office.

Outside her office, Raven pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut. The ringing noise inside her ears reached its crescendo. Raven sagged back against the batman poster. Sweat beaded against her forehead. She'd had sinus headaches before, but never this bad. Her stomach clenched and she could taste the ranch chicken wings she had for lunch, acidy at the back of her throat.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Raven answered before looking up.

Drake was standing to her right, looking at her with worried eyes. Raven saw him and another wave of nausea twisted at her stomach. Her body lurched forward. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Drake placed his hand on her shoulder to steady her. "Are you sure? You don't look fine."

Raven nodded and removed her hand from her mouth. "I'm good." She shrugged Drake's hand off of her shoulder. He let it fall to his side.

"Maybe you should sit down for a minute," Drake said.

"I'm fine. Don't you have a movie to watch?"

Drake nodded towards the restrooms across the hall. "Bathroom break."

"Well don't let me stop you. I'm sure Olivia's waiting."

"How did you- wait, I know you, don't I." Drake's eyes narrowed as he studied her face.

Raven's head snapped towards Drake, brows furrowed and lips frowning. He didn't remember her. Drake's blank stare made her feel small.

Raven took a deep breath and buried her wounded ego. "No, you don't." She pushed past him, her face warm with the heat of her embarrassment. Of course, he didn't remember her. His friends had launched a full force attack on her ever since the party but to him, she was just another faceless student in the crowd. A girl to be forgotten.

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13

The Heart Queensland

The council room was hidden down a corridor few ventured. Lu and Ramor walked until they reached the secluded area of the hall. Two guards, dressed in full armor, stood in front of the golden double doors. They were like statues. Rumors told they'd had their tongues cut to ensure the secrets whispered inside the room never left the closed doors. Lu was almost sure it wasn't true.

The two guards stepped aside, allowing Lu and Ramor to pass. She pushed open the doors to a dark lit room. Dark red walls connected to a black ceiling. The room was two thirds the size of her chamber with a long oval table set in the middle.

Domicin rose to greet her. His chair screeched against the wood floor as he stood to bow. Power buzzed beneath Lu's skin, their bond strengthening with their proximity. The cape that adorned his back was now marked with the Jack's symbol, two arms crossed behind a "J". Her coronation had made it official.

Lu looked down the table noting several empty chairs. Her eyes locked on one spot in particular.

"Where is everyone else?" Lu asked.

The door swung open as Domicin prepared to answer. All seven of the missing council members stepped through the golden doors. Lu turned towards them. Their laughter stopped upon meeting with Lu's cold stare.

Lu's eyes locked with her brother's. He stood in front of the group, no doubt its leader. A smile stretched across his face as he placed his fist over his heart and took a bow.

"My apologies, my queen, for taking so long," Lecive said.

Lu's hand twitched with the urge to ball into a fist. She would not give him the satisfaction. Lecive had been born a snake. He manipulated those around him like puppets. She'd been expecting something like this, knowing that he would not take her rise to power quietly.

"Well, hopefully it doesn't happen again. It would be very unfortunate if the people started to think their council members negligent in their duties," Ramor said.

Lu glanced at Ramor. His eyes were hard set on the prince.

"Prince Lecive was speaking with the gray priest," Lady Doservisich, a plump horse faced woman, said. She controlled the eastern territories of Munik and stood firmly behind Lecive.

Lu turned her attention back to her brother. "What for?"

Gray priest made sure everything was in order for the dead's passage back into the goddess's embrace. The name gray priest came from the ashes they painted over their face and arms. Though members of the holy church, they acted as a completely different sector.

"To oversee the preparations for our dearly departed mother, of course," Lecive said.

"Of course." Lu repeated.

The queen had mothered three children and loved none. Lu doubted Lecive had shed a single tear over the queen's passing. To him, her death was like everything else, an opportunity.

Oldest by nearly four years, Lecive would have been the ideal heir if he'd been born a girl. As a male, his claim to the throne was ruined but not his thirst for power. Growing up Lu had listened to whispers of his rising favor. Women spoke of his bravery and charm while men revered his cunning mentality. Most of nobility seemed to love him. He was a handsome man, wavy red locks and chestnut skin, exuding all the charm their mother had once been known for. People believed he would become the next Ace.

Over my cold dead body.

Lecive may have fooled everyone else but Lu would never trust him. She would never forget what he'd done.

"Perhaps it's best we get this meeting started now," Ramor said, pocket watch in hand.

The tension in the room lessened as council members took their seats. Lu and Lecive moved to opposite ends of the table. She waited until everyone was seated before taking her own.

“It would appear that the people inside the inner city have accepted the transition well,” Lu said. The council members nodded in agreement. “But we have to discuss what happened that night.”

The room went silent. Lu glanced around the table. They all bore an expression of unease, except for her brother. When Lu’s eyes landed on him he held her gaze. What she wouldn’t give to know what he was thinking. She was half tempted to try her powers out on him but knew better. The goddess did not forgive those who miss used her gifts. Her powers were meant to heal the sick; any other uses were unforgiveable.

Lecive’s eyes were a brighter red than hers, flecks of orange gave them a fiery look, but they had the same sharpness. The shape of their father’s eyes.

Lu turned to Domicin. “Have you learned anything new?”

Domicin cleared his throat. “We talked to some of the people in the city. There were a few reports of a man dressed in black running through the streets of Avlion and across one of the bridges late at night. Most say he seemed to be heading south. We tried to talk to some of the southern villages but none of them have seen anything. We are still looking, my queen.”

“It doesn’t make since, my queen, who would attack us here?” One of the council members asked. Lu couldn’t remember his name but she knew he was one of the northern lords. The four tattooed eyes on his knuckles were northern tradition.

“Perhaps, one of the villagers was infected and made it into the castle. I have brought up the problems of not properly training citizens for screening on several occasions.” Lord Amber from the White Queensland said. He wore a green monocle and white ribbons braided through his pepper gray hair.

“Screening isn’t an issue nor is it the problem here, Lord Amber,” Ramor said, “There is no way a person with an infected mind could have got that close without alerting the queen.”

“Then perhaps someone from another queensland sent him,” Lady Doservisich said, turning to the woman sitting on the other side of

Prince Lecive.

Lu remembered the woman as Lady Narshala. She was often around Lecive. Young and pretty by foreign standards, she dressed in a bright red dress accented with sparkling rubies. She wore more jewelry on her hands than Lu wore on her entire body. Across her chest rested the burning tower crest of The Red Queensland.

“Don’t be ridicules.” Lady Narshala scoffed. “Anyone from the three queenslands who would attack the queen of heart would have to be a fool. This is the only queensland equipped to defend the wall. Weakening the Heart’s defenses, weakens us all.”

Lu thought over Lady Narshala’s words. There were still factions of The Red Queensland who hated them but the war had refocused most of their attention to The White Queensland.

The realm knew they depended on the Heart for protection. They’d agreed to the peace treaty between the three queenslands because each one played an important part in the preservation of the realm. Any attack would have led to an ensured mutual destruction.

Ramor was also right about the attacker not being infected. If madness had poisoned his mind her mother would have detected them before they even made it to the inner city. Opening the third eye allowed every queen the power to see into the darkest parts of the infected’s mind.

The more Lu thought about her parents’ death the less it made sense. An assassin had been sent into their home, but who he was didn’t matter nearly as much as who he was connected to. This did not have the markings of a man who had acted alone.

“For now we focus on finding out who the killer is. Once we have them we can deal with who sent them.” Lu looked back at Domicin, “I want you to double the number of men looking for him. I want him found and brought back here.”

“Yes, my queen.”

“Make sure he’s still breathing when he makes it back here. We can’t question the dead.”

“Of course, my queen.” Domicin nodded.

There was no point in discussing it any farther. Nothing could be done until they knew who was behind the killings and there were other matters they still had to attend to.

“Lady Narshala,” Lu said looking back at the woman. “Have we received any information from The Red Queensland?”

“The queen has received news of your rising and regrets that she could not make your coronation. Both she and the prince shall be arriving within the fortnight.”

The council members erupted into whispers. Their eyes shifted between Lady Narshala and Lu.

“What reason would The Red Queen have for visiting?” Ramor asked.

They shifted their attention back toward Lady Narshala. She smiled before turning her full attention toward Lu.

“She wishes to speak with you in person, your highness,” Lady Narshala said.

Lu ignored Lady Narshala’s taunting tone. She looked at Lecive, a challenge in his stare. His lips pulled back into a smirk. Lu knew that he had something to do with this but could say nothing. Politics were often a game of waiting.

“Very well,” Lu said after a moment. “What of the outer villages?”

“Everyone appears to be faring quite well,” said Kirik, the southern lord sitting next to Domicin. “All but Zendel’.”

“What’s wrong with Zendel?” Lu asked.

“It would appear that one of the villagers has been infected. Piker’s vein has been growing out of control and lead to several cracks in the molder. We suspected that he came in contact with the madness when the wall was under construction. We’re not sure why it has taken so long to make its appearance.”

“Has he been isolated from the rest of the villagers?” Lu asked.

“Yes, my queen. When I received the report I had my men lock him up in a remote cabin. Everyone has been warned not to go near. Our healers tell us he is too far gone for the effects of the white rose.”

“And before his apprehension? Was anyone harmed?”

“Three villager girls fell victim to his madness. We found them inside his cabin all butchered.”

Lu thought of the three little girls who would never grow into women. Her hands gripped the ends of her armrests. They had failed them. Their blood was on the crown's hands as was the blood of the innocent man

locked in the dungeon. It couldn't compare to the prison madness had created inside his mind.

“Then there is no other option,” Lu said before closing her eyes. She took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again they glowed bright. “The Jack and I shall ride out to Zendel. Once there we shall grant this man the queen’s mercy, forever freeing him from his chains.”

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14

Raven pulled her thick curls away from her face. The bonnet she went to sleep in lay crumbled on the pillow. Sweat dripped down her skin and her pajamas clung to her body. She focused on her breathing. Fear still pumped a steady amount of adrenaline into her heart.

After her mother's hospitalization, Raven had developed trouble sleeping, but it was different this time. This nightmare wasn't the one she'd been expecting. Instead of dreaming of her mother, she'd dreamt of a girl dressed in red.

Raven shivered, memory of how innocent that girl looked as she sliced the man's head clean off was still vivid in her imagination. She hadn't flinched when the blood splattered against her face. Trails of red dripped down her starch white cheeks like acid rain. The girl's bright red eyes stuck inside Raven's mind.

Raven tried to remember what had happened before the beheading but that part had become hazy after a few seconds of being awake.

This marked her third strange dream in the past two weeks. Raven rubbed at her neck. Strange dreams had plague her mother months before her breakdown. They were the first sign that something was amiss. Sometimes her mother would talk about them for days, other times she just went mute with no one able to figure out what was wrong.

Raven pushed back the covers. Not wanting to think about it, she got out of bed. She went about her morning routine moving as efficient as possible. A few minutes later she was dressed and heading toward the kitchen.

The door opened just as Raven reached the bottom stair. Her father stood in the doorway.

Michael was a big man. His head almost reached the top of the doorframe and his body blocked out most of the view. He looked surprised to see his daughter. Black brows rose and brown skin wrinkled against his forehead. He stared at his daughter. "Raven."

There were a multitude of things Raven could have said. The words bubbled at the back of her throat, but she swallowed them down. He'd spent another night working without even calling to let her know he was okay. Part of her had waited, listening for the sound of the door opening that never came. She hated that part.

"I have to get to school," was all Raven said as she went to grab her backpack. She brushed past him without saying a word. Her stomach grumbled warning against her plan to forgo breakfast but she ignored it. She didn't want to be around him if she didn't have to be.

Raven's bike was old, made of mismatched parts, but it got her where she needed to go. She rode it down the street, listening to the clanks and whines of the bike's protest before it began to pick up speed. She biked the opposite direction of the school. Dion didn't live far, getting to him would be quicker than getting on the bus.

The wind picked up as she road. Strands of Raven's hair were pulled from her ponytail and whipped her face. She brushed them back, struggling to maintain balance as the wind bullied her sideways.

There was an eerie silence about the neighborhoods she rode through. Growing up in the city she was use to a certain amount of sounds, ambulances, car horns, gunshots, stereos, an argument or two. The quiet was unsettling. She passed by house after house, paying closer attention to the abandoned ones for possible signs of danger, but there was nothing there. The city wasn't nearly as dangerous as portrayed if you knew how to be smart. Careful not to puncture her tires on the broken glass she quickened her pedaling.

Dion lived on the wealthier side of town. Raven noted the changes in her surroundings. There wasn't a physical wall to separate the two neighborhoods but there was a clear divide. Abandoned houses covered in graffiti started to disappear from sight, as did the cracks in the sidewalk. All of that lay behind her. In front of Raven were Victorian and colonial brick houses with large windows and green lawns. These were the patches of the city people never heard about on the news. Beautiful even before

gentrification. It amazed Raven how different the two parts of the same city could be.

Despite the nicer neighborhood, Raven remained discomforted by her surroundings. The feeling of someone watching her never left. She half expected to see them leering behind curtains and inside shadows.

Raven glanced over her shoulder but saw no one. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It had to be the effects of the nightmare messing with her head. The dreams interrupted her sleep, leaving her mind tired and foggy.

Raven stopped in front of Dion's door. His house was smaller than his neighbors but it was still fairly large. She stood on his front porch noting the colorful flowerpots near the door. The petals had wilted in the cold air. Dion's mother took great pride in her green thumb and made sure the front of their house looked like something out of a magazine.

Raven pressed the doorbell and waited for someone to answer. She heard someone shouting inside, followed by the shuffling of feet.

The door opened and Raven dropped her gaze to the younger girl who stood about chest level with Raven. Amber, Dion's younger sister, looked annoyed but smiled when she saw Raven.

Raven smiled back. "Hey girly."

Raven marveled at how much Amber looked like her brother. They both had the same caramel skin and dimpled smile. Amber and Dion shared many of their father's features, but somehow those features combined on Amber's face into something softer and more feminine. She was sure to grow into a beautiful woman as she aged.

"Is Dion home?" Raven asked.

"Dion," Amber yelled for her brother. She turned back to look at Raven and smiled. "He's upstairs on the computer. Come in."

Amber pulled the door open wider and stepped back. Raven walked into the house.

Raven stood in the hall trying not to marvel at everything she saw. She'd been inside Dion's house before but every time she came, she couldn't help but to note the differences between their two homes. It was more than just the market value that set them apart. Dion's house was fuller.

Raven followed Amber into the kitchen. Mr. Crawford was sitting at the bar sipping on his coffee while his wife stood at the blender. She moved

sporadically around the kitchen grabbing various things from the cabinets. Raven's eyes went to the refrigerator where the whiteboard calendar hung. A rainbow of colors written in shorthand mapped out the month's schedule. Spike, the family's white Pomeranian, raced passed Raven's legs making her take a quick side step.

Dion's house was cluttered with life. Looking at them, a deep hunger settled inside of her heart. Mrs. Crawford stood with her back turned toward Raven; apron tied around her waist and rubber gloves covering her hands. She was the same height as Raven's mother. A bitter twist of longing and jealousy rose inside of Raven before she quickly stomped it out.

"Raven's here for Dion," Amber said as she grabbed an apple off the counter. Both Mr. and Mrs. Crawford turned her way.

Raven smiled and waved at them. "Hi"

The smile Mr. Crawford gave her seemed more welcoming than the forced grin his wife offered.

"Raven," Mr. Crawford greeted. He folded his paper and put it down on the table. "Dion didn't tell us you'd be stopping by this morning."

"He didn't know. He was suppose to pick me up but I decided to bike here instead."

"Well that's nice of you. This way Dion doesn't have to waste the extra gas." Mrs. Crawford smiled again, but the look didn't quite reach her eyes.

Raven's fingers twisted around the sleeves of her sweater. Her eyes fell to the tile floor. Mrs. Crawford had never been fond of her. She'd tried on several occasions to win the woman over but she wouldn't budge. People like Dion's parents moved so their kids wouldn't grow up around people like Raven.

"It's not a waste. Her house is on the way to school, so it's not even a big deal," Dion said.

Raven turned around to see him standing behind her. She was so happy to see him that she almost sighed with relief. He smiled and winked down at her.

Dion took Raven's hand. "Come on, let's get out of here?" He started to pull Raven towards the door.

"Dion, sweetie, don't forget to pick your sister up from practice," Mrs. Crawford yelled.

“I won’t.”

Raven followed Dion out to the truck. She glanced back at his house. It was like something out of a storybook. The only thing that was missing was the white picket fence. Despite Dion’s complaints about a nagging mother and a sometimes annoying little sister, she’d always envied him for that.

“Did you eat?” Dion asked as he opened the car door.

“No, not yet.”

Raven put her bike in the trunk and got into the passenger seat. Dion’s hand rested on the back of her headrest as he turned to get a better look out of his rearview. It brought them closer together. Raven smelt green apple jolly rancher on his breath. She smiled. He loved those god-awful things.

“We should have some time to stop for breakfast. How does Benny’s sound?” Dion asked.

“Expensive.”

“I got you covered.”

“Mmmh, but didn’t you cover it last time?”

Dion shrugged. “Who’s counting?”

Raven counted. She kept a running tally of all the things she’d taken from Dion. Each mark only added to the weight of her debt. It was an uncomfortable weight she tried to keep paid off, but her crappy part-time job could only cover so much.

“Bake me some more of your super brownies and we’ll call it even,” Dion said.

Raven chuckled. “They’re box brownies, Dion. Nothing special there.”

“Say what you will Ms. More, but I’ve bought that brand before and they never turn out the same as when you cook them.”

A few minutes later they were parked inside Benny’s parking lot and Dion was handing Raven her bag of food. Raven reached in for her breakfast sandwich. The scent of ham and eggs reached up to greet her. Raven licked her lips.

A sudden pressure at the back of her head blurred her vision. The sandwich fell from her hand. The world tilted and spun. Her hunger vanished. Raven put a hand to her head and groaned. A ringing sounded

inside of her ears. Raven thought she heard a whisper but the ringing sound made it hard to tell.

“Are you okay?” Dion asked.

Raven’s vision began to clear just as soon as he asked. She looked up and smiled. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Raven noticed something was off about Dion’s expression. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re bleeding.”

Raven felt the trickle down her lips. She touched her hand there and when she brought it back she saw the blood that smeared her fingertips.

“Oh god,” Raven said as she pinched her nose.

“Here.” Dion rustled through the armrest. He found the napkins he was looking for and quickly handed them to Raven. She took them and placed them against her bleeding nose.

“No, don’t do that.” Dion grabbed onto Raven’s arm, pulling her downward. “If you lean back the blood goes down to your stomach and you’ll get sick. Trust me I’m an expert on these.”

Raven leaned forward. She’d never had a nosebleed before; the protocol was new to her.

“How do I stop it?” Raven asked.

“Just keep pinching it. It’ll stop on it’s own.”

Raven did as she was told. A minute ticked by before she was confident enough to release her hold of her nose. She pulled the napkin away and saw the deep red spot had started to darken. Dion handed her a wet napkin and she cleaned off the rest of the blood.

“How does it look?” Raven asked.

Dion placed a hand under her chin and tilted her head up. “Better, less Nightmare on Elm St.” He rolled down both of their windows. “It was probably too dry inside of the car because of the heat.”

Raven nodded, but she knew her nosebleed had more to do with the ringing headache than the dry air. She tried to think about what sound she heard now that the pain was no longer a factor. There was something else up under the ringing, almost like a whisper.

Raven stopped trying to decipher the sound when she realized she was giving herself another headache.

“You can drive. I’m fine now, ” Raven said.

“You sure?”

“I’m good.”

Dion gave her one last worried glance before starting up the car again. Raven took a few bites of her breakfast sandwich but she found her appetite was no longer up to the task. Her eyes remained focused on the window for the rest of the ride. The blood from her nose had dried but the battle was far from over.

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15

The Heart Queensland

The council room was silent. Candle lights flickered, casting dark shadows inside the room. Their eyes were locked on the queen, the weight of her declaration still heavy in the air.

Lu had her first mission as queen. Failure was not an option. Her hands shook, but she gripped her armrest and kept her face blank.

Lu glanced over at Domicin. He looked her in the eye and nodded. This would be their first mission together. After only knowing each other for a short period of time, he'd be expected to give his life for her if necessary. She'd do everything within her power to make sure it didn't come to that.

The meeting reached its conclusion. Lu found it hard to pay attention to what was said. Her mind was focused on the mission. When the meeting adjourned she stood with the rest of them. Anxiety mixed with anticipation as she exited the council room, heart pounding against her rib cage. The brighter light of the hallway did nothing to sooth her worries.

Lecive stood behind Lu. "Do not be nervous, baby sister."

Lu spun around. Her eyes narrowed as they came face to face. He smiled, bearing his sharpened teeth. When they were younger he'd had the incisors and canines filed to look more intimidating. She'd heard about others who'd done it. It started in the southern territories. Boys sharpened their teeth as a rite of passage, a dust rats traditions adapted by societies elites.

"What is it now, Prince Lecive?" Lu asked.

"Is that any way to talk to family?"

Lu kept a straight face, refusing to respond.

Lecive sighed and stepped forward. “I simply wanted to wish you the goddess’s blessings.” He grasped both of Lu’s hands and placed a kiss on them. When he let go, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling Lu into a hug. His breath was warm against her skin. “You understand the importance of this mission in the legitimization of our family lineage, don’t you?”

Lu fought the urge to push him off, knowing how it would look to the others in the hall. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer.

“Of course, brother. I’m already fully aware how much *your* future depends on *me*. It must be so troubling to have ones entire value based off another, but you needn’t worry. I’ll take good care of you,” Lu whispered. She let him go with a smile.

“Are you ready, my queen?” Domicin asked.

Lu turned around to see Domicin and Ramor standing behind her. She nodded.

Ramor stepped forward. “I’d wish you the goddess’s blessing but I hardly think you’ll need it. She has shined her light on you from the moment you were born.”

“Thank you, Ramor,” Lu said. They bowed to each other before going their separate ways.

Domicin led the way, heading back to the eastern hall.

“What do you think?” Lu asked.

Domicin looked at her, a question inside his amber eyes.

“The mission...are you ready?”

Domicin nodded. “As ready as I’ll ever be. I didn’t get the chance to travel with your mother but I’ve seen my fair share of battle.”

Lu bit the inside of her cheek, stopping herself from further questioning. The last thing she wanted was to appear unsure. If he could possess confidence in the face of uncertainty, so could she.

They moved closer to a familiar black and gold doorway. Lu inhaled and pushed her shoulders back. Domicin opened the door.

Thousands of shining weapons decorated the red oak walls, sharp and glaring. Swords, axes, hammers, all types of weapons from across the ages. The ceiling above was replaced by a mural of the starry night sky. Lu stepped inside and removed her shoes. Domicin did the same. Her bare feet padded across the wood floor.

Meshi waited for them at the center of the arena. Her back was turned toward them. A blackened scorpion brand covered her tan shoulder. Meshi stood only a few inches taller than Lu. Her peppered gray dreads stopped at the nape of her neck and her slender hands folded together behind her back.

Lu stepped into the circle of the arena. She lowered her knees to the hard wood and bowed her head.

Meshi did not look at her. “Does a queen still lower herself to her lesser?”

“I am no more or no less. I am a queen who serves.” Lu’s head remained bent to the ground.

Meshi turned and made her way over to Lu. She bent down and placed her finger under her chin. Lifting up Lu’s chin, she stared into her eyes. “You are also the queen who leads. Rise, my child.”

Lu did as she was instructed. They stood eye to eye. She was happy to see Meshi though she tried her best not to show it.

“I assume you are here for a reason,” Meshi said.

“My first mission as Queen. We ride for Zendel.”

“Are you afraid?”

Lu swallowed, pushing her shoulders back. “Yes.”

“Good, fear can be useful so long as it is not in control; let it sharpen you.”

Meshi’s hand held firm to Lu’s shoulder. Since Lu was old enough to walk Meshi had trained her in the deadly arts. Inside of this arena, Lu had broken bones and been beaten purple and blue. Her blood had stained the wooden floor and she’d been made stronger because of it.

“You will not fail,” Meshi said, eyes hard, tone harder.

“I cannot fail.”

Meshi walked over to the black chest that had been pushed up against the wall. She opened it. The staff Meshi pulled from inside was as black as night. Meshi walked back over to Lu and held out the staff. “I would not give this to you unless I thought you were ready, crown be damned. I believe in you.”

Lu stared at the rubies that decorated the top of the staff. “Is it...?”

“Yna steel, forged from the mountains core and blessed by the high order.”

The moment Lu touched the staff an electric currents shot up her arm. Spikes jutted out from the staff, stabbing her palms. Her grip tightened. She gritted her teeth to hold back her scream. The spike scraped against her bone. Blood sucked from her hands, rose up the middle of the staff. Once the blood reached the top, the rubies glowed bright. The spikes retracted into the staff. Lu's grip loosened and she exhaled. Meshi's eyes gleamed with approval.

"Ancestral blood purifies it. Now you and it are one. Any weapon you think of, it shall become." Meshi took a step back.

Lu spun the staff around. By the end of the spin the staff had shrunk down into a black bladed dagger with a ruby handle. Another spin and the dagger transformed into a long sword. The weapon held the perfect balance each time. Lu held it in both hands slashing through the air. She could feel the air as her blade sliced through it. The weapon was a part of her. With one final spin it transformed into a battle-axe.

The axe was sharp and deadly. A skull sat in the middle with sharp teeth and glowing ruby eyes. Lu's finger grazed the sharp edge. When she pulled her hand away, blood spilled from her fingertips. The axe hummed softly in her hand.

"It responds to your blood." Meshi looked at the axe. "Those who have lost their minds to the darkness will have madness coursing through their blood. After every battle, it will need to be purified or risk the taint."

"Yazarath," Domicin whispered.

Lu turned towards him. She'd almost forgotten he was there. He stared into the distance, eyes clouded by the shadow of memory.

"Yes, though as time passes, much of the story of Yazarath has become legend. We do not like to speak of the East but there is much to be learned from the past. King Arman was fair and beloved by all his people. In his time he was able to double the lands in the east and continue the war against the orcestrals. It only took one battle to crumble all that the eastern king had built. One misstep is all it ever takes. When the taint overtook Arman's blade, madness overtook his mind. Thousands died, including his wife and sons. Arman's death marked the end of Amin's line and all hope for the east," Meshi said.

To be queen Lu would walk the razor's edge between sanity and complete madness. Lu's grip tightened around the staff. She was not afraid,

never afraid. Her heart pounded in her ears.

Meshi took a step forward. She placed a firm hand on Lu's shoulder. For a moment Lu could see her mentor's eyes soften. Lu realized that she might not see her mentor for a while. As queen, she would no longer be Meshi's student. This realization saddened Lu more than her parent's death. As soon as Lu felt the urge to reach out to her, Meshi's hand fell away.

Meshi took a stepped back. "Strike hard and true, daughter."

Meshi bowed before walking away. Longing rose inside of Lu but she pressed it down. There would be no goodbyes for them. She pressed and pressed until the feelings turned into a solid mass. The weight of it all hardened her resolve.

"My queen we should be going," Domicin said.

Lu still held the staff. She followed Domicin out of the training room. They remained silent as they walked down the halls. Lu went to her chamber for a change of clothes. When she stepped out into the hallway, dressed in black pants and red leather bodice, Domicin was still waiting.

He looked her up and down. Lu pulled at the top making sure it was adjusted correctly. These were the clothes she was use to. Gowns were required for formal affairs and dining with her father, but she'd never taken to them. They were nice to look at, harder to function in.

"You look..."

"What?" Lu asked looking up at Domicin.

Domicin shook his head. "Nothing, my queen."

Lu raised a brow at him before taking a step down the hall. Together the exited they castle, the silence between them growing with each passing step.

Lu looked down at her staff and then over at Domicin. "How did you learn of Yazarath?"

Domicin looked at her. His amber eyes studied her face. Lu held his gaze, awaiting his answer. Most did not speak of Arman, and even fewer knew the name of the place the legend had originated. Speaking of the east was taboo in many circles. Arman's fall was the shame of the realm.

"I was born just outside of Yazarath, in the village of Aminah," Domicin said.

"You are from across the Conar Sea?"

"Is that a problem my queen?"

“No, I just...” Lu searched for the right words. “I’ve never met someone born from the east.”

There were some families that had ties to the east still living in the Heart, but they were second and third generations. After the king’s death people who still held the faith fled to the west over a hundred years ago. Most of the original descendants were dead now.

“I came to the west when I was ten years old with my mother and sister. She was pregnant with Hëna when the Inka fly bit her. We came around the time Hëna started to get sick again,” Domicin said.

Lu glanced at Domicin, very aware of the black rose that adorned her lower back. “Did she...”

“Die? Yes. The physicians in the East told my mother that Hëna would not live past age seven, but the goddess blessed her with four extra years.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“She walks with the goddess now.”

Lu reached up for her necklace and closed her eyes. “Ever peace.”

“Ever peace,” Domicin repeated.

Lu opened her eyes, but her hand was slow to release the pendant. If a child born with the black rose survived the first year, they were considered safe, but every so often one would relapse into the sickness. The fear of death was never far from one’s mind.

“Is it true they’ve destroyed all the churches?” Lu asked.

Domicin nodded. “When Arman began killing innocents, many of the people were hurt and afraid. They’d never seen the taint before. It would have been hard to reconcile with what their protector had become.”

“But to deface the goddess’s temples...” Lu shook her head. Anger at the king she could understand but to completely turn against the goddess was inconceivable. She was their light. Without her they were nothing.

“Now they are without a leader and without faith,” Lu said.

“Galzin is the Grizun of the East.”

“Grizun?” Lu had never heard the term before.

“It is old tongue. It means ‘he who serves’. Galzin leads the Eastern armies.”

“What wars can he fight? His claim to the throne is illegitimate. He does not have the blood of the ancestors. He cannot purify the lost souls.”

“He stops the spread.”

Lu stared at Domicin for a moment. As his words sunk in she could not hide the horror on her face. “It’s murder.”

All the women of her bloodline risked their lives because they knew that only their blood could purify. That was the reason they fought. It was because of this purity, death at the hand of the queen was called a mercy instead of an execution. Without it, the tainted souls could not find their way back to the goddess.

Galzin was sending his people toward a fate worse than death. Lu thought of all those impure souls. Her stomach twisted. He’d taken those innocent lives and called it justice. No wonder no one spoke of the east.

“My queen, are you alright?” Domicin asked. He took a step forward. “I didn’t mean to cause you distress.”

Lu took a moved back straightening herself. With her hands folded in front of her and eyes cold on Domicin, she tried to control her disgust. “Galzin is a liar and master-manipulator. You should be glad that you escaped from such a place.”

Domicin looked as though he wanted to say something but thought better of it. Lu couldn’t help but feel slightly betrayed. She knew it was unreasonable to hold his Eastern heritage against him, but she couldn’t help it. If she had known would she still have chosen to bond with him? Surely the previous Jack must have known when he chose him to be his apprentice.

“That is why your mother brought you here, isn’t it? Because she was of the faith and she wanted her children to be of the faith. You believe in the goddess. You believe in what I- what the Heart stands for, don’t you?”

Lu needed him to say yes. He had to believe in what she was doing. For what they were about to do she would need him to be on her side. She *needed* him, the stranger from the east. It hurt her to admit. If there was even an ounce of doubt between them it could mean their death. There had to be no reason for the goddess to withhold her blessings.

“Of course, my queen,” Domicin said.

Lu relaxed, accepting his answer as the truth. There were still doubts in her mind but she pushed them away. She’d have to deal with them later. Now her mind needed to be focused on the task at hand.

“Good. Then let all this talk of your homeland be over. You are here now and that is all that matters,” Lu said. Then another thought popped into her head. “Does my brother know?”

“No, my queen.”

“Good, let us keep it that way for now.”

If Lu knew anything about her brother it was that Lecive would use this to his advantage. Domicin’s heritage could easily be turned against her. People already looked down on her because of her ailment. She did not need to give them another reason to question her legitimacy.

16

Mr. Smith had the warmest classroom in the building. Heat pumped directly into the classroom from an overhead vent. The temperature was too comfortable. Raven sat in the desk by the window fighting to stay awake. After last week's incident, she didn't want to fall asleep in another class. There'd be no talking Principle Alcester out of calling her father if it happened again.

Repeated pinches left her arm red and sore, but even the pain didn't seem to be enough to keep her awake. She yawned as she stretched.

"Ms. More," Mr. Smith stopped his lecture to look at Raven, "Do you find my lecture too boring for your liking?"

Everyone turned to look at Raven.

She brought her arms back down to her side. "No, sir."

"Then sit up and you can at least pretend to pay attention." Mr. Smith smiled.

Raven sat back against her chair, her back straight. The embarrassment of being brought to the center of the classes' attention made Raven more alert of her surroundings, but as her teacher returned to his lecture she started to fade again. Raven's eyelids sunk lower, as if held by weights, and her head bobbed.

The faint ringing sound returned.

A loud scream echoed through the room. Raven's eye snapped open. She glanced around trying to find the source of the scream. Darkness made it impossible to see anything. She was no longer in her classroom that much was certain. The room around her was empty.

Her heart pounded as she realized she was standing alone. The air around her felt thick. Raven ran forward. Slamming into the wall, she pounded her fist against it. "Help!"

Something was burning. The smell of smoke filled her nostrils and pooled inside her lungs. Raven coughed, her eyes watered.

“Help!” Raven entered another fit of coughs. Sweat beaded on top of her forehead. The room sweltered like a burning oven.

The door swung open. Raven stepped back. Her hands rose to shield her from the sudden brightness. A group of men dressed in tattered clothes rushed in. Raven tried to run but their rough hands wrapped tight around her arms. They yanked Raven out of the room.

The other end of the long hallway was burning bright. Wood paneling fell from the ceiling. The fire roared and crackled, consuming the wood whole. Raven only caught a glimpse of this before the man dragged her down the opposite side of the hall.

“Let me go.” Raven tried to yank away from them but they held tight.

The men said nothing.

They dragged Raven through red double doors and out into the cold night air. An angry crowd waited for her there, too many of them to count. The moonlight gave shadow to their faces making them appear even more monstrous. They dragged her up the stairs and onto the platform. Raven’s eyes widened at the sight of the guillotine. She fought against her captors but their grips only tightened. Her skin bruised. They walked her to the center of the stage.

“Lulana Heart,” a deep voice boomed, “For your crimes against the queensland and the people, we strip you of your title.”

The men pulled at the sleeves of Raven’s dress. She hadn’t noticed she’d been wearing one until they began ripping at it. Raven stood in only a thin wrapping. The red fabric of her dress lay in shredded pieces. Her body trembled. Raven could only think of one other time when she’d been this afraid.

“You have failed as our queen,” the voice continued. “You have failed as our protector. You are no longer of service to this queensland. Lulana Heart by order of the people, we sentence you to death. Have you anything to say?”

Raven opened her mouth to tell them they had the wrong person but instead, a low chuckle came out.

“You fools,” Raven said in a voice that was not her own. “Can you not see he is playing you? Oh, how funny this whole thing must be to him. Playing right into the hands of madness. You curse yourselves.”

Her words unsettled the crowd. They shifted from anger to slight uncertainty. Hushed whispers spread throughout the people, a look of fear on their faces.

“Do not listen to her. It’s the fearful pleas of a dead woman,” the voice reassured them.

“I’m not afraid. It is you who should be afraid. You may have burned my castle but madness will set this world on fire and you will all burn.” Raven glanced out around the crowd. “Each and every one of you.”

“Tainted. Do not listen to her words. They are as foul and wicked as she,” the voice said.

Raven still didn’t understand what was going on. Despite her earlier words, she was very much afraid. She didn’t want to die here. No one here knew her. No one would mourn her passing. She thought of Tiffany and Dion. Were they looking for her now? She pictured her photo posted on a board with the word “Missing” written in bold above it. Raven thought of her mother wasting away in the hospital. Would her father even tell her mother she was gone? Probably not.

One of the men pushed her down. A piece of wood locked into place around her neck. There was no escape.

“May your soul forever wonder the darkness,” the voice said.

There was a sharp pain in the back of Raven’s neck before everything went dark.

“Ms. More,” A concerned voice called. “Ms. More, wake up.”

A hand shook Raven’s arm. Raven’s eyes snapped open. She stared into a pair of brown eyes. It took her a moment to realize that they belonged to Mr. Smith. She took a quick look around the room. The desks were empty but at least she was back in a familiar place.

“Are you okay, Ms. More?” Mr. Smith asked.

Raven looked back at her teacher. “What happened?”

“You fell asleep in class again. I was fixing to toss a marker at you when you started screaming. Several students tried to wake you but you just kept on screaming. I dismissed the class and sent Ms. Martin to go get help.”

Raven played the scene over in her head. She pictured herself bursting into screams with the rest of the class watching. As if they didn't already have enough reasons to call her crazy. Rumors of it would travel like wildfire. Raven didn't even want to think of what might happen if Principle Alcester heard.

"I'm sorry for interrupting class."

"I'm not concerned about that. I'm worried about you, Raven," Mr. Smith said.

He put a hand on Raven's shoulder. She knew it was meant to be comforting but didn't like the way it felt. Her skin prickled under his touch. Raven stood up causing his hand to fall away.

Not wanting him to be offended she smiled. "I'm fine, sir. It was just a bad dream." Raven glanced over at the clock to see the time. "I should get going. Lunch is starting soon."

"Ms. More, wait," Mr. Smith called.

Raven stopped and turned back toward her teacher. He sat on top of her desk looking at her.

"Ms. More I'm a little concerned about you. I know that things aren't easy for you at home, but if you don't make an effort to pull up your grades, you might not graduate. I'm not trying to be the bad guy by telling you this. I just want you to know we're all here to help."

Mr. Smith was one of the younger teachers. He wore big square glasses and his button-down un-tucked. Charming, he was supposed to be the more easygoing teacher students felt comfortable talking with.

Raven smiled. She would have preferred a detention. "Thank you, Mr. Smith."

"No problem, and if you have anything else you want to talk about, whether it's academic or personal, don't be afraid to come to me, okay?"

Raven nodded. She hated how they all acted like they knew what was going on. They'd all heard the stories. With the visible scars left on Raven, rumors were bound to spread, but none of them knew the truth. None of them could ever understand.

"Thank you, Mr. Smith. I appreciate that. Can I go now?" Raven asked.

Mr. Smith sighed, clearly disappointed that she'd decided not to divulge all her secrets to him, and nodded. Raven left the room without

looking back.

Another scene to get everyone talking, Raven shook her head. She just needed to survive the end of the quarter but even that seemed impossible.

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17

The bell rung as Raven walked down the hall. Her fellow students flooded out of their classrooms. A group of girls giggled as Raven walked past. She didn't bother looking their way. Her focus was on making it to the lunchroom. The fact that most of the students rushed to get away from her, made walking the crowded hallways easier.

"Raven."

The voice calling her didn't sound familiar. She ignored it and continued down the hall. The lunchroom was only a few more doors away. Once there, she'd convince Tiffany and Dion to sneak out with her for lunch. They'd go somewhere away from people and she'd have time to think.

"Raven," the voice called again.

This time it sounded closer. Raven jumped when a hand touched her shoulder. She spun on her heels.

Drake smiled down at her "Hi."

"Bye." Raven turned back around to continue walking.

"Wait."

Drake reached out to grab Raven's arm. She turned back around, glare hot enough to melt flesh.

Drake pulled back his hand. "Sorry."

"What do you want? You suddenly remember who I am and now you just want to stop and say hi? Why don't you and your kind leave me the hell alone."

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I didn't mean to offend you but I'm really bad at names."

"I'm not offended. I actually would prefer if you leave my name out of your mouth."

“Raven, I’m really not trying to start anything. I heard about what happened in class and I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

Raven’s brow arched and arms crossed. “Why do you care?”

“The other day you looked like you were going to pass out and now this. I’m worried.”

“Don’t be. You don’t know me, so even if something was going on, it’s none of your concern.”

Drake frowned. “What’s with all the hostility? I’m just trying to be nice.”

“Nice?”

“Yeah, nice. You ever heard of it?”

“Oh I have, I just don’t believe you. You want something. I don’t know what, but I have no intention of sticking around to find out.”

Raven turned away from him and continued to push her way through the crowd. Drake followed close behind. “Okay, so maybe I do want to know something,” Drake said.

“Of course you do.” Raven shook her head without looking back.

“I just have a few questions. I promise it won’t take you long.”

“Go ask Google. That’s what the Internet is for.”

“I want to hear it from you.”

Raven did her best to ignore him. Whatever game he was playing at, she wasn’t falling for it. He was already causing problems by attracting more attention to them. Raven kept her eyes focused on the hallway ahead.

“Your mom is at the Corvix hospital, right?” Drake asked.

Raven stopped and spun back around. “Fuck all the way off. You keep following me- you keep talking to me and I’m gonna punch you in the fucking throat.”

She turned away from him. Raven put her headphones in and blasted her music. Drake tried to talk to her again but she couldn’t hear him over the noise. Eventually, he gave up and left her alone.

Her music was still playing when she entered the lunchroom. They were serving hamburgers and the whole cafeteria smelled like a greasy food truck. Raven noticed her friends sitting at one of the tables in the back. She ignored the stares she received as she made her way to her friends. Tiffany held Dion in a headlock. Neither of them noticed Raven as she approached.

“Hey,” Raven said.

Both her friends looked up. Tiffany still held her grip on Dion.

“Sup girl,” Tiffany said.

“Hey Rae,” Dion said.

“Wanna get out of here?” Raven pointed toward the door.

Tiffany nodded, releasing her grip on Dion. They grabbed their bags and headed towards the door. Once back into the hallway they made their way for the exit. Tiffany smiled when they reached the security guard. There was only one stationed at the west entrance.

Tiffany walked up to him. Raven watched their conversation. Tiffany’s hand ran up the length of the guard’s arm. She giggled at something he said. The guard turned towards Raven and Dion. His eyes narrowed. Raven stared back at him with a frown. Tiffany touched his arm again and he turned his attention back towards her. The guard nodded. Tiffany motioned them over.

Once they were outside, Raven let out a long exhale. The air was always too thick inside of the building. They walked towards the playground. Rufus High School used to be Matilda Middle School seven years ago. Due to budget cuts and relocations they’d converted the building to a high school, but they kept the playground. It wasn’t far from the school, but the tall trees that grew around it made it feel more isolated. A newer playground had been built a block down from the old one.

Tiffany, Dion, and Raven were the only people who still visited the rusty old park.

“So what made you want to go out and eat in this cold weather?” Tiffany sat down on the picnic bench. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her and her legs bounced, trying to warm up.

“Got anything to do with your little nap in class?” Dion asked.

He offered Tiffany his jacket, before moving to sit down on the picnic table.

“So you heard about that, great. Saves me from having to explain.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is. Everyone has nightmares. I’m sure they’ll forget about it soon,” Tiffany said.

Raven sighed and unfolded her arms. “It’s just another reason for people to think I’m crazy.”

“Hey, if it makes you feel better I’ll pants Dion in the middle of the hallway. I’m sure they’d forget all about you as soon as they take a look at

his superman briefs,” Tiffany said.

“First of all, are you ten? Secondly, I don’t own any superman briefs.” Dion looked disgusted by the thought.

“Oh yeah? Then how come I saw your mama buying them at Target? I doubt they were for your sister,” Tiffany said.

“I can’t control the fact the woman still thinks I’m twelve.”

Tiffany and Raven snorted a laugh. It was easy to forget the stupid people from school when Raven was alone with her friends. After reassuring Tiffany she didn’t need to pants Dion they ate.

Raven and Tiffany ate leftovers from breakfast. Dion offered them some of his lunch but they both declined. Raven remembered the first time she’d tried some of Dion’s mama’s home cooking. The devil’s spit was probably mild in comparison.

“So what was the dream about?” Tiffany asked between bites.

“Angry villagers chopped my head off,” Raven said. Her tone was casual but she still felt unsettled by it. The back of her neck throbbed. She rubbed at it. Never had a dream felt so realistic. Her hand dropped, landing in her lap. She stared at her ring.

The two rubies shined so bright that they almost appeared to be glowing. She lifted her hand. Faint red lines trailed from her ring finger up her arm. Raven dropped her hand back down. The lines vanished. When she picked it back up they didn’t reappear.

“Raven?” Dion called.

Raven’s head snapped back up. Her two friends were staring at her.

“I’m sorry, what were you saying?” She asked.

“I was wondering if you scheduled for orientations yet,” Dion said.

Raven remembered the email she’d received from Cornwell University. Inside was a link to register for orientation that she’d opened but never completed. Something seemed to always hold her back.

Cornwell was the college they were all supposed to attend next fall. The ideal of leaving high school thrilled her, but that would also mean leaving her mother.

Raven wasn’t sure about her future at Cornwell. She’d spent so much time dealing with today’s problems she hadn’t planned for tomorrow. She didn’t even have a major. The only real reason she got accepted in was because of her friends. They were the ones who helped her with her

grades and college applications. She couldn't tell them that she was getting cold feet.

"Um, still working out my schedule," Raven said, looking down at her food.

Dion nudged Tiffany with his elbow. "What about you, Tee?"

"Same."

Raven stared at her friend. Tiffany's voice lacked the usual enthusiasm that came whenever they talked about Cornwell. Raven wondered if there was something bothering her. Tiffany smiled and changed the conversation before Raven could ask her if something was wrong.

Lunch ended too soon. They were forced to make their way back to the school. Once inside, blending in with the hallway traffic was easy. Raven waved to her friends before entering her classroom.

Someone sat in her seat in the back of the class leaving the only open spots in front of the class. Raven tossed her notebook down and sat. She felt exposed sitting there, but she tried to ignore it.

Unlike calculus and physics, Raven actually enjoyed her world history class. The different civilizations fascinated her. She scribbled down notes and tried not to pay attention to the people sitting behind her.

Raven's pen stopped. The ringing returned, annoying at first but grew into something menacing. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to fight off the pain of the headache.

"Ugh, I can't believe they still let this psycho go here," one of the students whispered.

"I wonder if she's going to have another melt down and start screaming again," said another.

Raven opened her eyes. Dots spotted her vision. She blinked several times before her vision cleared. Her grip on her pencil tightened. She kept writing. These were the kinds of comments she was use to hearing. These people just didn't have the decency to whisper.

"Fucking crazy bitch," another voice said.

"I wonder if she worships the devil like her crazy ass mother."

Raven dropped her pencil down. She looked toward the teacher but he acted as if he couldn't hear their comments. No surprise there. The teachers here didn't want to deal with the 'crazy girl'. They only pretended to care.

The comments continued. Their voices seemed to be getting louder. Raven tried but she couldn't block them out anymore. She jumped up. Her chair fell back as she turned to glare at her fellow classmates. Venoms words caught in the back of her throat like hot bile. Enough was enough. Just before she was about to unleash them, the teacher called her name.

"Ms. More, is there something wrong?"

Raven turned her head toward him.

"God spare me from having to deal with this girl's mental breakdown," the teacher pleaded.

Raven's eyes widened. She'd been watching him the whole time. Though his words were as clear as day, his mouth had not moved.

"Miss More, are you okay?" The teacher asked out loud.

I'm going to have to miss lunch to fill out a report all because little Ms. psycho wanted to have a nervous breakdown in the middle of my class, his voice whispered in her ear.

Raven's hands shot up to her ears hoping to block out his voice. Several other voices began to shout in her head calling her "crazy". The voices screamed, blocking out her thoughts. Her headache amplified. Each new voice was like a shard of glass being pushed into her brain. Her head felt ready to explode.

Raven doubled over in pain. She clenched her teeth. The voices were so loud; she feared her ears would bleed. She screamed. Her throat ached as the cry ripped out of her but her own voice was a whisper in comparison to the voices in her head.

"Ms. More?" the teacher had taken several steps closer to Raven, a look of uncertainty clear on his face.

Raven didn't acknowledge him. Blood ran from her nose down to her mouth but she didn't notice it. Her heart pounded in her chest. Only death could feel this awful, she was sure of it. She had to make it stop.

Raven pushed past her teacher. She ran out into the hall, leaving behind everything. Her feet stumbled, but she forced herself to keep moving through the pain.

The voices followed Raven down the hallway. She rushed past the security guard. He yelled at her but she couldn't hear him. Even the sound of her pounding heart was drowned out by the voices. She burst through the doors into the bright afternoon.

The voices started to fade the farther she got from the building. Raven kept moving. Unchaining her bike from the rack, she hopped on and began pedaling.

Raven wasn't sure where she was going. Her bike zipped through the streets, missing the turning car by a few heartbeats, tires screeched and horns blared. The screaming voices had faded away long ago, but she couldn't stop. All she knew was that she had to get away. Home wasn't an option. If she went to any of her usual hideouts she ran the risk of being found. She just needed somewhere to clear her head. Somewhere where her rational mind could gain control again.

She rubbed the back of her hand against her mouth and nose. The blood smeared against her lips and she tasted copper. Her heart rate had not slowed. A hospital would be the logical next step, but that was the one place Raven refused to go.

Raven turned down another random street.

After a while, her legs refused to carry her any farther. She'd never really been the athletic type. Raven stopped, hands tight on the handlebars and chest heaving. Again she wiped at her face. Blood and sweat mixed. When she pulled her trembling hand back, she saw the brown skin stained red and blood caked between the diamonds of her ring.

18

The Heart Queensland

The bright rays of goddess glow glared down at Lu. She shielded her eyes. Squinting, she could see a group of soldiers huddled together in the distance. Domicin guided her towards them. The soldiers stood next to the carriage and horses, their backs facing Lu. They dressed in shining black armor and leathers. The number nine embroidered over their right breastplate and above their left hip. Their capes were a woolen black instead of the standard white.

A tall woman from the group was the first to notice Lu. Her hair was shaved and a ghastly scar cut from her left temple to her right jaw. For a moment Lu wasn't so sure that the soldier was a woman. Her features were harder than any woman she'd ever seen before. Scarface stood and motioned to the others to do the same. They bowed when Lu reached them.

"It is an honor to serve her majesty on this mission," Scarface said.

"You honor us," the rest of the group replied. There was one other woman in the group. She appeared to be younger than the rest, standing at the same height as Lu.

"Rise," Lu said.

They moved in unison, snapping to attention. Lu's eyes scanned each group. They were an odd bunch. The only thing they shared in common were their uniforms. They varied in both age and body shape.

Domicin stepped forward and gestured toward Scarface. "My queen, allow me to introduce Marcella Jovanny Heart, commander of the ninth regiment." Scarface, Marcella, stepped forward. Her skin was dark brown and body made of muscles.

"Jovanny?" Lu questioned.

“Names are meant to tell the world who you are and who you serve. Nothing more.” Leo said, picking the grass blades out of Lu’s hair. She’d played in the garden while he read under the shade of the willow tree.

Lu looked back up at her brother. He was the smartest person she’d ever known and at the time it felt like there was nothing he couldn’t explain.

“Who’s mama? What’s her name?” Lu asked.

“She is queen... and nothing more.”

People of the Heart Queensland were not given middle names. Mothers only gifted their children with their first name; anything more was frowned upon.

Marcella nodded. “My mother is Lady Jovanny of the White Queensland.”

She was a mixed blood, which explained everything. Other women did not share Heart’s traditions and beliefs. Lu had once heard a story of a White knight who had several different names. She struggled to imagine how one would be able to remember them all. It seemed rather pointless.

“How long have you been apart of the ninth?” Lu asked.

“Nine years exactly.”

“So you’ve worked with the previous queen on her missions.”

“Yes, we all have. Her loss was a travesty, but because of you, the queensland lives on. We will serve with you as we served with her.”

“And these are the rest of the crew members?” Lu asked, looking at the rest of the group standing behind Marcella.

“Yes, my queen, this is Kovain.” Marcella pointed to the tallest man. He stepped forward. His long brown hair fell over his shoulders in tight curls. He had high cheekbones and pouted lips. One might be tempted to call him pretty were it not for his eyes. They were sharp with a coldness Lu had never seen before. A deep crimson that made it impossible to look away.

“You will not find a more capable archer this side of the sea.” Marcella gave his shoulder a pat.

Kovain bowed. “It is an honor to work alongside you.” His voice was darkly enchanting as though each word was a forbidden spell.

“The big one next to him is Yack,” Marcella said. A short man stepped forward. What he lacked in height was made up for in muscle. His arms were the size of Lu’s head. He had a long red beard that was braided

down to his belly button. When he smiled Lu could see that three of his teeth had been replaced with gold.

“His strength on the battlefield is world renowned,” Marcella said.

“An honor, my queen.” Yack’s voice was gruff yet jubilant. He gave Lu a curt bow and stepped back.

“And this is Tomerin Hellen,” Marcella said gesturing toward the third member. “They came to us at age fourteen from the White. They are our young scholar, skilled both in the art of healing and tactical war.”

Tomerin looked around Leo’s age. Their short black hair curled around their ears and their lips formed a thin line. Their eyes were the same dark brown as their skin. Unlike Kovain’s intense analytical gaze, Tomerin’s eyes seemed relaxed in their watchfulness.

Lu stared them up and down. She had never met a gilun but she’d been expecting more. According to the stories the ones the goddess chose to flow between the genders were supposed to be incredible beauties, but Tomerin seemed disappointingly normal. There was no way Joavan the seductive could have entrapped two high lords into war looking as ordinary as Tomerin.

Tomerin gave Lu a slow bow. “It is an honor to be of service to you, your majesty.”

Lu felt guilty for her earlier thoughts. Poets were known to take liberties. Maybe this was what gilun looked like. Tomerin was the first she’d meet and as far as looks went she couldn’t pass judgment. Plain was always better than ghastly.

“And last but not least, we have Tyla, our invisible girl,” Marcella said pointing to the other woman.

Tyla stepped forward, a bounce in her stride. Her left eye was a darker red than her right. Lu had never seen eyes like that before. Tyla smiled, bright white teeth and blush cheeks that pushed up into her multi-colored eyes. Her shoulder-length sandy brown hair was pinned back with bright colorful clips. Of the group, Tyla was the most vibrant. She didn’t seem like the type of person who’d go easily unnoticed.

Tyla curtsied, pulling at her cape as though it were a skirt. “Tyla at your service, your majesty.”

Lu noted a southern accent as Tyla spoke, rolling every “r”.

“Tyla,” Marcella called with a warning.

“Oh right, sorry captain,” Tyla said to Marcella before turning back to Lu. She bowed. “It is an honor.”

Lu glanced at each of them again. It was still a little hard to imagine that they were the prestigious ninth that served with the queen. Ninth was no easy position to obtain. Every member was expected to be highly skilled at disabling their attackers without killing them. Protecting the person who was trying to kill you required a certain skill set that most did not have, but it was necessary for the position.

The only one allowed to make the killing blow would be Lu. Only she could free the souls from their bondage.

“Your Queensland thanks you for your service, as does your queen,” Lu said.

They placed their fist over their hearts. “For the Heart.”

“For the Heart,” Lu agreed, placing her own hand over her heart.

...

The horses were brought around for them to mount. Lu brushed back the dark mane of hair careful to avoid the horse’s horns. She stared him in his dark red eyes before brushing her lips against his fur.

“Ride with me,” Lu whispered. She could feel the anxiety rising up the back of her throat, but she inhaled, swallowing it back down.

Marcella ordered them into formation. Lu road in the center with Kovain and Yack in front, Marcella and Domicin on the side, and Tyla and Tomerin at the tail. Lu caught the wink Tyla sent Tomerin’s way. Tomerin rolled their eyes but said nothing.

“Tyla, focus,” Marcella said. Her back was to them and Lu was sure there was no way Marcella could have seen Tyla or Tomerin

“Always boss, don’t have to worry about me. I’ll be even more focused than mean eyes up there,” Tyla said.

Kovain scoffed at Tyla’s response. “You haven’t the will power, let alone the brain power to do so.”

“Leave the girl alone, Ko. She’s just poking you.” Yack said climbing on the horse. The animal looked instantly smaller with him on top of it.

“Woman, Yack. Not a girl.”

“Quiet, all of you. At least pretend to behave around the queen,” Marcella said.

“Oh, we’re just trying to make her welcome. Hardly got to see the little princess as she was growing up. Best she gets to know us now.” Yack glanced back at Lu and smiled. “Don’t be so nervous, my queen. You’re in good hands. We’ve all done this before.”

Lu’s hands tightened around the reigns. “I’m not.”

“Of course, you’re not. Just thinking about my first mission is all. Damn near pissed me pants.”

“Yack,” Marcella snapped.

“You are an abominable human being,” Kovain said in his bored tone.

Tyla giggled and Lu felt a pinch of envy. There was something here she’d missed. They were a group who fought together. The banter was playful and there was an air of camaraderie. A friendship? Lu wasn’t quite sure she’d recognize one if she saw one.

There were no friends inside the castle only alliances. Being the unwanted princess Lu hadn’t even been able to obtain that level of companionship.

For the hundredth time, Lu found herself wishing her brother was here. He was the partner who’d helped her fight off the loneliness. They’d kept each other sane.

“They’ll be waiting for us inside of the city. Everyone will want a chance to glimpse their new queen on her first mission. Keep your head high and this will be over before you know it,” Marcella said.

Yack look back at Lu and winked. “The old queen use to absolutely hate this part.”

Lu looked up at him not sure what to say. She was struck by the thought that she was sitting where her mother should be, existing where another belonged. The thought overwhelmed her, nausea twisting at her stomach and goosebumps appearing along her arms. Sweat from her palms coated the leather reins making them slippery. Her eyes went to the wooden gate. The only thing locking out the rest of the city was a wooden slab.

The people out there didn’t want to see her; they wanted to see a queen.

“Are you ready, my queen?” Marcella asked.

Lu said nothing.

Domicin stared at her. “My queen?”

Lu looked at him, focusing in on the soft amber of his eyes.

This is my place. This is my life.

Taking a deep breath, she refocused her attention to the gate ahead of them. Lu swallowed and nodded.

A high-pitched whistle filled the air. The wooden bar was removed from the gate and the door began to creak open on the inner city.

Lu reached up a hand to her necklace. *Guide me goddess, for darkness descends.*

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19

The Heart Queensland

The cobbled stone path lead down to the inner city. Lu could see them all, an ocean of people and homes rushing toward her like waves stretching for the sand. Her steed grew agitated, sensing Lu's unease. She reached a hand down and gave him a gentle pat on the neck.

Be calm, Lu pushed the thought into the steeds mind. The steed's ear jerked as if trying to catch sound of something.

Shhh, be calm and be brave.

The horse relaxed under her. For a split second, a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She'd trained in the techniques of mind mending but she'd never had the power of the goddess's blessing to back her up. A fear had been building in the back of her mind that it would not work. After the ceremony, she still felt uncertain of her own abilities.

Any relief Lu felt was washed away the moment they reached the bottom of the hill where the city waited. All at once they seemed to be upon them. People of every age and shape stared up at them. They were quiet, watching in awe.

Lu told herself that this was how they stared at every queen and it had nothing to do with the color of her skin.

"Wrath's mercy." The cry rang out from the crowd. Lu fought the urge to look around and find its source.

"Wrath's mercy," cried another.

It became a cheer, the crowd erupting into shouts.

"Light made flesh," shouted another.

"Goddess blessed be."

"Mercy! Mercy!"

The voices combined together in a loud rumble. Lu did her best to calm the horses even as her own heart raced. The crowd's energy moved all around them. They cheered for her. It called out to something inside of Lu, a nervous energy vibrating deep inside of her.

“Taint”

The word sliced through the air. Lu glanced back over her shoulder. The shout was nearly drowned out by the cries of the crowd. For a moment she questioned whether she had heard it right. Lu pulled back on her reins, halting the steed.

“Tainted.”

Lu searched the faces of the crowd. She couldn't find where the cry was coming from. The crowd was still alive with cheers and excitement. None seemed aware of the other voices.

Domicin turned back to Lu. “My queen?”

Lu ignored him. Her eyes remained focused on the people. An old bald man, a blacksmith with a pregnant woman pressed closely to his side, children racing, weaving in between legs. Almost every person inside of the inner city had come out to see them. Looking at their faces they all seemed to blur into one another.

Then she saw them. White capes and black armor. They surrounded a man who stood on the left bank of the crowd. He fought them as they tried to pull him away. One of the soldiers hit the man over the back of his head and the fighting stopped.

“My queen, we should keep moving, “ Marcella said.

Lu glanced at her and then back over her shoulder. The man was gone. Lu looked at the rest of her group. They were all watching her. Lu's legs squeezed around the horse as she shifted her body forward. The horse began to walk again, the rest of the group moving with them.

The people continued to cheer as they passed, but their voices faded into the background. The image of the man being pulled away by the soldiers kept coming back to Lu's mind.

Tainted.

Lu looked down at her arms. Pale as the smiling moon. She imagined the dark veins of the black rose coiling and spreading out across her back. If she could, she would cut it from her own skin. If she could, she would cut it all away.

The inner city was called the eye because of the way the Kai's river split in the west and reformed in the east. The whole city was surrounded by the river. They reached the piker's bridge. Lu looked at the bridge that was mostly wood and vine. Despite knowing that piker's vein was the strongest vine known to man the sight of the bridge still gave her pause. Though, if Lu was being honest, it was more than just the bridge itself that made her hesitate.

The river rushed past them. If she looked hard enough she could see schools of pangin swimming along the current, making the water look silver and purple.

"Is this your first time outside of the city, my queen," Tyla leaned forward to ask Lu.

"No."

"You ever been to the south?"

Lu didn't reply.

"It's different from here, but still the queensland. Still your home."

Lu glanced back at Tyla. The multi-colored eyed woman smiled at her. Lu looked away. She pushed her horse forward. Together they moved across the bridge. A cold breeze blew. Strands of Lu's hair smacked into her face. She pushed them back and looked up into the sky. The goddess's glow was warm against her skin.

South of Kai's river was farmland. The homes became larger and more spread out. Lords and Ladies with enough wealth to live near the inner city without having to deal with the congestion.

Their horses picked up speed. Lu felt the land change under them. The flat planes turned to hills and back to planes again. The air around them grew dry and the soil hard.

Marcella slowed her horse. "We should rest."

Lu looked back up at the sky. The goddess sunk in the horizon. The crescent moon rose to take her place. The moon was almost at its half turn. By the time they reached Zendel the night sky would have its smile.

It is the smiling moon you can't trust. It is when the night is darkest and its power is at its strongest.

So many of the dark tales took place during the smiling moon. Lu had passed most of it off as superstition. There was no real mention of the

smiling moon in either versions of the holy text Elirion. The stories she'd heard as a child were nothing more than old wives tales. Lu was sure of it.

"If we keep going, we could cut a day off of our travel," Lu said.

"Horses need to rest, my queen. As do we. Clear rested minds are what will get us through tomorrow," Marcella said.

"But what about the man? Can he stand to wait one more day?"

Marcella looked down the path and then back at Lu. She let out a sigh. "We could continue but I would not advise it. Fiyan horses are known for their speed but they burn out. We've already come so far in such a small amount of time. If something were to happen it would prolong the trip greatly."

Lu looked down at her horse. His breath huffed and heart pounded between her thighs. She stroked his mane again.

Lu nodded.

"There's a place not too far from here. Will set up camp there. Kovin led the way," Marcella said.

Lu spared one last glance at the moon before following along with the rest of the party. Tomorrow, when all was over, nothing would be the same.

20

Raven mentally replayed the scene from world history. The voices, the blood, and the screaming, all mixed in one confusing blur. There had to be an explanation for what happened. For a moment, it had felt like someone was ripping her head open. The voices had been louder than she thought physically possible.

No, not voices, Raven chastised herself. She was not hearing voices. She was not her mother. Her grip on reality was firm.

So was your mother's, once upon a time, the voice in the back of her head whispered. Raven shook her head, pushing the thought away.

"Miss, are you alright?"

Raven's head popped up. An elderly man stood in front of her. His eyes were full of worry. She could only imagine what she must look like. Sweat made her curly hair stick to her face and blood smeared from her nose around her mouth.

"I'm fine," Raven said. She could feel her lips struggling to maintain the fake smile.

The man's bushy gray brows furrowed. "Need me to call someone?"

"No. It's just a nosebleed." Raven's hand swiped at her mouth again. "It only looks bad."

Raven hoped she was convincing. The man eyed her, studying her from head to toe. Anxiety twisted at her stomach. She placed her foot back on the pedal, preparing to take off again.

"Well, why don't you come inside? I can get you a cold rag and you can clean yourself up a bit," the old man said.

He walked over to the door. Raven's eyes followed him. They were outside of a restaurant. Raven could see people eating through the windows. It wasn't crowded, but there were at least a few people inside.

Raven looked back at the man. He opened the door and the sound of soft blues drifted out into the street. He looked back at her.

Raven's hands twisted around the handles of her bike. "I don't want to bother-"

"You won't. Ain't no trouble to help a lady out." The man's smile was soft and warm.

"Thank you."

Raven walked her bike to the rack. After locking it, she followed the man inside. The sign above the counter read "Bobby's BBQ". A mouth-watering aroma of grilled meat wafted out from the kitchen. There was a light buzz of conversation with the sound of a woman belting out soulful tunes in the background. The old man weaved through the tables. Raven followed close behind, careful not to draw attention. She kept her head down, but everyone seemed too involved with their meal to notice her.

"Why don't you take a seat over there. I'll be back with a rag," The old man said. He gestured towards an empty table. Raven sat down. She fidgeted in her chair. The need to run was still at the back of her mind, but she didn't want to be rude. Her headache was fading and her nose had stopped bleeding. There was no reason to be afraid now, but she couldn't bring herself to calm.

The man returned and offered Raven a rag. She took it, the cold damp rag soothing against her hot skin.

"Better?" the old man asked.

Raven nodded. She felt awkward, but it was better knowing she didn't look as bad as before. Glancing around, her eyes fell on the sign again.

"So your name's Bobby," Raven said looking back at the old man.

The old man smiled. "Yeah, that's me and this old rundown whole in the wall is my restaurant."

"It's nice."

Bobby's BBQ was not the fanciest but it had its appeal. The furniture was simple. There were about seven wooden tables. Light from the windows gave the room a warm glow and photos of satisfied customers hung on the walls.

"No need for flattery, miss. I know she may not look like much but I keep her clean and the food's good." Bobby pulled out a notebook and

flipped it open. "Speaking of good food, why don't I get you something to eat? Is there anything you'd like?"

Raven tensed. She didn't have any money on her. Bobby would probably kick her to the curb once he found out she was broke. She wasn't ready to go back.

"A glass of water would be nice," Raven said.

"Anything else with that?"

Raven stared down at her hands. There was a spot of blood caked in the corner of her nail. She could feel the weight of Bobby's stare.

"No, I'm not hungry." The moment the words left her mouth, Raven's stomach let out a loud growl in protest.

Raven's face grew hot. "Maybe I should just go." Raven stood up and tripped over the leg of the chair. Bobby's hand grabbed onto her arm to steady her.

"No need to go running off. Have a seat and I'll see what Drew's cooking," Bobby said.

"But I-"

"It's on the house." Bobby smiled.

Raven nodded. Under normal circumstances, she would have refused but she was too tired to turn down kindness. Her legs ached whenever she moved. She wanted a chance to catch her breath and Bobby's restaurant seemed as good as any other place.

Bobby walked back to the kitchen. Raven watched as he disappeared behind the door. Her face twisted in a grimace. With Bobby gone she no longer felt the need to hide her pain. She placed her head in her hands. Raven closed her eyes. Her fingertips massaged at her temples.

There was a sudden prickling of the hairs on the back of Raven's neck. She opened her eyes. Someone was watching. Her eyes scanned the room. Everyone seemed oblivious of her presence, lost in their own worlds. She tried to convince herself that she was paranoid, but it did nothing to ease the tension. It grew harder to ignore.

Raven, the voice whispered.

Raven turned to face the window. A little girl stood with her hand pressed to the glass. Her head was bowed. Long black strands blocked her face from view. The white nightgown she wore blended in with her pale

white skin. Raven's heart raced as she struggled to breathe. Her eyes widened in horror.

Help me, Raven, the girl's voice whispered inside her mind. *Help me destroy them.*

"Hope you like pulled pork," Bobby said. His voice made Raven jump. She turned to see Bobby placing the plate on the table.

"Something wrong?" Bobby asked.

"I-" Raven started but stopped. When she turned back toward the window the girl was gone.

Raven's throat tightened. She couldn't think of anything to say.

A glass of water sat next to her plate. Raven reached out to grab it but stopped when she noticed her hand shaking. She snatched her hand back.

"You okay?" Bobby asked.

"Yes," Raven said, but knew her shaking voice wouldn't fool anyone. "I'm just..."

"Having a rough day?"

Raven looked back at Bobby. There was no judgment in his soft brown eyes.

"Yeah, just one of those days," Raven said.

"Want to talk about it?"

Raven shook her head. "Not really." She wouldn't even know where to begin.

"Want me to leave?" Bobby asked after a moment of silence.

"No," Raven said. The desperation in her voice surprised her. "Sorry, I didn't mean that. I'm sure you're busy. You don't have to stay here."

"Nah, it's okay. It's pretty slow right now," Bobby said sitting down in the seat across from Raven. She felt relieved the moment he did. She didn't want to be alone right now. She didn't trust herself to be alone right now.

Raven smiled. "Are you always this nice to people you find standing outside your restaurant?"

Bobby chuckled. "No, not usually."

"Why me?"

“You weren’t looking too hot when I found you,” Bobby said but Raven wasn’t convinced, “That and the fact that I’ve got a grandson about your age. Judging by your clothes I’d guess you two go to the same school. He’s a good boy but some of those people he hangs around are nothing but trouble. I hope that if he’s ever lost his way someone would be willing to help him.”

Raven smiled at Bobby. It was a nice thought. Whoever this mysterious boy was Raven thought he was lucky to have Bobby for a granddad.

“What’s his name?” Raven asked.

“Drake Murphy.”

Raven’s face fell. She thought of Drake laughing with his friends. Her fist clenched in her lap. She wondered how that jerk could possibly be related to Bobby. As much as she hated it she could see the similarities now that she knew what to look for. Bobby skin was a lighter brown but they had the same square jaw and downturned eyes.

“You know him.” Bobby could tell from her reaction.

“Not really. We don’t exactly hang in the same circles.”

“Well if he ever bothers you, just tell me. I’ll knock some sense into the boy.”

Raven pictured Bobby “knocking sense” into Drake. She imagined the tall basketball player cowering before the elderly man.

“Nice to see I finally got a real smile out of you,” Bobby said, leaning back in his chair.

Raven hadn’t noticed that she been smiling. It was a small smile but felt nice.

They continued to chat about simple things. Thoughts of voices and strange little girls were pushed to the back of her mind. Not gone, but if Raven focused on the soothing sound of Bobby’s voice, she could almost ignore them. They were talking about Christmas when the back door to the restaurant opened.

Bobby stood up from his chair “Drake.”

Raven froze the moment she heard his name. Bobby smiled at his grandson. Raven slouched down in her chair. She hoped that Drake wouldn’t see her but knew it would be impossible not to. If she had left

earlier she could have avoided him. Bobby's company had been so enjoyable she'd forgotten the time.

"Hey, granddaddy," Drake said.

Raven didn't dare turn around.

"No practice today?" Bobby asked.

"Got canceled. I thought I'd come-" Drake didn't finish. His eyes landed on Raven. She watched as his eyes widened and brows crinkled.

"What are you doing here?" Drake asked.

"She was eating. What does it look like?" Bobby answered before Raven could.

Drake ignored him. His dark brown eyes remained locked on Raven.

"I should probably get going now." Raven stood from her chair.

"Hold on now. You didn't even finish your sandwich." Bobby pointed down at the uneaten pulled pork. "Wait here and I'll get you a to-go-box."

Bobby left before Raven could stop him.

"What are you doing here?" Drake asked again.

Raven turned to face him. "I didn't know this was your granddad's place or else I wouldn't have come."

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm just surprised. I heard about what happened at school, but I wasn't expecting to see you here," Drake said.

"Like I said, it wasn't planned."

"What happened?"

Raven folded her arms, glaring at Drake. "I don't see how that's any of your business."

"And I don't get why you always got an attitude," Drake snapped.

Raven's eyes widened and nostrils flared. "I'm sorry, is my attitude not to your liking? Should I bend over and kiss your ass like everyone else?"

"What did I ever do to you?"

"You treat me and my mom like a joke and I'm supposed to like you for it?"

"I never joked about your mother."

"What the hell was that in the hallway then? What, you just wanted to know about the hospital my mother's in out of general curiosity? Don't

bullshit me, Drake Murphy. I know who you are and I know what you're about."

"You don't know shit about me."

Drake seemed to be getting upset, which Raven found laughable. Guys like him were always treating people like dirt but still expected to be treated like kings. Not today. Raven didn't have time to cater to his ego.

"Here you go," Bobby said, returning from the kitchen, to-go-box in hand.

Raven turned away from the grandson. She smiled as she accepted the box from Bobby. "Thank you so much for today."

"No, thank you. It was a pleasure talking to you, Miss Raven," Bobby said before turning to Drake. "Drake would you mind giving Raven a ride home."

"That won't be necessary. I can find my way back," Raven said. The last thing she wanted was to spend more time with Drake.

"I have no doubt that you can but this way I can be sure you made it back safe," Bobby said.

Raven had a feeling arguing with Bobby would be pointless. Bobby had already done so much for her without asking for anything in return. Rejecting Drake would be fine but rejecting Bobby would be rude. Her mother had raised her to be respectful.

"Okay, but only if Drake doesn't mind," Raven said hoping Drake would refuse.

Bobby looked at his grandson. "It would be his pleasure."

Drake forced a smile. They were both screwed.

Raven waved to Bobby at the door. The moment they left the restaurant so did all the warmth in Raven's body. She pulled her arms closer in, blocking out the cold wind. Any security she'd felt inside of Bobby's restaurant had vanished. She grabbed her bike and followed Drake to the parking lot.

Raven knew which car was his the moment she saw it. The silver Impala was dented on the side and the left rear view mirror was missing. Rust formed around the wheels and bumper. The hood of the car had been replaced and the black metal stuck out against the mostly silver body. Raven had seen the eyesore in the school parking lot before but she'd never known whom it belonged to.

Drake passed Raven, pressing the keypad to unlock the car. “Come on, we’ll put your bike in the back.”

The Impala wasn’t equipped with a bike rack. Drake helped her get the bike in the back and Raven did her best not to add any new scratches to the car. When they finished Raven moved around to the passenger side.

“Hold on. I have to open it from the inside,” Drake said.

Raven watched as Drake climbed in from the driver's side and reached over to push her door open. Raven looked down at the car seat. There was a plastic pink tiara sitting there. Drake grabbed it and tossed it to the back. Raven arched a brow at him but said nothing as she climbed in.

Raven buckled her seatbelt. She tried to shift away from Drake, but the whole car was full of his scent and presence.

“Where do you stay?” Drake asked.

Raven told him as they pulled out of the parking lot. Drake turned on the radio. Raven did her best to ignore him, shifting closer to the window. The music wasn’t bad and if she kept her eyes focused on the outside world she could almost forget who she was riding with.

“Raven.”

Raven sighed and turned back to look at him. “What?”

Drake glanced over at her. His jaw clenched and his hands tightened around the wheel. “Nothing.”

Raven rolled her eyes and returned her gaze back to the window. A few minutes later they pulled up in front of her house.

“Is this it?” Drake asked.

“Yup.”

Back when their family had been whole Michael had painted the outside of their house lilac purple. It was a present for her mother, a perfect match to the dream house she’d drawn as a kid. The paint made their house stick out like a sore thumb, but it had been their home. Now, most of the paint was chipped, only a few remaining patches of purple clinging on as if to remind them of what they use to be.

They both got out of the car. Drake helped Raven pull her bike from the back seat. It was just as hard getting it out as it had been getting it in.

Raven pulled the bike back over to the sidewalk. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Don’t thank me. Granddad seems to like you.”

“Yeah, it’s almost hard to believe you two are related.”

Drake glared at Raven. “What’s that suppose to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

Drake crossed his arms. “What the hell is your problem, Raven? I asked you one question and suddenly I’m enemy number one. I get that it might have sounded wrong but you won’t even let me explain.”

“Because I know what you meant. You think I don’t hear the jokes you and your friends make? Everyone thinks what happened to my mother is funny, but it’s not. None of you know what it’s like for her. You think she wanted to end up in a hospital? Do you think it’s fun for her? What she has is an illness. She didn’t ask for it and she sure as hell didn’t do anything to deserve it. You can’t even imagine the helplessness and the fear she felt. I’m so sick of people like you. I’m tired of being your joke. Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

Tears swelled in Raven’s eyes. She pushed them back. Crying in front of Drake again was not an option. Anger had allowed her thoughts to slip out. She inhaled and tried to calm herself. When she looked back at Drake her gaze was cold.

“Forget it, just tell Bobby I made it back safe.” Raven turned and started to walk her bike to the front door.

“Someone I know might be getting transferred to Corvix,” Drake said.

Raven froze midstep. She turned to see Drake’s brown eyes staring at her. He looked down at the hood of his car. “I thought maybe you might know a little more about it there. The website’s kind of shitty and everyone on the pamphlets looks too happy to be trustworthy. I just wanted to know from a personal experience what they’re really like. If she’s going to be... I just really want to know if they can help,” Drake said. He avoided looking at her but Raven could see it wasn’t easy for him to talk about. Whoever he was talking about was someone he cared for.

Raven was speechless. Of all the things that could have come out of his mouth, this was one she’d never expected. She blinked a few times trying to gather her thoughts.

“I’m sorry I didn’t-”

“Know? Yeah, like I said you don’t know anything about me.” Drake opened his car door, but before getting inside he glanced back at

Raven. "I get why you're angry, Raven, but maybe next time you should try being a little less judgmental."

Drake got into his car and Raven watched as he pulled off. She didn't know what to feel watching him drive away. Guilt and embarrassment seemed to be the dominant two emotions. She wondered how many times in one day her world could be turned upside down.

Raven unlocked the door and stepped inside. She leaned her bike up against the hall wall. Walking over to the living room, she sat down on the couch and pulled her knees into her chest. Raven closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The clock on the wall ticked, counting the passing seconds.

Raven.

Raven's head snapped up. Her eyes glanced around the empty living room. There were shadows all around her. She hadn't bothered turning on the lights when she first came in. Raven didn't know which would be worse, seeing someone or not seeing.

I'm here Raven, the voice echoed inside her head.

"God, please don't let this be happening," Raven's eyes glistened with tears. She knew what this meant for her.

He can't help, the voice said.

The last bit of control Raven was holding onto was lost. She fell apart. Her hands covered her ears, though she knew it wouldn't help. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"No," Raven cried. Her sobs echoed through the house.

This had been something she'd feared could happen but never allowed herself to fully believe would. Now that she was alone there was no denying it. When she thought of all that had happened her heart sank with despair. She was losing her mind. Soon she'd share the same fate as her mother.

Thinking of her mother only made her cry harder.

No, Raven, the voice whispered, *You're not losing your mind; I'm opening it.*

Raven felt a cold shiver run down her back. She could feel the girl's presence all around her.

"Go away. Leave me alone," Raven shouted into the darkness.

I can't. Fate has already tied us together, Raven. Into darkness, we will descend.

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21

The Heart Queensland

The fire provided a much needed warmth. The air was colder in the south. This close to winter, the wind turned brutal. Lu pulled her cape tighter around her body.

“Are you cold, my queen?” Domicin began to remove his own cape. Lu shook her head. “No, I’m fine.”

“Want us to put on some more wood,” Yack asked from across the fire.

“You’ll attract white ichions you idiot.” Kovin glared into the fire. Yack smiled and patted his stomach. “White ichion stew.”

“White ichion is one of the most poisonous snakes you will ever run across. They turn your blood into white paste and brain into mush, and you want to eat one of them?”

“Technically it’s just their venom that is poisonous,” Tomerin spoke up for the first time since they’d settled for camp. Lu glanced over to her left and saw them sitting with their book open. “It’s all in the gland. So in theory, if you were to remove the gland without rupturing it I suppose you could eat white ichion. I have no record of any attempts but it would be an interesting experiment.”

“Tomerin, no experiments on the crew,” Marcella said.

“I didn’t say I would, just that it be interesting.”

Lu continued to watch Tomerin. Their fingertip glided across the paper of the book. She frowned.

“They’re reading,” Tyla said behind Lu.

Lu jumped a little. She glanced back at Tyla. The woman smiled back at her, one eye seemed to glow brighter than the other.

“They changed the words to shapes you can feel when you touch the paper. Tomerin likes to read, but there isn’t always time on our mission. They invented it so they could read in the dark.”

“I didn’t invent it. I repurposed it. There are books like this all over the White Queensland,” Tomerin said without looking up.

“They’ll show you if you want to see, my queen,” Tyla said.

“No, thank you.” Lu turned away. “Perhaps some other time.”

There was too much on Lu’s mind for books. She was keenly aware of the staff strapped to her back.

Doubt begets death, Meshi often told Lu. Pick a path, make a choice, and be sure of it.

Lu’s path had already been chosen. Fear and doubt would do her no good. She looked around the fire. None of them seemed afraid, but this was not new to them. Lu and Domicin were the only ones who’d never been on mission. She glanced at him. He spoke with Marcella in hushed whispers.

Lu studied Domicin. They were only two years apart, but he seemed much older. Was it the loss of his sister or his time in the east that aged him? Lu didn’t know, but she got the feeling that everyone around her was much bigger than her. Lu was just a little girl still playing around in her mother shoes.

“Are you alright, my queen,” Domicin asked. He was looking back at her.

Lu blinked. At some point, she’d been wrapped up in her own thoughts and stopped seeing him.

“Yes, I was just...” Lu looked back at the fire. She didn’t have the words nor did she make the attempt to try to find them.

“Would you like to hear a story about your mother’s first mission?” Marcella asked.

Lu leaned forward to see past Domicin. She did not say anything, but Marcella must have seen something in her eyes because she smiled.

“Your mother was twenty when she became queen. Twenty-one on her first mission. Yack and I are the only ones remaining from that crew. The other two retired and one died in a bar fight. It was also my first mission and I hate to admit, but looking at your mother’s perfect skin and beautiful face, I had my doubts. I remember thinking ‘our queen is too

beautiful for this type of work. That's why they created stone castles to protect girls like her.' I mean she'd painted her lips and smelled of Lilies."

Her mother was renowned for her beauty, even Lu knew that. Sometimes she would catch glimpses of her, in the corridors or dining room, and her breath would freeze inside her lungs. She was more than beautiful; there was something in the very essence of her that made poets write sonatas.

Marcella smiled lost in the memory. "But she could fight. I'd never seen someone move the way she did. Our mission was supposed to be a simple one. There was an infection outbreak near the eastern border, one of the children. We were told that the child had been secluded from the rest of the town but when we got there we soon learned that was not the case. The kid had a sister. When she learned that her brother had been locked away, she set out to free him. The people of the village had all been avoiding the area so no one noticed the little girl sneaking over."

"How old was she?" Lu asked.

Marcella brows crinkled and lips pinched. "Hmm, I believe she was twelve maybe eleven years."

"She should have known better."

Marcella lips quirked into a half smile she tried to hide. "Sometimes what we know isn't so easily put into action. From what I gathered the siblings were very close."

"Selfish."

"Perhaps. Either way, we hadn't planned for it. We got there and your mother knew right away that something was wrong. She tried to warn us but it was too late. They seemed to come at us from every angle. Nearly a quarter of the village had been infected."

"I still got the scar on my shoulder from the butcher who bit me. Man had a big mouth too. Nearly fit my whole shoulder inside of his mouth," Yack added.

"We all got scars from that battle."

"Is that where you got-"

Marcella pointed to her face. "This? No, that's another story for a different day."

Lu nodded and tried not to stare at the scar. She was curious but didn't want to take the attention off of her mother's story.

“So yeah, everyone got their fair share of scares. Alowa, our leader at the time, lost an entire finger. The only one who didn’t have any scars was your mother, though she got cut up quite a bit. But you should have seen her move. People say the goddess works through her children but you don’t fully understand until you’ve seen a queen in action. Your mother wasn’t a woman or a queen. She was light made flesh and bone, wrath and mercy. She saved the rest of the village and gifted the infected with the peace they so rightfully deserved.”

Lu knew her mother to be a decent fighter. According to Meshi she’d been a studious pupil, but Meshi never went into details. Lu wondered which of them had been the better student. She wasn’t smart like Leo nor cunning like Lecive. All she had was her body and because of her illness, even that was at a disadvantage.

Lu looked into the fire. “So the queen was as the legends say.”

“She was. She proved that to all of us, but she also retched three times.”

Lu’s eyes widened at Marcella’s words.

Marcella’s lips pulled back into a full grin. “Don’t believe me? Ask Yack. If I remember correctly she got a little on him.”

Lu glanced back at Yack.

“Only a little and she was very apologetic,” Yack said.

“Of course we told no one. Our first battle is hard for most of us. No matter how much you train it’s really something you can never be fully prepared for. Your mother was an excellent fighter but she’d never had to send anyone to the goddess before. When all the fighting was done she just doubled over and...”

Yack made a retching sound. Kovin rolled his eyes at the obscene noise.

Marcella shook her head but the smile was still on her face. “Basically, what I’m trying to tell you is, you’re expected to be a bit nervous, my queen. Heck if you manage to make it through this mission and only retch twice you’ll be at a good start.”

Lu couldn’t imagine her mother retching under any circumstance. She seemed too fine of a woman.

“Did the story help at all, my queen,” Marcella asked.

Lu gave a slow nod. “It did... I think.”

Domicin placed his hand against her shoulder. She looked at him and saw the soft smile pressed against his lips. Lu gave a small smile back. The story had helped.

“Alright then, let us get some rest before the goddess glow greets us. Tomerin’s first watch, correct.” Marcella looked at Tomerin. They gave a nod and unfolded their legs to stand.

“Can I go with them, captain? Two eyes are better than one,” Tyla said.

“Fine, we’ll work in shifts of two.”

“Captain, if possible can I not be partnered with onions over here?” Kovin pointed at Yack.

“Domicin do you mind taking the next shift with Kovin.”

Domicin nodded. “Though after a day’s riding I can’t be sure I’ll smell much better.”

Marcella looked at Yack. “That means you’re with me.”

“Like old times.” Yack grinned.

“When’s my watch,” Lu asked.

Marcella looked down at her and smiled. “You won’t have a watch, my queen. You will rest. After all, you are the centerpiece of this whole operation.”

Lu wanted to argue but she wasn’t sure if this was the way things were done. As they prepared to lay down for the night Lu felt her anxiety return. She closed her eyes but could not turn her mind off. Shifting against the cape she’d laid down on the forest floor, she tried to get comfortable. Meshi had trained her to sleep in worse places, but still rest did not come to her.

Lu turned over on her back. She opened her eyes and looked up at the night sky. Stars and a moon that was almost smiling.

Goddess, make me the queen they wish me to be.

22

The Heart Queensland

By the time Lu opened her eyes the next morning the crew had almost finished clearing their campsite. The ground had frosted over during the night and her muscles turned stiff. Lu stood, brushing the leaves and dirt off of her cape. She tied it around her shoulders and walked over to the horses.

“You all move quickly,” Lu said when she saw Marcella.

“We all take these mission seriously, my queen. It may not seem like it but they all willingly signed up for the ninth. We want to help these people in any way possible.”

Marcella turned to help Tomerin finish saddling the horses. Lu watched them. Of all the positions in the army, the ninth was by far the most dangerous. There was great glory in the position but everything came with a cost. She wondered what made them agree. Marcella seemed like a natural born leader and being the daughter of nobility she could have easily found success elsewhere.

Domicin walked up next to Lu, strapping a sword securely to his side. “We’re ready when you are, my queen.”

“Ready.” Lu nodded and climbed onto the back of her horse.

Whatever reasons they had for signing up didn’t matter. They all shared a common goal now. They would do what was necessary to protect the people. Together they saddled up and began to move again.

The chill from last night had settled in and seemed prepared to stay. Lu’s clothes kept her body warm but her face was left exposed to the wind. The area around them was quiet. So many of life’s inhabitants prepared for winters slumber.

They’d reached the outskirts of one of Zendal’s neighboring villages when the darkness hit Lu. A wall slammed down around her mind.

The force of the hit nearly knocked her off her horse.

A scream ripped through her mind, loud and piercing. Lu covered her ears but the sound was coming from within. She opened her eyes.

The world around Lu changed, filling with shadows and twisted figures. The goddess glow was gone. A heavy fog surrounded them. The bare trees twisted with limbs reaching out for her. The slow drip of blood trailed its way from her nose down to her lip. Pain sent her eyes rolling back and teeth grinding.

Domicin caught Lu as she fell sideways from her horse. She felt his arms wrap around her but when she turned to look at him something was wrong with his face.

Domicin smiled at her. His lips curled back, exposing sharpened teeth. His smile widened. The skin that connected his mouth began to rip, tearing like string cheese. Blood spilled down his face but still he kept smiling. Terror gripped at Lu's chest. She closed her eyes.

It's not real. It's not real.

Lu reached into her mind, pushing past the darkness and screams. They clung to her, sticky tar-like muck. She trembled.

A gentle purr beneath the screams and the tickle of fur against her skin.

Come play with ussss.

The darkness held her tighter the deeper she went. Lu used all her strength to push. With the final push, the darkness shattered. Light burst through her mind silencing the screams into one single voice.

"Can you hear me, my queen?" Domicin asked.

Lu opened her eyes. Domicin still held her. She saw two versions of him staring down at her. One smiling and the other looking down at her with concerned amber eyes. The two versions of reality overlapped, but she could see the difference now.

Lu pushed herself up. They were both on Domicin's horse making the maneuver awkward. "I'm alright. "

She brushed her hand against her nose and felt the blood smear her skin. That part had at least been real.

Marcella looked at them. "It was the madness, wasn't it? You can sense it all the way from here."

Lu nodded. "It's stronger than I thought it would be. I wasn't prepared."

Lu's first mind merge was nothing like she'd expected. According to Meshi, there was suppose to be some kind of warning before hand that would give her enough time to put her mental walls in place, but there'd been no such warning.

Now that she'd broken madness's hold, she could see clearer. Her eyes showed her one reality and her third eye saw another. *His* reality.

"Perhaps we should stop. Give her majesty a moment to rest and adjust. I have something for the bleeding," Tomerin said.

"No. I'm fine now." Lu sniffled and wiped her lip again. "We don't have time to wait. He's afraid and he knows we're coming."

Lu stared down the path. She could sense his fear as though it were her own. Her third eye told her how his mind saw the world. She thought of how long he'd been trapped in that perpetual state of fear. The ideal sickened her.

No one should suffer such a fate.

Lu slid off of Domicin's horse and walked back over to her own. She wobbled as she tried to climb on. Domicin's hands were outstretched to catch her but she adjusted herself and grasped the reins.

"I'm ready," Lu said.

Marcella stared at her for a moment but then nodded. "Alright crew, move out."

They took off again. Hooves beat against the earthy ground. Cold wind whipped past her face but Lu leaned in and held tight to the reins. The motion of the horse caused the acids in her stomach to rise. For a moment she thought she might vomit but she pinched her lips and willed her stomach still.

The pull towards the town grew stronger. Separating the two realities became harder but Meshi had spent years training Lu's mind as well as her body. When dark shadows rose from the ground and twisted up toward the sky she rode right through them. She kept her mind focused on what was real.

Zendel was like most villages near the southern border. The proximity to the wall did something to the soil making it almost impossible to farm. Hard earth made even harder people.

Lu hopped off of her horse and looked around. The village appeared like a ghost town. Homes made of scavenged wood and broken parts. No one dared come out when the queen's mercy was at hand. It was better that way. The last thing Lu needed was more people getting infected.

The others dismounted. There weren't that many houses inside of the village. The ones that were there were small and in need of repair. There were a few animals rambling around, but otherwise, there was no movement.

Lu focused on the reality her third eye created. Suddenly everything about the village seemed threatening. The faint sounds of children singing vibrated in the air around them creating an electric buzz. Their melody taking on an eerie tone.

The three will rise, but two will fall

Despite it being mid-day the village appeared dark. Moonlight casted shadows over the shanty houses. Their roofs stretched tall and glared down at Lu. Dark figures seemed to leer around every corner.

madness madness

infects them all

Trails of blood ran from every doorstep connecting in a river of crimson that cut through the middle of the village.

One of the pigs turned to face Lu. The skin on its face had been peeled away and eyes gouged out. She turned away from the sight.

into darkness we all descend

Falling falling

Lu walked through the village using her third eye as a guide. She stepped into the blood river and could almost feel the warm liquid as it rushed past her. The children's singing grew louder.

down the hole never seen again

Lu had heard the song before when she was younger. It sang of the darker ages when madness had overrun the queensland. Children were forbidden from singing it out loud, which only added to the temptation. The song held the words of oracles and was said to summon orcestrals. Even after the church had rid the land of oracles the songs had remained. Most children saw it as a game. They sang the song when no one was around, tempting the creatures to rise again.

Lu kept walking, following the sound of their singing and laughter. When they reached the darkest corner of the village, She stopped.

“He’s here.” Lu looked towards one of the houses. The members of the ninth moved to surround her. She pulled the staff from her back. With one quick twirl, the staff transformed into a battle-axe. She glanced at Domicin. He gave her a silent nod.

Lu turned to Marcella. Another quick nod.

Lu raised the axe and swung it down on the lock. It fell to the ground with a loud clink. She placed her hand against the wood door and pushed. As soon as Lu opened the door the foul scent of warm urine and feces greeted them. The smell stung her eyes. Stomach churning, Lu stepped into the dark corridor.

“It smells like death in here,” Tyla whispered.

Tomerin stepped in beside her. “Were you expecting roses?”

Marcella turned her head. The two were silenced by the intensity of her glare. Lu kept moving paying them no attention. Her heartbeat slow in her chest. Every step they took brought them farther into the darkness. Soon they were swallowed in its shadows.

It’s too quiet.

The singing had stopped. Lu heard a soft mumbling noise. Her heartbeat quickened. She stepped closer toward the sound. He was around the corner. She could feel him. Her palms were sweaty but gripped tight to the axe. Lu took a deep breath. This was what she’d been trained for. With her axe raise high she turned the corner.

A man lay balled against the stone wall. His clothes were tattered, covered in blood and dirt. He made no movement. She now knew where the smell was coming from. Lu might have thought he was already dead were it not for the mumbling. She listened in. The words coming out of his mouth were complete gibberish.

Lu took a step forward. The moment she did the man turned to face her. His face bloodied and covered in scars. Her eyes dropped to his hands. They too were coated in blood. Bits of hair and flesh still stuck under his fingernails. The man had done this to himself.

Lu felt sick. Acid rose to the back of her throat. How afraid does a man have to be to do this? Maybe it was the guilt. Thinking of what he’d done to those poor girls drove him to this level of madness, but he wasn’t

the one to blame. The queensland had failed to protect him and because of that, he'd become a prisoner in his own mind. He was a sad sight to behold.

"We have failed you, but I promise you will walk in the goddess's light again." Lu raised her axe up high. "By the blood of my ancestor, I grant you mercy."

She swung.

The man's eyes flew open. They connected in that moment, a hair of a second. Lu could see herself through his eyes. A pale skinned girl with black snakes for hair and glowing red eyes. He was terrified. His fear pumped inside her chest, but underneath that fear, anger and hate festered. Lu had never felt such strong emotions before. Worse was that all those emotions were aimed at her.

Lu thought to pull back but it was too late. The axe sliced through his neck like butter. Blood splattered against her face. Her third eye slammed shut the moment his head severed from his neck. His head rolled away from his body and hit the adjacent wall with a thunk.

Only one reality remained. That, and the last image in the man's mind. With her eyes closed, she could still see it. She saw herself as a monster.

Lu wanted to comfort him, assure him that what she was doing was for the best, but he was gone now. It didn't seem real but the sudden emptiness in her mind told her so.

Domicin stepped forward. "Your majesty?"

His voice was too distant for Lu to make out the words. There was blood spurting from the man's neck. An empty space where a head should be. She couldn't move.

I did it...I...

They'd connected, if only for a moment. Now Lu was alone. She'd done the right thing. Everything she believed in told her so. Killing him had been a mercy but it happened too fast. This wasn't over. This couldn't be over. There had to be more, Lu was sure of it. Where was the shining light at the end of his tunnel? The feeling of the goddess working through her? Why did she feel so empty?

Domicin's large hands covered Lu's. The warmth of his touch snapped her out of the trance. She could feel the magic of their connection wrapping around her. The emptiness subsided.

“It is done, your majesty. You saved him,” Domicin said.

Lu’s eyes glanced around the room. The others were watching her. She loosened her grip around the axe. Her hands were still stiff from the tension.

Lu stood, the room tilting unevenly on its axial. “We’ll need to burn the body. The risk of contamination is too- is too-”

She was back on the ground again. The smells and sights overwhelmed her. On hands and knees, she emptied herself.

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23

The Heart Queensland

Lu wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She could still taste the acidic sickness on her tongue. Domicin was back by her side, one hand on her back the other against her arm.

“I’m alright,” Lu said.

Lu wasn’t all right, that much was clear. Her whole body was still shaking and she would have vomited again if there were anything left on her stomach. She couldn’t look at him, could barely stand the smell of it. The only thing she was certain of was that she had to get out.

Domicin helped Lu to stand.

“Um, guys, there’s something over here you might want to take a look at,” Tyla said.

Lu turned to see what she meant. When she came in she’d been so focused on her third eye vision she hadn’t noticed anything but the man.

“What is it?” Domicin asked.

Lu walked over to the other side of the room. She reached out to touch the wall. When she pulled her hand back her fingertips were red. Fresh blood, slick against the walls. She didn’t dare look back at the man’s severed head, but she could see it in her mind’s eye. His hands were covered in blood, but she’d assumed it only came from scratching his face.

“It’s a Lulana, right?” Tomerin squinted at the painting. “I mean it’s a crude rendition but the heart-shaped petals definitely resemble those of the Lulana flower.”

Lu stared at the petals. They were thick and curvy, the ends of each petal forming a heart shape. She knew what it was the moment she saw it. She still remembered Leo pointing to the flower in one of his books before pointing back at her.

“You see Lu, she does love you. That’s why mother chose this name for you,” Leo held up the book for her to see. *The bright yellow and orange flower was one of the most beautiful things her young eyes had ever seen.*

“It is,” Lu said. Everyone’s attention returned to the queen. “So rare some theorize that the flower is just a myth and doesn’t really exist, but stories say for those who find these flowers it’s supposed to be a sign of hope to come.”

Lu looked at Domicin. “It shares a dead girl’s name. A name that should not exist anymore.”

Domicin’s eyes shifted between Lu and the painting. When his eyes returned to Lu she could see the alarm that lit his amber orbs. “That’s impossible.”

A tremble ran down Lu’s spine. “Burn it. Burn the whole house down.”

Lu turned to leave. It wasn’t a coincidence that this flower was here. Most people in this part of the queensland didn’t even know what a Lulana was. This was a message.

The magic used to erase a queen’s name left no room for loopholes. No one in the three queenslands was strong enough to break the spell. Lu knew of only one powerful enough to be able to obtain that information. The last time a queen had been named their world had faced their destruction. A second spell had been performed only after he was gone. Now he was more legend than man.

Lu stepped outside. She inhaled deeply but her chest seemed too tight. She took another breath and then another. Looking around, she found herself expecting.

Someone’s out there. Someone’s watching.

A hand touched Lu’s shoulder. She spun around, stopping with her axe only inches away from Domicin’s face. He stared back at her.

“My queen?”

“I’m sorry.” Lu dropped her arm back down. “I didn’t mean...”

A lump swelled in her throat.

“Come with me,” Domicin said.

He took her hand and led her behind the cabin. Once they stopped he let go of her hand. The feel of that hand touching her face surprised Lu.

“Look at me. Breathe,” Domicin said raising her chin up.

Lu focused in on his eyes, noting the flecks of red and orange. She breathed in. The memory of the smell would be forever etched into her mind but at least out here, it was better.

Lu pulled Domicin's hand away from her. "It can't be him."

Domicin's expression grew grim. "Who else could have done this?"

"I don't know, but it has to be someone else. He hasn't been in the west for years. Not since Ogato."

The town was never the same, no matter how many queens pushed for reconstruction. Piker's vein grew thicker there. The blood-soaked earth acted as a perfect breeding ground.

"He left when he wanted. Who's to say he can't come back when he wants. First the assassination, now this?"

"No. This and that are not connected. If people start to believe that-if they even so much as think it-" Lu shook her head.

Domicin stepped closer to Lu. "I'm not trying to start a panic, but we have to discuss this. That painting was left here for you to see. If it really was him then you're in danger. He knows your name and he's seeking you out personally. He's not threatening the queen of hearts, he's threatening *you*."

"Than that is where this person has made a mistake. I *am* the Queen of Heart. The girl they wish to threaten is gone. I will not cower under the painting of a madman. We will take this information and look at it objectively. We will not jump to any conclusions, am I understood?"

"Yes, my queen." Domicin took a step back from Lu and bowed his head.

"Good, then let us burn this house down and show whoever is responsible for this that we will not be intimidated."

Big words for a small girl. Lu stepped past Domicin. She walked back to the front of the house and saw the rest of the ninth waiting there. Yack stood with a torch in his hand. She looked at him and nodded. He touched the torch to the base of the wooden door. It did not take long for the broken home to burn. Within minutes, the house and everything inside was engulfed in flames.

Lu stared into the flames, her heart still pounding and sweat beading against her forehead. She felt the tremble building inside of her hands and squeezed them into tight fist.

“Say nothing of the painting inside,” Lu said.

“What painting?” Marcella asked.

Lu looked toward Marcella.

Marcella turned away from the fire and stared back at her. “We see what you want us to see.”

Lu held her gaze for a moment longer and then looked at the rest of the ninth. They all seemed nice enough but she wasn’t sure if she could trust them. The others turned to look at her. Domicin’s eyes met hers and he gave a nod. Lu exhaled and nodded.

She looked down at her axe. The blood of the madman still coated the blade. She pressed it into her palm. The sharp metal broke through her soft skin. Before she’d winced at the slight sting. Now she could only wonder what the man had felt as the blade sliced through him.

No, there wasn’t enough time for that. He felt nothing, Lu thought.

Blood pooled in her hand and spilled onto the blade. Her blood mixed in with the other blood, purifying it. The axe hummed. Blood ran down to the middle of the axe, ruby eyes of the skull glowing bright as it absorbed the crimson liquid.

Lu pulled her hand back and watched as the last drops of blood disappeared. She looked down at her hand. The skin on her palm began to stitch it’s self back together. When it was done her hand looked as though the blade had never touched it. So long as the cut didn’t go too deep, nothing could hurt her. She was goddess blessed.

Lu looked up into the sky. She could see the goddess and feel the warmth of her glow against her skin, but on the inside, she felt hollow.

Goddess? Lu called out.

There was no reply. As always, the goddess remained silent and watchful. Lu looked back down at the house. After a while, the flames died and the only thing left was a pile of ash and bits of metal and wood. She turned away.

Marcella lead them toward the center of the village. Wind blew dust into Lu’s face. Marcella stopped, looking around at the broken down homes.

“You may come out now. This village has been cleansed,” Marcella announced to the quiet village.

There was a moment of hesitation and the doors began to creak open. People of the village shuffled toward Lu and the others. Once everyone was close enough Marcella took a step forward. “I present to you your savior, the Queen of Heart.” She stepped to the side and gestured toward Lu.

The villagers cheered.

A hand pressed into the small of Lu’s back. She stepped forward.

“Your generous queen rode all the way from her home to your village so that she might give you mercy. It is because of her your village is now safe from the blight,” Marcella said.

The crowd cheered again, yelling out gratitude, the sound of it overwhelming Lu’s senses. She stood not knowing what to do. The awful smell of that home returned to her. Blood and shit, death and grime. She looked at their smiling faces and felt herself growing dizzy. Domicin took a step closer to her.

A middle-aged man came forward from the crowd. Lu noticed that most of them were men. Several were marked by red rash.

Piker’s vein grew constantly around the wall. Cut and dried it made excellent rope but if not handled correctly it could leave permanent rashes. She assumed most of them had worked on the wall, a desperate man’s job. A southern man’s job.

The man who stepped forward was one of the few without a rash. His clothes, like the others, were ragged and covered in dirt. The swirling tattoo over his left eye marked him as the village priest. He bowed before the queen.

“We are grateful for your services, your majesty. Might you allow us to show you our gratitude by staying to feast with us?” The priest asked.

Lu looked around the village. Most of the villagers were underweight. She doubted they had enough to feed themselves.

Lu prepared to say as much but Marcella answered first. “We appreciate your offer. The queen welcomes a chance to feast amongst her people. We look forward to tasting the traditional dishes of Zendel and hope that you might enjoy the food of the royal court as well.”

Lu understood what Marcella was trying to do. Any food brought from the castle would greatly outweigh anything Zendel could provide on

their own, but it would take days for anything to reach Zendel. Lu didn't want to be inside of Zendal that long.

"It will take some time for the food to arrive until then do you have a place that the queen might go to freshen up?" Marcella asked.

"Yes, of course. There is a well just outside the village. Naxson can take you there."

A young man stepped forward from the crowd. He bore a mark similar to the one the priest wore but unfinished. Instead of a full swirl, the tattoo hooked just above his brow. The boy bowed.

"If you are ready I can take you there now," Naxson said.

"Lead the way."

They walked together towards the outskirts of the village. The priest hadn't lied when he said the well was close. It only took them a half an hour to make it there. The well was old, its bricks already starting to fall apart.

Yack lowered the wooden bucket into the well. When it rose again he handed it over to Domicin. Domicin brought the bucket to Lu. She stared down into the murky water. It looked more like dirty milk than water.

"Apologies, my queen, the water might not be the cleanest but it is safe to drink," Naxson reassured them.

"Allow me, your majesty." Domicin poured the water into his hand and took a sip.

They waited. Everyone but Lu stared at Naxson, assessing his every move. Lu kept her eyes on Domicin's face monitoring for any signs of change, growing more anxious with every passing moment. His amber eyes rose to meet hers.

Domicin nodded. Lu exhaled a breath, the group relaxing along with her. Domicin passed the bucket back to Lu. She reached her hands into the water and started to wash the blood from her face.

"How did you find your way into the priesthood? You're rather young for an apprentice," Tomerin said to Naxson.

Lu looked up. There was a hint of hostility she'd not previously heard inside of their voice. Tomerin's eyes stared at Naxson, a hint of contempt inside of their brown eyes.

Naxson didn't seem bothered by this. "The honor should have been my father's, but during his tour of the queensland he tried to make his

venture through the orcestral forest and was infected. He killed himself before he could receive the queen's mercy.”

“You were there,” Tomerin said, not a question but a statement. There was a look inside Naxson’s eyes. Lu could see it too. His eyes stirred something inside of her she made quick to stomp down. The image of her parents’ bodies flashed inside of her mind.

Naxson nodded.

“I’m sorry I asked,” Tomerin said. To say their voice was softer would be wrong, but there was a change in tone.

”Don’t be. I’m not the first son to lose his father to the madness. I’m actually luckier than most. Markolas, the priest from the village, was traveling with my father when it happened. Out of respect for my father, he agreed to take me on.”

“And you agreed to take his place, even though it was the priesthood that cost your father his life?” Kovin asked.

Naxson glanced over at him and shook his head. “My father was a great man but my choice wasn’t about him. I grew up in a village much like this one. People need to believe in the goddess just as much as they need food and water. I want to help them see that the goddess has not turned her back on them.”

“A noble cause. The goddess will surely shine light on your path,” Marcella said, patting Naxson on the shoulder as she passed.

The group returned to what they were doing clearly finished with the conversation. Lu was the only one left staring at Naxson.

Naxson felt Lu’s eyes on him. He looked up and his eyes met hers. With a smile, he started towards her.

There was a shift in the air. Lu turned to see Domicin with his hand on the handle of his sword. His analytical gaze locked on Naxson. When Domicin’s eyes flicked back toward Lu she shook her head.

Receiving Lu’s message, Domicin released his hold of his sword.

Lu turned back toward Naxson to see him standing only an arms length away.

“Is there something wrong, my queen?” Naxson asked in a soft voice.

“No, your story is inspiring. You speak with such confidence.”

Naxson smiled. "But of course, I am a faithful servant of our goddess. When you walk with all that is righteous you needn't fear being wrong."

Lu stared at him, searching for something in his eyes but all she saw was complete conviction. He really believed that.

"Right, of course. Thank you for your service." Lu turned away from him. She had nothing more to say. In her head, she knew Naxson's words to be correct but in her heart, she found them disappointingly lacking. He made things sound so frighteningly simple. Was it even possible to be so unafraid and without doubt?

Lu dipped her hands into the cold water. Her hands had been washed of the blood but it would be awhile before she felt clean again. Lu walked back over to the well. Her hands gripped the bricks. *I don't want to be here anymore*, Lu thought as she looked down into the murky depths.

Domicin walked up behind her again. "My queen?"

Lu looked back at him. She saw the question in his eyes. Domicin wanted to know how she was really feeling, but Lu didn't have it in her to answer.

"Has someone sent word to the castle yet? I imagine it will be a long journey," Lu said.

Marcella walked up to stand beside Domicin. "I ordered it be sent out before we left."

"How did you know there would be a feast?" Lu asked.

"Feasting with the queen after a mercy has been dealt is somewhat of an unofficial tradition. It allows the queen to give back to those less fortunate while at the same time building better relationships with her people. The south deals with so many different struggles. We try to give back when we can. They will bring food and a priest to bless the dead."

Lu had never heard of these unofficial feasts but it made sense. She imagined people were more accepting of the queen's mercy if it meant their starving villages would be fed. The gratitude Lu received made sense now. The crack in the wall had been a mistake of the crown but people were willing to be more forgiving once their bellies were full.

Lu stopped her thoughts. Since when had she become so cynical? People needed time to grieve. No one could be forced to burn the red feather before they were ready. Their cheer may have been a front to hide

wounds that cut too deep. When the dust settled and Lu was gone, they would be left alone to deal with their sorrows.

“How much longer do you think it will take for them to get here?” Lu asked.

Marcella looked back in the direction of the castle. “Not long, my queen.”

Lu looked toward the castle but she couldn't see it. Here they were closer to the darkness. Here every shadow seemed to call her by name. She couldn't help feeling that the castle was farther from Zendel than it had been when she left.

24

The Heart Queensland

Lu sat at the center of the circle. There wasn't a hall big enough to hold all of them. Instead, they sat mats out over the dirt ground and arranged them into a circle. The goddess was still glowing in the sky. Lu had to remind herself that she'd never actually stopped glowing. The dark village had all been a figment of the madman's imagination.

Lu heard someone clear their throat. She looked over and saw Domicin holding out a plate. She took it. Most of the dishes had come from the castle. They passed plates of it around, people taking what they desired. The one Lu held had smoked pangin and salmon. Lu passed it to Priest Markolas, who sat on the other side of her. She watched his bare hands grab hold of the gray scaled pangin before turning away.

The people of the village continued to pass the plates around but none seemed to be eating. Their sunken eyes stared at their plates with desire, some even licking their lips, but still they did not eat. This was probably the most food any of them had seen in awhile. They all waited on Lu to request the blessing.

Lu waited until the last plate made it's way around before holding up her hands. All eyes turned to her.

"Praise be to her highest. The goddess has brought us here today so that we may join hands and give thanks. Darkness has resided in this village for far too long. We should all be grateful that she has chosen to shine her light on us now. Take solace in knowing that those you lost are now in her warm embrace. Rejoice with the ones who surround you now." Lu repeated the words exactly as Marcella had instructed her to. She lowered her hands to her sides. Domicin took her right hand and Markolas took her left.

“Let us join hands now and ask that the goddess continue to shine her light down on us all,” Lu said.

Everyone stood. Joining hands, they formed a giant circle. They bowed their heads and raised their hands to the goddess. After a moment Lu raised her head again.

“Now may we eat and celebrate the blessing the goddess has laid before us,” Lu said.

Their hands separated as they began their feast. The starved villagers devoured their meals. During the first meal, most were too busy stuffing their mouths to hold polite conversation. Only after their first meals were taken away, did the light buzz of conversation begin.

Lu studied them. They all seemed rather cheerful despite the recent horrors that had taken place. While they ate, a gray priest circled the ashes of what had once been a home. None of them seemed bothered. Of course, they hadn't been the ones to deliver the final blow. They waited in their homes, hidden behind locked doors.

They were a village of mostly men, and though their clothes were ragged and skin dirtied, Lu could see the muscles that came from hours of manual labor. Surely one of them could have easily taken down the frail man in the cabin.

It is a good thing they did not, Lu reassured herself.

There were only a few children in the crowd. Lu imagined it would be hard to feed a child when these villagers could barely feed themselves. Lu had heard once or twice of the Queensland's financial problems but she lived most of her life in the inner city. Seeing it in person was different.

Yet another reason to stress the importance of her marriage. Without the support of The Red Queensland, villages like Zendel wouldn't last long. The closer one got to the wall the poorer the soil became. Without the ability to farm and provide for itself, villages like Zendel depended on what the crown could provide them.

Lu's list of duties continued to grow. Protect the realm, lead the people, form the bonds, marry the prince, the list seemed never ending. If what Domicin said about the flower being a message was true, then that would mean adding another thing to the list. Prepare for war.

Lu's stomach twisted at the thought. There were always casualties in wars. With this one, odds were both she and her people would be

slaughtered. Villages close to the wall would be the first to fall. Madness and death would walk hand and hand through her lands.

That was why she refused to discuss it with Domicin. She'd been raised on stories about him. There wasn't a western child who hadn't. But, he'd gone long ago. To most children her age he was nothing more than a legend, a terrifying horrific legend, but a legend nonetheless.

Now there was the possibility that legend had been brought back to life during a time when the Heart was barely hanging on. The thought made her shiver. If even the thought of his return was enough to frighten her, how could she ever hope to protect them?

"You need to eat, my queen," Domicin leaned over and whispered.

Lu looked down at the plate in front of her. It was mostly fruits and vegetables but she hadn't touched anything. She picked up a vegetable that resembled a grape and popped it into her mouth. Biting down she tasted its salty juices. Her stomach revolted but she chewed a few more times before swallowing.

Lu continued to force feed herself. She stopped only once she cleared her plate. The food sat heavy on her stomach. The goddess now sank low into the horizon. Markolas tried to start up a conversation with her. Lu listened as he spoke, nodding her head when appropriate, but adding nothing to the conversation. When Marcella came along to distract him, Lu was more than happy to turn the conversation over.

Lu leaned over to Domicin. "I need a moment alone."

"My queen, that isn't safe."

"I can handle myself."

"I can't allow that."

Lu arched a brow. "Since when does a queen need to be allowed to do anything?"

"Since the cabin." Domicin leaned over to whisper.

"My legs hurt. I need to stretch them."

"Then I will walk with you."

Domicin started to move but Lu reached out a hand to stop him. "That's not necessary."

"My quee-"

"Jack, please. I just need a moment. I promise I won't go far."

Lu's hand still rested over Domicin's arm. Domicin held her gaze for a moment before letting out a sigh. Lu pulled her hand back. When she stood she dusted off her gown. They'd brought it along with the food; Marcella insisted that Lu wear it.

Standing gained Lu the attention of some of the villagers. Their eyes followed her waiting to see what the queen might do next. She gave them a reassuring smile before turning away.

Once outside of view Lu's body shifted. Her shoulders slumped and walk slowed. No longer was she the regal elegant queen. She sighed.

Is it like this every time? Lu wasn't sure she'd survive if there was to be a feast after every queen's mercy. The mood change was far too jarring. No matter how holy the task, she'd just played a hand in someone's death. A man she knew very little about. From what she'd heard not a single person spoke a word about him or the three girls. More than dead, it was as if they'd vanished from everyone's thoughts.

Lu walked through the village grateful for the solitude. She headed towards the horses. Their company was often more preferable than other humans. Once around them, maybe it would be easier to breathe.

A rustling sound alerted Lu to movement. It came from behind one of the houses. She turned towards the noise but saw nothing. Lu took a step closer. The noise came again but this time from the opposite direction.

Lu reached behind her back, gripping her staff. She pivoted on the balls of her feet. Her eyes scanned the village but saw nothing.

"I suggest you show yourself now. I do not take kindly to being followed," Lu called out.

Her grip tightened on the staff. She shifted her body preparing for a fight. The noise came again this time from behind her. She spun around. In one swift move, she pulled out her staff and turned it into a sword. She swung out her arm and stopped.

A woman stood at the tip of her blade. She was pretty, in an unassuming sort of way, but her dress had started to fray near the edges and the colors faded dull. One of the villagers, Lu assumed. Her dark red eyes were fiercely bright as she glowered at Lu.

"What are you doing out here?" Lu asked.

"I come to give my last farewell," the woman said, turning to look down the dirt road. Lu turned with her.

A few feet away sat a pile of ash that only this morning had been a house of madness. Lu didn't understand. This hadn't been the direction she'd been walking in. The cabin shouldn't have been this close. Even now that it was ash, a dark aura still surrounded the area.

Lu looked back at the woman. She studied the older woman's profile. In another life, she would have been the type of woman noblemen catered to. Tears trailed down the woman's cheek. For a moment Lu's third eye blinked open and she could feel the woman's bitter sorrow as if it were her own. Lu swallowed hard before quickly closing off that part of her mind.

"He was a good man," the woman said. She stared at the pile of ash. "Most of them aren't, but he was. He cared. He never hit me, not once. Said a man should never hit a lady."

The woman looked at Lu, tears in her eyes. "I ain't no lady, and he knew it but it didn't matter. Said he loved me. Said I was gone be his wife."

Lu didn't say anything. Her mouth had gone dry and she shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. She'd never had to comfort anyone and couldn't even begin to understand how. This was the type of reaction she'd been expecting but now that it was happening she didn't know what to do.

The woman looked back at the ash. "We were going to be a family. He loved kids, not the way some men do. Not in the way that hurts. He loved them pure and kind. What happened, he never would have done it. Would have sooner died."

Lu thought of the little girls who'd died before she'd arrived. Her heart sank. She wanted to take comfort in knowing they were safe with the goddess but couldn't. All she could think of was what they could have become and knowing that they never would. All their lives had been cut short including the man's.

The woman grew quiet. Her tears fell silently down her cheeks. The need to say something swelled inside of Lu's chest. "He is with the goddess now." It was meant to be a comfort, something people say at funerals. Hearing it now Lu understood how little it did to help. There was no comfort to be found in such loss.

The woman turned back to Lu. Hurt and anger mixed inside her dark red eyes. "He's supposed to be with me," the woman spat. "He was

supposed to be with me but you took him away,” the woman said through gritted teeth.

The sting of her words made Lu take a step back.

“You killed him,” the woman hissed.

“He was sick. If he’d been allowed to live any longer there’s no telling what he would have done. You said so yourself, he rather die. What I did was a mercy,” Lu tried to explain.

“Mercy?” The woman asked. Her voice shook with anger.

Lu knew she had to say something to calm the woman down before the situation got out of hand. “Yes, if he’d had died with an impure soul he wouldn’t be able to walk with the god-“

“Damn the goddess.”

The woman’s words were like a slap to the face. Lu stared at her unable to think. Never before had she heard such blasphemy spoken so blatantly.

“Where was she when he needed her? I know my sins. I know the path I chose and why she ain’t never looked kindly on me, but he was good. He spent his whole life trying to walk in her light. Why would she let this happen to him in the first place? Protector? She ain’t never protected nothing of mine. Instead of helping she sends her executioner with skin so pale it’s as if she’s never seen the light.”

Lu fought not to wince at the woman’s words. Each word cut deeper than the one before. She’d known that some people might think that of her but it was still hard to hear.

“I-“ Lu started to speak what was cut off when the woman swung at her. She stepped back avoiding the hit.

“You’re a liar.” The woman came at her again. “You make us all believe you’re something great but you’re nothing.”

Lu sidestepped, pivoting as the woman tried to grab again. Her body moved on its own, trained in defense even as her mind struggled to comprehend the situation.

“You didn’t save him. You can’t save anyone.” The woman struck out aiming for Lu’s face.

Lu grasped hold of the woman’s wrist. She turned, pushing down the woman’s shoulder and pulling her arm back.

“You need to calm down,” Lu said.

“Curse the goddess and this entire queensland. If the crown had protected us like they promised, he would have never been exposed to the madness.”

“What is going on here?” A voice asked. They both looked up to see Markolas standing with a crowd behind him.

Lu closed her eyes. If it had just been her, the woman might have been spared, but now the entire village would know of her crimes. The woman had sealed her fate.

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25

The light of a new day crept into Raven's shadowed room. She laid on her bed in the fetal position, eyes staring blankly at the wall. Last night she'd cried herself to sleep on the couch, but when she woke, she was tucked inside of her covers. She didn't remember how she got there.

The alarm on her phone rang for an hour before giving up on her. She made no attempts to silence it.

The girl had visited her dreams again. Raven watched as she hacked her way through the village, her body coated in blood. Screams of the innocent villagers rang inside Raven's head. Severed heads littered the ground, faces frozen in fear.

The girl had turned around. Her glowing red eyes widened as she called out to Raven. The girl's voice was muted but Raven could see the fear etched on her face. Raven thought the girl might have been trying to warn her, but she had been jolted from her sleep moments later by a sharp pain in her chest. The warning remained a mystery.

Raven's phone buzzed, alerting her of a new text message. She made no move to check it. Dion and Tiffany were probably wondering where she was. She didn't know what to tell them. 'Sorry guys I'm having a mental brake down' didn't seem like the right answer. She didn't want to admit it to herself.

Raven wasn't sure what she should do.

Is this how you felt? Raven wondered thinking of her mother. Along with the nightmares, her mother had started to isolate herself from others.

Raven wondered if she should see a doctor. Images of straight jackets and padded rooms popped into Raven's head, making her sick.

No, that's not right. Raven reminded herself. *They don't do it like that anymore. Not when drugs are so accessible.*

“Raven?”

Raven lifted her head and saw her father leaning against her doorframe. He was dressed in his blue uniform. Did he ever take it off? The dark blue fabric may as well be fused with his flesh. She couldn't tell the difference either way.

Raven looked away from him.

“How you feeling?” Michael asked.

“Fine.”

Raven didn't want to discuss it. She waited to hear the door close but instead heard the sounds of approaching footsteps. He sat down next to her, bedsprings creaking under his weight.

“What happened in school yesterday?” Michael asked.

Raven shrugged her shoulders. “I don't know. An exam, maybe.”

“Raven, they called me. At work, in the middle of the day. School said they'd been trying the emergency cell number but it wasn't going through. Turns out the number wasn't even mine. Any ideal on how that happened?”

“Nope.”

Dion hacked into the school system on prior request. He'd switched around the contact number so that messages about tardiness and absences never made their way to her father.

“Raven, do you need to start talking to Dr. Bowing again?”

Raven sat up. “No. God, no, I'm fine. I just- I had a bad headache, that's all.”

“Principle Alcester sounded concerned.”

“Principle Alcester cares a whole lot about shit that doesn't involve her.”

“Aye, watch your language.”

Raven looked down at her lap. “Sorry. I just mean that you know how everyone talks. They still talk about her when they think I'm not listening and when they look at me I know they're thinking of her. I can see it in their eyes.”

She didn't want to be talking about these things with her father, but she knew she had to give him something to get him off of her back.

Michael let out a sigh. “Maybe we shouldn't have come back here.”

“Well we couldn’t stay there. Not in that house. Not in that neighborhood.” Raven looked back down again her voice dropping down to a whisper. “Not with that woman.”

Raven could feel her father’s eyes on her. She closed her eyes, mentally cursing herself. She shouldn’t have brought her up. This conversation would have ended much sooner if she hadn’t.

“Raven-”

“God, can we please just skip this part. We don’t have to talk about it.”

Michael looked at Raven’s face, his eyes glancing up to the top of her head. “I think we do. I think it's been bothering you and us not talking about it is making it worse.”

“This and that are not connected. I’m a senior in high school and I’m stressed like every other senior in high school. We don’t have to dig up the past. We don’t have to talk about anything. We don’t have to pretend we’re more than what we are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Raven looked away and closed her eyes. “Nothing.”

Michael looked like he was about to say something but then his phone buzzed. He looked down at his screen and then back up at Raven.

“I have to get to work, “ Michael said.

Raven nodded still not looking at him. Work came first. Work always came first.

“Are you going to school today?”

Raven shook her head. “Taking a mental health day.”

“We’ll continue this conversation when I get home.”

Raven nodded again. Then Michael did something he had not done in years. Catching Raven completely off guard, his lips pressed against her forehead. She turned to look at him when he pulled back.

“I love you, Raven. Try to get some rest,“ Michael said before leaving.

He closed the door behind him. Raven stared at the door not knowing how to feel.

Tears stung her eyes. It was moments like these when it hurt the most. She could see the remnants of what they had been. This could have

all been so much different if that woman hadn't come along. If her father had just been the man he promised to be.

Anger swelled in Raven's chest. She held onto that hate, blaming him for all that had happened, but her anger brunt bright and faded quickly. The sound of his car pulling off told Raven she was alone again.

According to the clock next to her bed, Raven should already have left for school. Feeling no desired to be around anyone, she stayed in bed. The seconds ticked by without her making any movement. She tried her best not to think of her mother, but it was impossible. Tears slipped from her eyes, but she wiped them away with the back of her hand.

Raven wished she could talk to her mother, or at least hear her voice. She remembered the feel of her mother's slender fingers working through her hair as she lay on her lap. If her mother were here, they'd both be sipping hot coco.

"Words come easier when the tongue has been warmed and sweetened," her mother used to say as she added extra marshmallows to both of their mugs.

If anyone could understand what Raven was going through it was her mother.

Hours passed. Raven started to drift back to sleep. She heard someone calling her name. Jerking up right, she stared at the door. For a split second, Raven feared the girl had returned. Her heart beats picked up speed.

"Raven, you here?"

Raven recognized Tiffany's voice.

Tiffany came up the stairs. She stood in Raven's doorway dressed in her school uniform. Her eyes widened and for a moment she just stared at Raven. Tiffany blinked and her shocked expression turned to concern.

Raven mustered up a smile, knowing how she must look. "Hey."

Tiffany walked into the room. She sat down on the bed in the same spot Raven's father had occupied a few hours before.

"What's going on, Rae?" Tiffany asked.

Raven looked everywhere but at Tiffany's face. "How'd you get in?"

"Spare key under the red brick. Answer my question."

Raven looked down at her hands in her lap and shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“Shouldn’t you be in class right now?”

“Yeah, but so should you. Stop avoiding the question?”

Raven looked back up at Tiffany. “I’m fine, Tif.” She forced another smile. “Really.”

Tiffany reached over and grabbed one of Raven’s pillows. She hit Raven in the arm with it. Raven tried to jerk away from it but she was too slow.

“Don’t lie to me, Rae,” Tiffany said.

“I’m not-”

Raven received another feathery whack. “Ouch.”

“Come on, I can keep this up all day.”

“Tiffany this isn’t-”

Another whack. This time Raven reached out and with surprising speed she grabbed hold of the pillow. They both held on, pillow frozen between them and eyes locked. Raven sighed and let go.

Tiffany dropped the pillow and reached for Raven’s hand. “Talk to me, Rae.”

Raven looked at her friend’s hand. For a moment it was as if they were little girls again. So much had happened since then but at least this had never changed. Even if everyone else had gone, Tiffany remained, still breaking into her tower like a gallant hero.

Raven frowned. She was far from a storybook princess. “I’m scared, Tif. I think I’m losing control, and I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t want to end up like her.” Raven looked up at Tiffany, tears swelling in her eyes again.

Tiffany pulled her friend into a tight hug. Raven let her. She buried her head in Tiffany’s shoulder and let the tears fall freely.

Tiffany’s arms tightened around Raven. “Shhh, It’ll be okay. Just because you look like her doesn’t mean you are her. You’re not alone, Rae. Whatever problem you have, you don’t have to face it alone. Dion and I got your back no matter what.”

Raven pulled back and looked into her friend’s eyes. “You might regret those words someday.”

“Never.”

Raven saw the look in her eyes and she believed her. No matter how crazy the storm got, Tiffany wouldn't leave.

Raven squeezed her hand. “Anyone ever tell you, you have bad taste in friends?”

“It's a character flaw.”

Tiffany wiped Raven's tears away with her thumb. She gave a gentle smile before standing from the bed. She held out her hand and Raven took it. With one pull Raven was back on her feet.

“Come on, we got work to do,” Tiffany said.

“Work?”

“Oh silly girl didn't anybody ever tell you nothing ever got accomplished by sitting on your ass. You've got problems so we're going to find solutions.” Never one to shy away from a challenge, Tiffany's natural take-charge attitude started to kick in.

“For starters we should probably text Dion. He can hack into the school system so that no one knows were gone.” Tiffany pulled out her phone and started to text. When she was finished she turned back to her friend.

“Next we should probably do something about that hair,” Tiffany said playing with one of Raven's curls. “We can run up to the beauty supply and get some dye.”

Raven took a step back from her friend. “What's wrong with my hair?”

“Don't tell me you actually wanted hood rat red.”

“What?”

Fear slowly crept back in.

Tiffany shrugged. “I mean I guess you can pull it off with your complexion. It's just a really bold move for you.”

Raven only half listened to her friend. Her hand reached up to her hair and pulled one of her curls into view. Bright red, the color of fresh strawberries. The curl seemed to catch fire in the sunlight. Raven pulled down curl after curl, each one as red as the one before.

Her hand fell away from her head. Heart pounding in her chest, she ran out from the room. Tiffany called after her but she didn't stop until she reached the bathroom.

Raven slammed the door behind her. She yanked the lock into place and searched for the light switch. With the flick of her hand the florescent light filled the room.

The mirror hung on the adjacent wall. She took a step towards it. Part of her already knew what she would see but the other half content on denying it. She stepped into view of the mirror. A girl with bright red curls stared back at her. Her nightmare was far from over.

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26

Raven stared into the mirror, still not believing her eyes. The longer she looked, the less real it seemed. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping beyond all hope that when she opened them again, her hair would be back to its dark brown color. She slowly opened her eyes, a panic rising up her throat.

Red. Bright fiery red strands, from root to tip.

“This isn’t real,” Raven said.

Something brushed against the hairs of her arm. She looked down but saw nothing. The feeling of something touching her remained, an invisible hand pressed against her biceps.

Raven touched her arm. She felt the cold flesh and bones of another hand under hers. Yanking her hand back, she kept her eyes on that spot. Still, she saw nothing.

Raven held her breath as her eyes turned slowly to the mirror. She covered her mouth. The scream muffled between her hand and lips. Her body shook in terror.

The two girls in the mirror stared back at Raven. One with red curly hair and the other with straight black locks. The girl with black hair held the other with her pale white hand. She smiled. “Hello, Raven.”

Holyshitholyshithol-

“Shhh, it’s okay. Don’t be afraid. There’s nothing wrong with you, Raven. It’s the world that’s wrong.” The girl stepped forward, holding Raven’s gaze in the mirror. “Together we’ll make it right.”

The younger girl's hand slid down Raven’s arm, leaving goose bumps in its wake. She rested her hand on Raven’s. “From now on, we will always be as one,” the girl said.

Raven squeezed her eye shut. Mentally willing the younger girl away. Hot tears spilled down her face. She told herself again and again that

what she was seeing wasn't real. If this was all another nightmare, she was ready to wake up.

When Raven opened her eyes again the girl was gone. Body relaxing, her hands fell away from her mouth and rested on the sink. She leaned against it, unable to support her own weight. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Raven lifted her head. She stared once again at the ugly red curls. First the voices and now this. She was crazy. She'd actually gone completely insane.

We will always be as one, the girl's voice echoed in her mind. Raven's eyes narrowed and her trembling hands balled into tight fist. She pushed herself away from the sink. Fear gave way to anger.

Raven looked down into the basket next to her. It was full of random hair supplies, flatirons, coconut oil, hair clips, and a pair of silver scissors. She reached for the scissors. The metal shined under the fluorescent lights.

Her hand pulled at a chunk of hair. "No. I am not her."

She began to cut, the scissors ripped through her hair. Her hand grabbed for more hair, silver blades shearing through the thick red strands.

"I am not my mother," Raven said.

Her hands pulled at her hair until her scalp turned red and sore. The scissor scratched against her hand as she pulled. Cuts dripped blood into her hair from her fingers but Raven didn't notice. She pulled at another chunk.

"I'm not crazy," Raven growled in frustration.

She didn't stop until the sink was full of curly red locks. Her breath turned into ragged pants. She stared at her reflection. The sight of her uneven chopped hair brought the image of another to mind. She'd never looked more like her mother than she did right then.

Something inside her broke. Raven laughed at her reflection. A cruel bitter laugh, hysteria setting in. She'd always known it would end like this. As much as she tried to deny and fight it, she'd always known. Her laughter became painful, abdomen crunching and mouth aching. She wanted to scream.

"Raven, open up." Tiffany banged against the door.

Raven bit her lip to silence the laughter. The doorknob jiggle. She thought about how worried Tiffany must have been on the other side of the door. She wished Tiffany hadn't come. No one should have to bear witness

to something like this. Raven knew first hand how devastating it could be to watch someone she cared about lose their sanity.

“I’m serious Raven, you better open this door or else I’m going to break the damn thing down,” Tiffany yelled.

Not paying Tiffany’s threats any attention Raven turned back toward the mirror. She stared at her reflection, again unable to believe what she saw. The blood red curls had grown back. Not a single lock out of place. When she looked down at the blue sink it was empty.

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27

The Heart Queensland

The woman looked around the crowd realizing what she had done. Her eyes widened by panic. Everyone knew what would come next.

The woman turned wild again. She scratched and kicked, her movement becoming desperate. Her nails scraped at Lu's arms leaving trails of red. Lu barely noticed its sting.

Kovin and Marcella stepped forward from the crowd. They pulled the woman away from Lu. Their iron grips on her arms restrained her. The woman struggled against them, but she was no match. In that moment, the woman looked more like a scared child.

A hand gripped Lu's shoulder. She turned to see Domicin standing behind her. In the dark, his eyes shined like gold. "She spoke against the crown and goddess herself. We all heard." The finality in Domicin's voice filled Lu with dread. "There is no forgiveness for such an act."

Lu closed her eyes. She didn't want this to happen. More than anything, she wished there was a way to stop it, but the fates had already decided. No matter what Lu did or didn't do, the woman would die tonight. Meshi warned her that this time would come, but still she was not ready. She felt the bile rising up the back of her throat.

Wrath and mercy. She had to be both.

Lu swallowed and opened her eyes. She turned to face the woman again. Marcella held her sword against the woman's throat, her blade nearly half the width of the neck it pressed into. Everyone looked to Lu. Once again they waited for her command.

"You spoke against the goddess," Lu said. Her voice shook but she forced herself to continue. "To do so is unforgivable. It is a crime punishable by death."

The woman's eyes locked on to Lu. She didn't need her third eye to know how much the woman hated her. She blamed Lu for everything that was happening.

I didn't want this.

Lu took a deep breath. "Do you have any last words?" Her voice was clearer and colder now. She could do this. She had to do this.

Tears fell down the woman's cheeks but the rage never left her eyes. "They was right about you. You are a death curse on our land. Not even the goddess gone save us from you. Damn you all."

Lu looked away from the woman. She didn't think it was possible for words to cut any deeper. "For speaking against the goddess you will be granted no mercy. Your body will be marked," Lu said.

Markolas stepped forward. He stood in front of the woman. Naxson handed him a knife. The blade was thin and the handle covered in inscriptions. Kovin yanked the woman's head back by her hair. Markolas placed the knife against the woman's forehead. He began to chant. The knife glowed bright. The skin burnt under the glowing heat of the knife. The woman screamed and wiggled but that only made it worse.

Lu trembled but she would not look away. She hated that sound, absolutely hated it.

When it was done, the priest stepped back so that everyone could see. Three burnt lines marked the woman's forehead. The one in the center was the longest, cutting just past her eyebrows. The crowd reacted to the sight of the mark.

"Filth," one of the villagers yelled.

"Trash," yelled another.

They continued to yell obscenities at the woman. Lu could feel their fear and hate. The emotions were overpowering her senses. When the sound of their voices became too much to bear, Lu held her hand up. The crowd quieted.

"Your soul has been tainted and will remain so in death." Lu's voice echoed through the now quiet village. "The goddess will not embrace you. Your soul will be forced to walk the dark earth. You will never know peace."

The woman yelled, calling Lu a demon. She ignored her. Lu imagined herself isolated behind thick walls. It was a calming method

Meshi had taught her. A cold chill ran through her body as she began to separate her emotions from the situation. She added barrier after barrier around herself. She buried herself into the deepest part of her mind and the coldest part of her soul.

Because sometimes great things require terrible actions.

Lu looked at Marcella and nodded. Without hesitation, the sword sliced across the woman's throat. Blood spurted, pouring down her neck and staining her dress red. The dark red color drained from the woman's eyes.

The woman's body fell to the ground once Kovin let her go. She landed with a thump. Her face turned to the side. Blood still pumped from her wound, soaking the ground red. Lu saw the woman's lifeless eyes staring at her and turned away.

Markolas walked up beside Lu. "We do what we must to protect our people. Allowing someone who speaks ill of the goddess to remain living would have surely brought a curse upon us all."

"We'll be leaving now," Lu said. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to talk about anything.

"I hope you don't let this little ordeal ruin your view of Zendel. I can assure you everyone else here is of the faith. She was a troubled woman. Known to offer her body for less than holy endeavors. These people are better off without her around, I can assure you, my queen." The priest looked at the dead woman with disdain.

Lu turned on him.

"It was a lovely feast." Marcella stepped up between them. Her sword sheathed against her waist, clean of the woman's blood. "Our majesty appreciates any opportunity to dine among her people, but we simply must get back now."

Markolas smiled at Marcella. They exchanged their goodbyes and once he was gone from sight Marcella turned to Lu. She eyed her but Lu's eyes were on the woman. Her body grew colder with each passing second.

Marcella spoke with a soft voice. "It's time to return home, your majesty."

Tradition demanded the tainted body be left out for at least two days. This allowed everyone to see their shame. The body also worked as a warning to those who thought to speak against the goddess. She'd seen it once before, inside of the inner city, but she hadn't known the person then.

She hadn't been the person who ordered the execution. This wasn't mercy; this was what they would call justice.

"My queen?" Marcella asked.

Lu turned and began walking towards the horses. The other's hesitated but followed behind her. They remained silent as they saddled their horses. No one dared to say anything. She left Zendel with two bodies in her wake. One mercy. Another wrath. Both left her colder.

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28

The Heart Queensland

Lu was the first to make it back to the castle. She'd taken one of the back bridges to avoid unwanted eyes. They cut half a day off their trip back home. She dismounted. Her legs were sore from the long ride, but she did not slow. Domicin arrived after her. He pulled back on the reins forcing the beast to slow.

"My queen," Domicin called.

"I have to change in order to meet with the council. Please take care of everything here," Lu said without turning around. She made her way through the castle. Her shoes clicked against the tile and she tried to focus on making it to her chamber. The mental walls around her were cracking. She'd kept them up for as long as she could. Soon Lu would be buried in the rubble.

Lu's footsteps quickened with the desperate need to put a door between her and the rest of the world. Images of the four dead bodies danced in her head. Her mother and father's image switched between the woman and man she'd killed. She could see them even with her eyes closed. Her eyeless parents, the eyes of her victims, they all stared at her with accusation.

The one constant thing among the images was the sound of laughter. Although she'd never heard the laugh before, she knew instantly it belonged to *Him*. She fought against the urge to cover her ears.

From the moment the crown was placed on her head she'd been surrounded by death. Her hands dripped with blood.

You are a death curse on our land, the dead woman's voice echoed in her ear. The woman's words were followed by more laughter.

The wide hall felt crowded. There were too many eyes on her now. She was unraveling right in front of them. Crumbling walls with blood seeping in between the cracks. She could feel him watching her just beyond the shadows.

A hand touched Lu's shoulder. She spun, grabbing hold of a wrist and slamming his body against the wall. Her forearm was pressed against his throat before she realized who it was. Ramor stared back at her. Red eyes panicked and hands wrapped around her arm.

Lu recoiled. Ramor sucked in a gasp of air and doubled over. She could see the red mark on his neck that was sure to bruise.

"I'm sorry. I didn't-I'm sorry. I-" Lu continued to move back. She averted her eyes unable to look at what she'd done. Something was building inside of her. A stinging in her eyes and a tightening inside her chest.

Ramor straightened and moved closer to Lu. "My queen?"

Don't call me that. Please don't call me that.

Lu closed her eyes. Her hand wrapped around her pendant but she found no comfort there. A hand touched hers. Lu opened her eyes. Ramor looked down at her. Any other time Lu would have been able to hide her emotions but not now. She couldn't keep pretending to be queen when everything was falling to pieces. If she was being honest she'd lost control the moment she set foot into her parent's chamber. Foolishly, she'd thought she'd be able to handle it all, but all she'd done was prove them right.

You're not good enough.

Tears swelled in her eyes. Suddenly letting go didn't seem like a bad idea at all. All she had to do was stop fighting it. She would just let those dark emotions swallow her whole.

Something changed in Ramor's expression. Without saying a word he grabbed Lu's wrist and pulled her down the hall. She stumbled when they turned the sharp corner. They came to a stop in front of a wooden door. Ramor pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. He pulled Lu into the room and slammed the door behind her.

Ramor held onto Lu's arms again, his eyes searching hers. "Whatever happened in that village you need to get yourself under control."

Lu looked back at him. For a moment the stern look in his eyes reminded her of her father. She imagined the look of bitter disapproval he would have now if he could see her. Tears slipped down her face. She began

to draw farther into herself. Four bodies, four dead bodies. Her fault. It was all her fault.

“My queen.” Ramor shook her.

The laughter in Lu’s head grew louder. “Make it stop,” she whispered. Her hands coming up to cover her ears.

“You have to be the one to make it stop, my queen. Right now your emotions are heightened. You need to pull back. This is what happens when you suppress your emotions for too long. I watched it happen to your mother,” Ramor said still holding her.

“I can’t”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t. I can’t do any of this. I can’t be the person you need me to be. I can’t keep pretending I’m more than what I am.”

“You *are* the queen.”

“No! My mother was the queen. I am just her mistake.”

Lu saw her mother’s face. Beautiful and distant with eyes that looked right through Lu. The real queen had known.

Robert’s hands tightened around Lu’s shoulders. “You are queen now and that is no mistake.”

“I killed two people today. One was a kind man who fell victim to madness because of our mistake. I chopped off his head and felt the life pour out of him.” Lu thought of how he’d seen her as a monster the moment before his death. More tears fell from her eyes. “The other was his grieving love. She blamed me. She *hated* me.”

“Their deaths were necessary in order-“

“In order to what? In order to protect the Queensland?” Lu questioned.

“Yes, because of what you did the people of Zendel are safe.”

“And I am a killer.”

“And you are a killer,” Ramor agreed. Lu stared back up at him, speechless. She’d expected him to sugar coat the truth. Spin the horrific act she’d done into something sweeter.

Ramor’s hands relaxed. “But, you’ve always known what it would mean to be queen.”

The man that stood in front of her now seemed very different from the one she’d known before. His eyes saw right through her. She knew there

would be no way to hide from the truth now.

“I didn’t know it would feel like this.” Lu’s voice was softer now.

Ramor’s eyes softened. “What we are- who we have to be- is never easy. We make the decisions and sacrifices no one else has to make. You were a child trained to be a killer because that was what the Heart needed. We do it because it is our duty. Because no one else can.”

“What if I can’t do it? What if I’m not strong enough to keep them safe?” Lu asked. Her thoughts traveled back to the madhouse and the bloody message that was left for her. Her panic began to rise again.

“You are strong enough,” Ramor said.

“How do you know that?”

“Because you have to be.” His tone left little room for argument. “Now do as I say and find your inner light. You have to fight, my queen. We need you. Your people need you.”

Lu did as Ramor told her. She closed her eyes, tears still dripping down her face, and concentrated. Weaving her way through the darkness, she tried to find her light. It was harder than it had been with the madman because this darkness belonged to her. It clung to her tighter because it was apart of her. Every insecurity and doubt she’d ever had was unleashed inside of the darkness.

They’ll never accept you, a voice as cold as the pale dark whispered. *You weren’t born to be their queen.*

“You are stronger than this,” Ramor said.

Lu continued to push. Finally, Lu hit a wall and just like before, the light shattered through the darkness.

The laughter and the voices stopped. She breathed in and her chest expanded. She felt lighter, the darkness fading back into its corner. Lu opened her eyes and for the first time, her mind cleared. The guilt she felt was still there but at least now it wasn’t overpowering.

“Better?” Ramor asked.

Lu nodded. She leaned against the wall. “It’s been awhile since I’ve been so... emotional. Not a pleasant feeling.”

“Queen’s often tend to develop a sense of composure. Under normal circumstances, your inner light fades away the more negative emotions but not this time. I worried about you after the death of your parents. That added on to whatever happened at Zendel, was too much for you. The

barrier around your emotions that your teacher trained you to use snapped. The flood of emotions is what no doubt caused you to act uncharacteristically.”

“How do you know all of this?” Lu asked.

“As I said, I experienced the same thing with your mother.”

“They said she threw up.”

Ramor smiled. “I can imagine. Your mother was a woman of many mysteries. There were sides of her very few of us ever got to see.”

“I wouldn’t know. The only face she ever showed me was the face of the queen.”

“She had her reasons, I’m sure.”

“Don’t we all.”

The tears on Lu’s cheeks were beginning to dry. She wondered what life would have been like if her mother had actually taken an interest in her. Perhaps the old queen could have prepared her for what it would have been like to rule. There were still so many questions Lu had but she would get no answers from the dead.

“You know, my queen, there’s a touch of madness in all of us. The infection merely feeds off of it. We must be mindful of it at all times less it gets the best of us,” Ramor said.

Lu’s light still glowed inside of her, but she could feel the other part. Her hand found it’s way to her pendant. She knew why that other part of her existed. The sin inside her soul.

Ramor shifted against the wall, reaching into his pocket for the watch. “We have to hold another council meeting, my queen. They will be expecting to hear what happened in Zendel. It is best that they hear it from you.”

Lu nodded. “I know. I just-“ Lu sighed. She could already imagine Lecive spinning the story to fit his needs. By the time they made it there he’d probably have the whole council convinced that she was a failure of a leader. She should go, but she wasn’t quite ready to deal with the outside world just yet. “Can we just hold it off for a little bit longer?”

Ramor hesitated before answering. “Of course, my queen, whatever you like.”

Lu appreciated his patience. She knew she’d have to meet with them eventually but for now, she just wanted to be left alone. Out of the corner of

her eye, she saw Ramor walking over. He leaned against the wall next to her. Neither said a word.

Lu thought back to what one of the soldiers had told her when she asked where the Ace had been on the night of the attack. They'd confirmed that he'd been visiting a village. The village had claimed to not have received their monthly delivery of white roses. The queen had ordered him to discover the legitimacy of their claims. As the queen's adviser Ramor was trusted with the responsibility for overseeing the distribution of the white rose.

Looking back Lu saw it was ridiculous to think that he could have killed her parents. Ramor wasn't strong enough and his influence within the queensland destabilized the moment the old queen died.

She looked over at Ramor. He still looked unkempt and frail, but at least he'd proven to be more competent than she'd first assumed.

But is he to be trusted?

No, not completely. There was still something inside of her that bid Lu not to, but she wasn't sure if that was because of him or her. She was too vulnerable around him. He knew more about the queensland than she did and she'd just shown him a part of herself no one got to see. If he wanted to he could hurt her dearly. That alone was enough to terrify Lu.

They stayed silently leaning against the wall until someone knocked on the door. Ramor stood first. He opened the door but not wide enough for Lu to see who was on the other side. The person spoke in a voice that was too low for Lu to hear. At the end of the message, Ramor nodded and closed the door. He turned back to Lu.

"The Prince and The Red Queen are here," Ramor said.

Lu pushed herself off the wall. "Now? They're not supposed to be here yet. How? Where are they?" The panic began to rise again inside of Lu. Today wasn't a day to be dealing with The Red Queen.

"They're waiting for you inside the council room."

29

Tiffany crouched down so that she was eye level with the doorknob. She pulled off her earring. The gold hoops had cost her five dollars at the beauty supply. Bending the metal back she slid the pointy end into the lock. She wiggled it around and waited for the tumbler to slide into place. The last tumbler found its spot. With a click, the door opened.

Tiffany pushed the door and stepped into the small bathroom. She searched for her friend. Raven sat in the corner on the bathroom floor. Her head rested on her knees leaving only her bright red hair visible.

“What the hell, Rae. Didn’t you hear me banging on the door?” Tiffany asked.

“It grew back,” Raven said without looking up.

“What are you talking about?”

“It keeps growing back. I cut and cut but it still grows back.”

Tiffany noticed the pair of scissors that laid next to Raven. She bent down and picked them up. She examined them before looking back at her friend. Her fingers were bleeding. The cuts didn’t seem too deep but the sight of them was alarming.

“God, Rae, what happened? Where are the Band-Aids?” Tiffany opened the medicine cabinet. She searched the shelf for the first aid kit, her eyes pausing for a second when she saw the prescription bottle. She looked away and grabbed the kit.

Sitting down on the floor, Tiffany grabbed one of Raven’s hands and began to wipe the blood away. “Please tell me this is not because of your hair. I already told you it’s not that bad.”

Raven glared at her. “You don’t understand.”

“Girl, you’re not the first person to mess up their hair. Remember freshman year when I-“

“I didn’t do this. I didn’t dye my hair.”

“Then who did?”

“I don’t know.” Raven’s voice broke as she looked away from Tiffany. “I mean, maybe I did, but I don’t remember doing it.”

Tiffany frowned. Something in Raven’s tone scared her. She still held onto Raven’s bandaged hand. “What do you mean?”

Raven bit down on her lip unsure of what she should say. She tried to think of something that would make Tiffany understand.

“Raven?”

Raven closed her eyes. She knew Tiffany would not stop asking until she told her the truth.

“I keep seeing things,” Raven said finally, “things that aren’t really there. Seeing things and hearing voices.” Raven shook her head and pulled away. “It started out with a nightmare about a girl with black hair, but then it kept getting worse. Now my hair suddenly turns red and I can’t remember how.”

“I’m sure there’s an explanation for that”

“Yeah, isn’t it obvious?” Raven said with a sad smile. “I’ve finally gone completely insane.”

“Don’t joke.”

“What joke? I’m serious, Tif. It’s the same thing that happened to my mother. One day she was fine and the next she just wasn’t.”

Raven didn’t blame Tiffany for not understanding. She’d been the same way when the doctors diagnosed her mother. You try to tell yourself anything to avoid the truth. Raven wasn’t going to be like her mother. Denial got people hurt.

“Raven I-“ Tiffany’s hand touched Raven again and her voice cut off. Every hair on Raven’s body stood at attention. The air around them grew warm. Her forehead burned and something inside of Raven ripped open. Darkness exploded around her. It grabbed hold of her and pulled her in.

The darkness blocked out all light with Raven suspended in its depths. She drowned in it, not just the absence of light, but a cold dark she could feel moving all around her.

Light poured in. At first, a gentle glow, but it grew in intensity until the light became blinding. Her eyes took time to adjust. When they finally

did, she saw that she was looking at herself. Her hair was back to its normal dark brown color and a gentle smile was painted across her face.

This version of Raven looked somehow prettier. The scar was less apparent and her brown skin glowed. Her eyes twinkled in a way they'd never twinkled before. Everything about her seemed softer and more welcoming. It made her happy but also a bit envious.

Turning her head Raven noticed Dion was standing next to the other her. He too looked different. His muscles seemed more defined. The dimpled smile he wore made her stomach flutter. His caramel skin looked smooth and enticing. She felt heat rising to her face.

He still looked like Dion, just in a way that she'd never allowed herself to see him before. The fluttering feeling in her chest was frightening and wrong. She turned away from him.

In the mirror, she caught her reflection, except it wasn't her face she saw. The girl in the mirror was Tiffany. Raven looked down at her hands and saw the sparkling acrylic nails that her friend loved, but she hated. She opened and closed the hands that were not hers. She touched her stomach and felt toned muscle.

Raven looked back up at her friends. Whatever had happened, she was no longer inside of her own body.

30

“We’re leaving Tiffany,” the other Raven said. Raven looked at the two of them, still not fully understanding what was going on.

Dion and her other self stood side by side. For the first time, she noticed that they were both wearing University T-shirts and backpacks.

Looking at them her heart ached. They were going to leave and she’d be stuck here forever. A desperate need to be close to them made Raven rush forward. She made it a few steps before hitting an invisible wall. Raven stepped back. She reached out and felt the wall press against her hand. She felt around, trying to find a way past it.

“We’ll try not to forget you,” the other Raven said.

Raven pounded her fist against the wall. “Wait for me.” When she spoke it was Tiffany’s voice she heard. “Don’t leave.”

Dion took the other Raven’s hand in his. Their fingers intertwined. They smiled as they waved at her.

“Raven. Dion.” Raven yelled as they slowly began to turn away. “No! Please, don’t go.” They kept their backs to Raven. “Please, Raven, please. I need you. I need you both.” Tears trailed down her face.

They started to walk away. She was losing them. Raven slammed her fist against the wall. When that didn’t work she began kicking and clawing. She’d do anything to break the wall that separated them.

“But they don’t need you,” a voice whispered from the shadows, “No one needs you.”

“Shut up,” Raven yelled.

“Look at them. Look at how happy they are without you.”

Raven screamed for them trying to drown out the sound of the voice. They were supposed to be together. They’d promised each other.

“Did you honestly think he’d pick you? You’re nothing but a dirty whore, Tiffany,” the voice hissed.

Raven covered her ears. “Shut up.”

“And what about your other friend? How long did you think she’d stand in your shadow? You and I both know you only drag her down. She already left you once. If she was smart she would have stayed gone.”

Raven could still hear the voice even with her ears covered.

An image of a younger Raven waving as she stepped into her father’s car, popped into Raven’s head. She tried to chase after her. Her foot slipped against the asphalt. Blood dripped from her knees. The younger Raven got into the car and never looked back.

“No. It’s not like that. She didn’t want to leave. She’s my best friend. I’d never hurt her,” Raven said.

“Liar. She’s better than you without even trying and you hated it. Your entire life you’ve hungered for attention and all the little princess has to do is get attacked by her psycho mother and all eyes are on her.”

“You’re wrong.”

“What have you done to get people to look at you? How far have you sank?”

Another image came of Tiffany lying down on a bed. The boy hovering over her had a face Raven didn’t recognize. His hands reached up Tiffany’s shirt and Raven felt his touch crawling up her skin. It was the week after Nana left. Tiffany squeezed her body tight against his, pretending not to feel the pain.

“No, it wasn’t like that. I liked him and he liked me. I’m not ashamed,” Raven said.

The voice laughed.

Some part of Raven realized that the emotions she was feeling didn’t belong to her, but it was becoming harder to think clearly. She turned back to the invisible wall. Dion and the other Raven were beginning to fade into the darkness.

“But you have done shameful things.”

Raven blinked and they were gone. She felt hollow inside. All she could do was stare at the empty space they’d once occupied.

“Haven’t you, Tiffany?” The voice asked.

“Tiffany.”

Raven looked over her shoulder. The voice that called her sounded different from the one before. It was strained. Raven watched the dark background transform into a living room. With one look at the flower wallpaper and brown sofa, Raven realized it was Tiffany's house. She hadn't been over in a while but it looked exactly as Raven remembered.

"Tiffany," the voice cried.

Raven's feet moved on their own as they carried her closer towards the sound. It came from outside the living room. Raven stepped into the dark lit hallway. The floorboards creaked under her feet. A glowing white door stood at the end of the hall. Raven knew she should turn back but couldn't. The hallway narrowed the closer she got to the door.

"Tiffanyyy." The cry sounded like a wounded animal.

Raven rushed forward without thinking. Her caution was swept away in a tidal wave of fear. If something happened to the person on the other side of the door, Raven knew it would be her fault.

"Hold on, Daddy. I'm coming," Raven yelled. Again it was Tiffany's voice that came out of Raven's mouth. Raven reach for the doorknob but when she tried to turn it, the knob wouldn't move. She strained trying to get the knob to turn. Her hand slipped. The white pressure print from the knob on her palm faded to red.

"Tiffany, I need you," Tiffany's father cried from the other side of the door. Raven tried to open the door again. The knob rattled but still would not open. She banged her shoulder against the wood, hoping to muscle the door open.

"Looks like you'll have to say goodbye again," the voice from before teased.

"Ugh, Tiffany I need my medicine." There was a loud cough followed by the unmistakable sound of someone throwing up. Raven could smell it now. It was so strong she wondered how she hadn't noticed it before. Her stomach turned. The air was bitter with it.

"Poor daddy's sick again," the voice said.

"Daddy!" Raven pounded on the door. She could hear him coughing again. Tiffany's father was right there but she couldn't reach him. Raven felt powerless.

"Wonder how much it'll cost this time to make him better. You probably won't be able to go to college because of this. All that time

studying, such a waste. You'll have to get a job in order to help pay the bills. We both know your mother can't do it alone," the voice said.

Raven thought of the image she seen earlier. Dion and the other Raven had left her behind. The pain she felt then was renewed. They were going to move on without her. Raven would remain stuck inside of this house forever.

"Admit it. Part of you hates him because of it," the voice hissed.

"No, it's not his fault he's sick. It's not like he planned any of this."

"Your right, Tiffany. It's not his fault. It's yours. He worked that horrid job at the factory for you and your mother. All those nice things you own were bought from his sweat and blood. Every day he ingested thousands of chemicals just to keep you happy."

"I didn't know it was making him sick. I never would have let him work there if I did."

"It's not that you didn't know. It's that you didn't *want* to know. If you had paid attention you would have seen how sick he was. You remember how tired he got after work. How he sat in his chair for hours without moving. The signs were there, but you pretended not to see."

Raven felt the urge to deny what the voice said but when she opened her mouth nothing came out.

Hands wrapped around her arms. "Don't bother denying it," the voice whispered, close enough to tickle her ear. "I know the truth. I know who you really are."

"You don't know me. You don't know anything about me." Raven hissed balling her hands into fist. She turned around ready to strike but stopped once she saw where the voice was coming from.

Tiffany stood behind Raven.

"Of course I know who you are. You are me and I am you." Tiffany smiled, showing off her razor sharp teeth. "Or, I suppose it would be more accurate to say, I'm the darker side of you. I know the truths you won't even admit to yourself. I am your darkest thoughts and I know you better than anyone else."

Tiffany stepped closer. Raven knocked into the door trying to avoid her. Tiffany raised her hand. Her nails were long white claws. They scraped against Raven's skin as Tiffany touched her cheek. Her eyes were completely white. Looking at them, Raven felt like she was falling.

The pale dark.

“Do you want to know the truth? No matter how hard you try to hold on to them they’ll always leave you,” Tiffany said with a frown. Her other hand came up to stroke Raven’s hair. She brought both hands to Raven’s face. She held her, making it so Raven couldn’t look away.

Tiffany continued speaking her voice a soft whisper. “No one wants to love an empty shell. You’re nothing, a nobody, and everyone knows it.”

Tiffany held her for a moment longer. Then she pushed Raven’s face away, laughing. Her laughter filled the quiet hallway and the whole house seemed to shake with it.

Waves of despair washed over Raven. She covered her ears and shut her eyes. She tried to block out everything. Tiffany’s pain was too much and she couldn’t bare it any longer. She was being crushed under the weight of her friend’s emotions. Raven felt something inside her snap close. She was pulled away from everything. The air around her constricted then grew lighter.

When Raven opened her eyes again she was no longer in Tiffany’s house. A quick glance around told her that she was back inside the bathroom. Her back pressed against the bathtub and she was staring at the base of the toilet. Raven pushed herself off of the ground. She rushed over to the mirror.

A sigh of relief escaped her lips when she saw her own reflection staring back at her. Her hair was still bright red but at least everything else was back to normal. She closed her eyes. She never thought she could miss the solace of her own mind.

Something shifted on the floor next to Raven. She looked down and saw Tiffany sitting there. She sat in the same position Raven had been in earlier. Although Tiffany’s face was covered Raven could still hear the whimpering noises coming from her.

Raven took a step forward and then paused. She wasn’t sure what had happened but knew she didn’t want to experience it again. It had felt as if she’d been erased and replaced by Tiffany. Raven felt every one of Tiffany’s emotions as if they were her own.

“Tiffany,” Raven called.

Tiffany mumbled something too low for Raven to hear.

“Tiffany, what’s wrong?”

More mumbling.

“I can’t hear you,” Raven said but Tiffany’s voice did not get any louder. She closed her eyes. If she got closer, she ran the risk of getting sucked in again, but staying away meant abandoning her friend. Whatever had happened to Raven was having an adverse effect on Tiffany.

Raven opened her eyes and with one look at her friend she knew what she had to do. She squatted down next to Tiffany. After a moment of hesitation, Raven placed her hand on Tiffany’s arm. Tiffany froze under her touch. Raven held her breath.

When nothing happened Raven relaxed enough to exhale.

“Tiffany?” Raven called again, shaking her friend’s arm.

“...thing...no...body” Tiffany mumbled. Raven leaned in closer, trying to hear what her friend was saying. Her face was now only inches away from Tiffany’s.

“Nothing...nobody...” Tiffany repeated over and over.

Raven’s heart stopped. She remembered when the other Tiffany had said those same words to her in her mockingly sweet voice. The weight of each word sank deeper into her heart.

Panicked, Raven pulled at Tiffany’s arms. She needed to see Tiffany’s face. She needed to know that this was the real Tiffany she was talking to. Tiffany’s head shot up. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her eyes were unfocused, but they were her eyes, not the phantom white of the monster. Tiffany continued to mumble those two words.

“Looks like she’s cracked her cookie,” a voice said from behind Raven.

Raven turned to see the skirts of a red dress. She raised her head to see the black haired girl. She looked older now, more mature. The pale girl leaned over Raven, studying Tiffany. She looked back to Raven and smiled. “Now someone’s going to have to piece her all back together again.”

31

The Heart Queensland

Lu stepped out into the hall. She rubbed at her tear stained cheeks. Had it been anyone else she would have stopped by her chamber to adjust her appearance. Lu walked as fast as she could without bringing notice. Ramor followed, close on her heels. Another queen in her land was a delicate situation. She could not leave matters in the hands of fate.

Lu was almost to the council room when she stopped.

The man down the hall stood with his back facing Lu. She could not see his face but she would have known his short dark red hair anywhere. A deep red, that in dim lighting, could be mistaken for black.

“Leo?”

Lu felt relieved to see him. Out of all her family members, she’d been closest to Leo. They were only four years apart and had spent most of their childhood together. It took great restraint to walk and not run over to her brother.

“Leo,” Lu called again once she was closer.

Leo turned around. He smiled. Most of the right side of his face was burnt, preventing it from becoming a full smile. Lu smiled back at him. He’d had the scar for so long Lu often forgot what he looked like without it. Her heart warmed when she looked at him.

Leo bowed. “It’s good to see you, my queen.”

“Not as good as it is to see you, Prince Leeano.” Lu wanted to hug him and tell him how much she missed him but she reminded herself where she was. Having him back here with her changed everything. He was the first good thing to happen to her since her parents’ death.

“Prince Leeano, I was not aware you’d made it back,” Ramor said coming up behind Lu.

Leo looked away from her, eyes falling on Ramor. “Yes, well the queensland seems to be preoccupied with our other visitors.” He watched the servant scurry across the hallways.

Lu wasn’t surprised Leo already knew about The Red Queen and Prince’s arrival. He seemed to always know what was going on in the queensland. Leo was always watching, always listening.

“Their arrival is an interesting surprise, but I fear we may already be running late.” Ramor pulled out his pocket watch.

Leo nodded. “Then I’ll come with you.”

“You’re coming to the council meeting?” Lu asked.

Leo avoided nobility. He preferred the company of his books and experiments over people. He didn’t mind observing so long as the subjects were kept at a distance. The only people he ever freely interacted with inside the castle were Lu and Eleaa. Lu would have liked him as her Ace but he’d made it clear the only role he wanted was to be her brother.

Have you changed? Lu wondered.

Leo’s expression grew troubled. “Yes, there’s something I discovered during my trip I think everyone needs to hear, but perhaps it’s better if I tell you first.”

“What is it?”

“A toxin.”

“My queen, we really have no time to waste,” Ramor said, looking down at his watch again.

Lu looked back at Ramor and then again at her brother. “Alright, the rest we will discuss later. Come now.”

The three made their way to the council room. There were too many problems for Lu to focus on just one. She wanted to ask more about the toxin but she needed to be prepared to meet with the queen. Ramor opened the door and walked in. Leo followed behind, leaving Lu as the last to enter the room.

All conversations ended the moment Lu entered. The members of the council stood, their chairs screeching against the wood floor, and bowed. Everyone was in attendance. Lu walked over to the front of the table. Her eyes landed on The Red Queen and Prince.

They stood at the other end of the table. The Red Queen was old enough to be Lu’s grandmother. Her reddish brown skin wrinkled around

her eyes and neck. Her nose took up most of her face, long and pointed, a gold ring pierced between the nostrils. She draped herself in jewels and expensive fabrics. Even the scarf that wrapped her brown hair was full of sparkling rubies. The only things that did not sparkle on The Red Queen were her murky gray eyes.

The prince, Lu's betrothed, stood next to his mother. He was a year older than Lu. Hefty body and short stature. His skin was a shade lighter than his mother's but held the same red undertone and a splattering of acne. His only redeeming quality seemed to be his eyes. They were large with a rich brown coloring. His long curly eyelashes reminded Lu of butterfly wings.

Too beautiful for a face like his.

Not that any of it mattered. Looks were of no importance to Lu. They were all here to play the roles they'd been assigned.

"Please take your seats," Lu said. The standing council members followed her order.

Lu took her seat. Ramor and Domicin sat beside her. Leo moved to sit on the other side of Domicin, eyeing the young Jack.

Lu looked down the table.

Lecive sat to the left of The Red Queen and the prince on the right.

Lu eyed her oldest brother. He stared openly back at her, opening his hands and a smirk on his lips. She grimaced and turned her gaze back to the other queen.

"Red Queen, we are grateful that you were able to make this trip at such short notice but we were unaware that you'd be here so soon," Lu said with a smile.

"That much is clear, Queen of Heart." The Red Queen's voice was full of disdain.

Lu fought to keep the smile on her face. "Lady Narshala informed us that you would not be here for another fortnight." Her eyes turned cold as she glanced at Lady Narshala who sat next to Lecive.

Narshala sat with her hands in her lap looking straight ahead.

"I sent the royal horses out to bring her," Prince Lecive said.

Lu looked back at her brother. "And who gave you permission to touch the queen's horses?"

“No one, but I knew it needed to be done. After you left for Zendel, there was no one here to protect the castle or the inner city. The previous queen and kings unexpected departure has greatly weakened the queensland and you have yet to formally name an Ace. I was merely acting in the queensland’s best interest.”

“Did you not think to inform me of any of your plans, Prince Lecive?” Ramor asked with a glare.

Lecive glanced over at Ramor and then back to Lu. He smiled. “As I’ve said the queen has yet to name a *formal* Ace.”

“And what of your queen. Did you not think to send word to me?” Lu asked.

“I tried, my queen, but your stay in Zendel lasted longer than expected. When I saw that you’d returned, I tried yet again to speak with you. I found the ninth and the Jack in the stables, but you I could not find you. Several servants said they saw you storming off somewhere.”

Lu’s fingers flexed and tightened against the armrest of her chair. Her brother had manipulated the situation since the day she left. Lu opened her mouth preparing to speak but was interrupted by The Red Queen. “I’m beginning to think you do not want us here.”

Lu turned to look at the queen. “Of course we want you here. The Heart welcomes our sister queens.”

“Yet you scold your brother when all he has done is take action so that my son and I would arrive as soon as possible.”

“I did not mean for it to come across that way. You and your son are welcome here and I am thankful for my brother’s quick thinking.”

The last statement felt like claws in the back of Lu’s throat. She would find a way to make Lecive pay for those words.

“Right. Now that is settled, what is this mission I hear of that has kept you away for so long?” The Red Queen asked.

“Our majesty had her first mission as queen. A man in one of the lower villages,” Lord Kirik said.

The Red Queen frowned. “Ah, your first mission. How did you fair? I myself have always found it to be such a messy business.”

“Her majesty’s efficiency in handling the task, allowed for the man’s swift and painless death,” Domicin answered for Lu.

“I heard there was an uprising during the village feast,” Lady Narshala said.

“It wasn’t an uprising. It was one woman and I handled it.” Lu’s fist clenched under the table. She wished she could skip past this part.

The Red Queen arched a brow at Lu. “By handled it you mean...?”

“She was executed as our laws instruct for those who speak against the goddess.”

Lu pushed the images of the woman from her mind, knowing now was not the time. But it still lingered like flashes of light in one’s eye. Throat cut, resting in a pool of blood, the woman’s colorless eyes stare back at her.

“It is as I told you. Our young queen has proven to be quite capable of protecting her people,” Prince Lecive said to The Red Queen. Lu looked at her older brother. Her entire life she’d never once heard her brother give a compliment that didn’t have a hidden agenda. She didn’t trust him now.

“Your brother is right. Even at a young age, it would seem that the people of the Heart Queensland are bred for battle,” The Red Queen said.

“No, not bred, trained. We work hard at what we’ve got,” Lu said.

The Red Queen’s lips quirked into a smile but there was no amusement inside of her eyes. “Yes, you need to be strong this close to the wall but from what I hear that preparation can be quite expensive.”

“It can be,” Lu said carefully choosing each word. “But we have been lucky to have friends who understand the importance of our queensland’s success.”

The Red Queen’s smile widened clearly pleased with Lu’s answer. “Very lucky indeed.” Her gaze remained locked on Lu but Lu refused to look away.

Ramor cleared his throat gaining the attention of everyone in the room. “Are there any other subjects the council wishes to speak on?”

“There is an issue with the white roses we need to discuss.” Leo spoke for the first time. All eyes turned toward him. He pushed back his glasses and held his head high. Only Lu knew how uncomfortable this was for him. She couldn’t see his hands, but she bet they were twisting at the gold ring he always wore.

“What is the problem, Leeano, have the plants decided to shy away from you as well,” Prince Lecive teased. Lu glared at her eldest brother.

Leo ignored Lecive's comment. "During my travels I discovered a patch of white roses that had been coated in a red substance. This substance had a paint like texture when wet, but when dried the petals retained their original texture."

"What is it doing?" Ramor asked.

"I'll need to do more studies but the substance appears to be tainting the roses. The healing effects of the roses seem to be reversing."

The room went deathly silent. Everyone knew the importance of the white rose. If something was reversing the healing effects it spelled great danger for everyone.

"Do we know what affect these red roses have on people?" Lu was the first to ask. She feared finding out but knew it had to be asked. The image of the flower painted on the wall of the cabin came back to her mind.

You are a death curse.

"There was a village near the garden. In the morning a young boy from the village was seen holding red roses. Later that evening his entire family was found murdered inside their home. The little boy took his own life."

The council room was silent. Lu looked around the room. She could see the fear on their faces. Lu didn't blame them for being afraid. White roses were one of the few ways to reverse the effects of madness. If the white roses were in danger then so were they.

"Are you saying the boy lost his mind within only a day of coming in contact with the roses." The Red Queen asked.

Leo shook his head. "Within hours."

The council room went silent again.

"Impossible," said Lord Amber. He was the only one in the council room dressed in all white. The only color in his wardrobe came from the green satchel draped over him with the symbol of the white queensland.

"That's the fastest it's ever happened," Lu said. She believed her brother, despite wishing that it wasn't true.

"I've spoken with several people from the village. All the accounts are the same," Leo said.

You are a death curse on our land. The woman's words came back to her again. Lu closed her eyes. Maybe the woman was right. Things only seemed to be going from bad to worse since she'd taken the crown.

Lu opened her eyes and looked at Leo. “Have you learned anything about reversing the effects of this red paint?”

“No, none yet, but the good news is that it's not spreading. Unless the paint is placed directly on the rose there is no way for it to get infected.”

Lu thought for a moment. “Will need to increase security around the gardens. Jack, have two more of our men posted at each one of our gardens.”

Domicin nodded. Lu turned toward Lord Amber. “Write to your queensland. Ask them if they have any reports of white roses painted red. Then warn them of its effect.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” The Red Queen asked.

“Of course, if the white roses are being tainted than it affects us all.”

“Yes, that is true but The White Queen holds the biggest reserve of white roses. If your supplies suddenly become tainted than the white queensland will have even more power.”

“Are you suggesting the White had something to do with this?” Lord Amber asked.

“All I’m saying is that the white queensland would have a lot to gain from the loss of our rose gardens.”

The council members seemed to consider her words. A few even nodded in agreement.

“We have a treaty with the White Queen.” Ramor said, knowing full well where this was heading.

“And the treaty only has meaning as long as everybody is willing to play nice.” Lady Narshala glared back at Lord Amber.

“So far the White Queen has kept to her promise and until we have evidence that proves other wise we will treat her as our ally. We will not start wars where wars are not needed, am I clear.” Lu glanced at each of the council members. Her eyes stopped on the queen.

The Red Queen glared at her but Lu refused to back down. She would not have another war breaking out in her council room. The treaty had only been in place for thirty years and tensions were still high between the three. The Red Queensland had been in wars with both the Heart and White.

“But perhaps we could send some of our men over to help protect your gardens,” Lecive offered The Red Queen.

The council members all turned to look at Lu, waiting for her response. "I can have one extra man sent to each of your gardens if that would allow you to feel more secure," Lu said.

The Red Queen offered another tight smile. "It would, we've missed our boys."

Part of the agreement was that both red and white send men to train at the wall and serve for a time period. Each queensland had something to offer. Heart's fighting style was without match.

"Then I will have Jack prepare some men to return with you when you leave for The Red Queensland. Is there any other issues the council wishes to discuss?" Lu asked.

This council meeting was taking too long. Too much had happened in the queensland since her parents' death and Lu needed time to process. Her entire body ached to leave this council room and never return.

"We still haven't discussed your wedding to my son," The Red Queen said.

Lu mentally sighed. If it were up to her she'd marry the prince right here and now. At least then she could focus on more pressing matters. She looked back over at the prince. His eyes were already on her. He offered her a small smile.

"What is it you wish to discuss?" Lu asked.

"Well for starters, it would be nice to set a date for the wedding. I'd really hate to be away from my queensland for so long."

"No, we wouldn't want that. When do you think would be a good time for the wedding?"

"Two months should be enough time for preparation," The Red Queen said. Lu thought a week would be long enough but said nothing.

"And I suppose the we will be financing it."

"We have card set aside for the wedding. If you should need it feel free to speak with me or our treasurer," Ramor said.

The Red Queen glanced over at him and frowned. "Trading cards for currency, Heart's way of handling these things has always been strange to me. What real value does your paper have?" The Red Queen shook her head. "Perhaps, if we need spare flowers I'll come to you."

Lu was too tired to even get angry at her insult. "Good, than if there's nothing else..." She waited to see if the was another problem they

wanted to add to her plate. When no one said anything Lu continued, “Than this meeting is over. Prince Lecive I’m sure you will have no problem showing the queen and prince to their chambers.”

Lu stood from her chair. Everyone else stood up after her and bowed. Lu turned and left the council room. She was the first one out with Domicin and Leo following close behind.

“It’s strange,” Leo said.

Lu glanced back at him. “What is?”

“Not being able to remember. Different from mother. I never used her name, but with you. You were always my little...” Leo frowned, unable to find the word.

Lu felt her heart rise up to the back of her throat and had to swallow it back down.

It’s still me, Leo. I’m still here. Please don’t look at me like that.

Leo smiled. “I suppose you really are a queen now.”

Lu smiled back. “I suppose I am.”

32

The Heart Queensland

“Oh dear, you look awful,” Eleaa said when Lu entered the room.

Lu gave her a small smile. “You always did know how to make me feel better, Eleaa.”

“My apologies, your highness. Here, let me help you change.”

Eleaa led Lu over to the mirror and began undressing her. When she was done Lu stood naked before the mirror. Lu looked at her body. It seemed so much smaller without her clothes. She could see her ribs moving as she breathed in and out. She turned so that her back was facing the mirror and stared down at it.

A tangled black web. Lu placed her hand against the black rose. There was no difference between the textures of skin. Sometimes Lu would imagine it crawling against her back, moving and spreading out, but the mark never changed. It was always there, where it always had been.

Eleaa handed Lu a washcloth so that she could wash her face. “I heard about what happened today.”

Lu pulled the rag away from her face and held it tight in her hands. “I don’t want to talk about it.” She looked up at Eleaa, not trying to hide anything. “I’m tired of talking about it.”

Eleaa walked over to Lu and pulled her into her arms. She held Lu against her chest. Lu closed her eyes and after a moment relaxed into Eleaa’s hold. She felt the older woman stroking back her hair. She fought back the urge to cry. Lu wanted to tell Eleaa everything but the words stuck at the back of her mouth.

“All queenslands are sinking ships. Empires built to crumble. We just try to prolong the inevitable. Don’t blame yourself, sweet girl.” Eleaa pulled back and placed a kiss against Lu’s cheek. “This ship has been sinking long before you became captain.”

Lu looked up at Eleaa and shook her head. “That’s not good enough, Eleaa. I can’t- I won’t give up. People die if I do.”

“People die if you don’t.”

Lu stepped back, brows furrowed in confusion. “Where is this coming from?”

Eleaa reached out for Lu’s hands, pulling her back. “Nothing, my queen, it has just been a long night for both of us. Let me finish dressing you for bed.”

Lu nodded. There’d already been enough talk of the dead. Lu didn’t want to prolong the conversation by asking any more questions. Eleaa helped her into her nightgown. Lu walked over to her dresser and kneeled down in front of the candelabra.

“Merciful goddess, bring blessed morn,” Lu said pinching her fingers into the fire. She didn’t leave them in long enough to burn but when she pulled her fingers back there was a black residue on the tips. She pressed her thumb to her forehead leaving a black dot.

Lu didn’t pray as often as she should at night, but on this occasion, it felt necessary. The mark would fade in her sleep, but while it remained the goddess would watch over her sleeping form.

Lu stood. Eleaa pulled back her bed covers and Lu crawled into bed.

Eleaa bent down and kissed Lu’s temple. “Growing up can mean facing hard truths, but you must remember to take care of yourself. There are people who love you even when you’re not the queen.”

“He didn’t remember,” Lu whispered.

“What?”

Lu shook her head. “Nothing.” Of course, Leo hadn’t remembered. The power of the goddess made the spell absolute.

Not completely, her thoughts whispered. The image of the bloody Lulana flashed in her mind.

Lu turned over on her side. “Good night, Eleaa.”

“Good night, my queen.”

The door closed and Lu closed her eyes soon after. Sleep came easier than she would have expected.

The candles flickered before extinguishing. Thin trails of smoke rose from their burnt wicks. Eyes still closed, Lu shivered deeper into her covers.

She dreamt of a ballroom where the dead danced all around her. Her dance partner was a tall man made to look even taller by his top hat. She couldn't see his face, no matter how hard she tried. He pulled Lu's body closer until her chest pressed into him. She smelt the scent of tea and spices heavy in the air. His body was cold as ice, the chill of his skin spreading out with every touch. He leaned down so that she could feel the curve of his smile against her cheek.

“Soon,” He whispered.

The ballroom erupted into laughter.

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33

Dion slid his thumb across the screen of his phone ending the call. It was the fifth time he'd tried to contact Tiffany and for the fifth time he'd been greeted by Tiffany's annoying answering machine. He hadn't heard from her since she texted him.

"What's wrong?"

Dion looked up to see his little sister, Amber, standing in the doorway. She was still dressed in her school uniform, checkered skirt and yellow button down. Five years his junior, Amber attended a private school. It was the same one Dion had attended before transferring.

Dion put his phone back into his pocket. "Nothing, Bee. Did you finish your homework?"

"You know I finish my homework during free period. Stop trying to change the subject," Amber said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Dion stood up and walked over to his sister. "I'm not changing the subject." He passed her.

Amber followed him down the hall. "Then how come you won't tell me what's wrong?"

"Because it's nothing."

"That's such bull."

"Hey, watch your mouth," Dion said looking over his shoulder. Amber rolled her eyes and shook her head. He was beginning to think he let his little sister spend too much time with Tiffany. Their mannerisms were starting to mirror each other. One Tiffany was all his sanity could take.

He walked into the kitchen and pulled out a loaf of bread. His mother had just gone shopping. The refrigerator was fully loaded, a blessed sight. He grabbed some turkey slices and placed it all on the table. Amber

sat down next to him. She watched as her brother started to prepare a sandwich.

“You want one?” Dion asked pointing to the bread.

Amber shook her head. Her nose crinkled. “Nah, I’m good. That turkey use to have a family, you know.”

Dion’s little sister had declared herself a vegetarian over a week ago. He and his father had already started a bet to see how long it would last. Dion had given her a month but his father doubted she’d last past the end of this week.

“And now his come to feed our family.” Dion took a bite from his sandwich. “It’s the circle of life.”

“So?” Amber said staring at her brother.

“So what?”

“Did something happen with Raven and Tiffany?”

Dion stared at his little sister. If he didn’t tell her the truth now she’d probably keep asking until he did. Even though Amber was five years younger than him, she was still a smart girl.

Dion shrugged his shoulders. “Tiffany texted me and told me that they weren’t coming back to school today.”

“Did she say why?”

“Nope.”

Dion began to put the stuff back into the refrigerator. He didn’t want his little sister to see how worried he was. Both Tiffany and Raven had been acting strange recently. He got the feeling there was something they weren’t telling him. Tiffany seemed to pull away whenever he talked about their future plans. Raven had always been aloof, but with recent events, she seemed to be pulling back even more. Dion worried that he was losing them.

“Have you heard from her since then,” Amber asked.

“Nope, I tried to call but she didn’t pick up.”

Dion’s tone was casual but it bothered him. Unlike Raven who always seemed to be losing her phone, Tiffany’s phone was always on hand. Even if she wasn’t able to answer she would have texted him.

“Why don’t you stop by Raven’s and see if they’re there? She’s only a few blocks down,” Amber said.

“Because someone has to watch you.” Dion poked his little sister's arm.

Amber pushed his hand away. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I think mama would disagree.”

Dion walked into the living room and plopped down on the couch. He pulled out his phone to see if Tiffany had texted him. There was still no message. He slid it open; his thumbs hovered over the keyboard a moment before closing his phone.

“You could always drop me off at Madison’s house. We have a class project to work on anyway.”

“Who’s Madison?”

“She’s this girl in my class, one of the scholarship students. Mrs. Domrma loves to put us colored folk together. The girl’s a little weird but pretty harmless. I think her older brother plays basketball at your school.”

Dion thought about it for a moment. Dropping off Amber would give him a chance to check in on his friends. There was probably a logical reason for Tiffany not answering but he just wanted to make sure.

“You don’t even know if she’s home,” Dion said.

“Well if you let me use your phone, instead of staring at it like a rejected boyfriend, I can call and ask.”

“Smart mouth.”

Amber flashed a smile. Dion shook his head and handed his sister his phone. After a ten minute conversation, Amber hung up the phone and gave Dion the address.

“Don’t forget your coat and hat,” Dion said as he grabbed his from the hall rack. The temperature had dropped again last night.

“Okay, mom.” Amber followed Dion to his truck. His father had bought it with him on his sixteenth birthday. They split the price halfway. Dion had poured all his savings from tutoring into the truck. Amber climbed into the passenger seat and he made sure she was buckled in before pulling off. In less than thirty minutes they pulled up in front of a small restaurant. Dion looked at the sign.

“Bobby’s BBQ?” Dion looked back at Amber.

“It’s her granddad’s place. They live above it.”

Amber opened the door. She was halfway out the door when Dion stopped her.

“Call me if you need me, okay,” Dion said.

Amber nodded and got out the car. She waved to her brother and walked into the restaurant. Dion waited for a moment. He had to make sure she got in before pulling off. An older man opened the door to let Amber in. He waved at Dion and Dion waved back. After watching Amber disappear behind the door Dion started his truck up again.

Raven’s driveway was empty. Her father was probably still at work. Dion pulled in. He hardly ever saw Raven’s father and often forgot he lived in the house. Dion knew her father worked on the police force but questioned if it was safe to always be leaving his daughter alone.

Dion knocked on Raven’s door. When no one answered he tried opening the door. It was unlocked which made Dion uneasy. Raven’s neighborhood wasn’t the safest. His mother was always going on about the rise in crime around the area. Earlier he’d heard a report of a double homicide a few blocks down.

Dion pushed the door open. The lights were on but the house was quiet. He stepped inside. “Rae. Tiffany,” Dion called out. No one was on the first floor but he figured they might be upstairs.

Raven jumped at the sound of her name being called.

“Dion?” Raven asked.

“Yeah, it’s me. Is Tiffany up there with you?”

Raven looked back at her friend. Tiffany still sat mumbling on the floor. Raven had been trying to talk to her but nothing she did seemed to help.

“Come upstairs. We’re in the bathroom,” Raven yelled to Dion, knowing it would be better for him to see than for her to try to explain.

“What’s going on Rae?” Dion asked as he made his way up the stairs. He stood in the bathroom doorway, taking in the scene. His eyes landed on Raven, who sat on the edge of the bathtub. Her hair was the first thing that caught his eyes, a bright red that was hard to ignore. His eyes shifted down to her face and saw the worry in her eyes. When he looked down he saw Tiffany balled up on the floor.

As he looked at his friends his face became a mixture of worry and confusion. His eyes returned to Raven.

“What’s going on?” Dion asked.

“Help me move her. Maybe moving her out of this bathroom will help.” Raven stood and tried to take hold of one of Tiffany’s arms.

“What happened to her, Rae? Why is she sitting there like that?”

“I’ll explain everything once we move her. She’s been like this for the past two hours.”

“Two hours? Raven-“

“Dion, please, ” Raven begged. The sadness and frustration Raven had been feeling seeped into her voice. She’d been stressing over her friend and had yet to come up with any answers. An overwhelming sense of guilt hung over her head. If Tiffany had never come to check on Raven she wouldn’t be in this situation.

Dion wanted to say more but the distressed look on Raven's face stopped him. The questions were put aside but not forgotten. He walked over to Tiffany. Raven grabbed her right arm and Dion took the left. They hoisted Tiffany’s body up. Her limp body was heavy. Dion took on most of her weight. He listed as she mumbled two words again and again.

“What’s she saying?” Dion asked.

Raven ignored him. She knew there would be no easy way to explain what was going on. She wasn’t exactly sure herself. Putting it into words right now would be too hard.

“We should take her to my room,” Raven said.

They walked Tiffany to Raven’s room, struggling and stumbling the whole way there. Once inside, Dion helped Raven get Tiffany to the bed. Tiffany pulled herself back into a ball lying on her side. Her eyes were open but she didn’t seem to be looking at anything.

“Okay, now can I get that explanation?” Dion asked.

Raven sat down on the bed next to Tiffany. She brushed Tiffany’s hair away from her face. “I’ve tried everything I can think of to get her back. Nothing seems to work,” Raven said.

“What happened Raven?”

Raven turned back toward Dion. His hazel eyes stared back at her. She tried her best to think of a way to explain what had happened to her within the past two days. Everything she thought to say made her sound insane. The words clung in her throat like paste. She wasn’t even sure what parts were real or fake.

“I think I did this to her.”

“What did you do?” Dion asked.

Raven pushed back her hair. “I don’t know.”

“I told you, you broke her.”

Raven’s head turned toward the sound of the voice. The girl leaned against Raven’s dresser. Her arms were crossed and she was staring at Raven.

Raven glared back at the girl. “What did you do to her?”

“What? Raven, what are you talking about?” Dion followed Raven’s gaze but saw nothing.

“I didn’t do anything. You’re the one who doesn’t know control. Did you honestly think you could go stomping around in your friend's mind and not break anything,” the girl said.

“I didn’t want to go inside her mind. I didn’t even know where I was. She just touched me and suddenly I was there.”

“Raven?” Dion asked. His tone sounded fearful but Raven paid him no attention.

The girl crossed her arms over her chest. “I tried to warn you that your third eye was opening, but you didn’t listen.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have a third eye or anything like that. All I know is you better start making some sense.”

“You didn’t but now you do. Opening it is what allowed you to enter your friend's mind. You used my power. You want to save her, you’re going to have to use it again.”

“You can bring her back?”

The girl sighed. “You really haven’t been paying any attention have you?”

“Tell me how.”

“Raven you’re really starting to weird me out,” Dion said.

The girl folded her arms. “Why should I? So you can go back inside your friend's mind and forget who you are? You have no control. If you go back into her mind you’ll end up just as broken as she is.”

Raven looked down at Tiffany. She didn’t want to end up like her, but how could she live with herself if she left Tiffany like this?

“Then tell me how to control it,” Raven said.

“Silly chicken, control isn’t something you can be told how to do. You have to train and practice. I spent years before I was blessed meditating

and preparing for that responsibility. You weren't ready then and you aren't ready now."

That was not what Raven wanted to hear. She didn't have years. She needed to be able to do this now. "So you're telling me I'm just suppose to leave her here until I what? Master the force? No, that's not going to happen. I'll do it myself if you won't help me."

The girl chuckled. "That threat might have worked if I actually believed you could do it by yourself?"

Raven gritted her teeth. She didn't want to waste any more time talking to the girl. It was clear she wasn't going to be any help.

Raven turned back to Tiffany. Her friend's state remained unchanged. She may not have been sure what to do but she new she had to try something. She placed her hands against Tiffany's temples. The girl told her that opening her third eye was what had allowed her to enter Tiffany's mind. Raven cleared her mind, focusing only on Tiffany.

"Do you honestly think it'll be that easy?" The girl asked.

Raven didn't respond; it wasn't working no matter how hard she tried and the girl was only making it worse.

Raven closed her eyes. She imagined all the walls she'd placed around herself opening up. There was an overwhelming sense of vulnerability but she forced herself to push it aside. At first she felt nothing. Raven began to pull back but something grabbed hold of her. It wrapped itself around her and tugged.

"You idiot," the girl yelled but Raven could barely hear her. She was dragged back into the dark abyss.

34

The Heart Queensland

Sweat dripped from Lu's brow. Her teeth clenched and muscles ached but she forced herself to hold the handstand. She lowered herself to the floor, bending at the elbows, before pushing back up.

She'd started training in the middle of the night. Nightmares kept her from sleeping.

The castle was different without the goddess glow. Guards made their rotations and a few servants still busied about, but a hush blanketed everything. Lu found her way into the empty arena and worked until the screams from her muscles drowned out her thoughts.

She lowered herself again.

"You're wasting energy."

A foot came flying toward Lu's right arm. She pulled her hand back but her left arm was not strong enough to support her. Lu fell to the ground, left half taking the blunt of the hit. She rolled over staring up at the face of her attacker.

Meshi squatted down next to Lu. "Your form is disappointing."

"Blame my teacher." Lu stood, brushing the sweat from her mouth with the back of her hand. "What are you doing here?"

"There are far too many answers to that question." Meshi stood, hands folding behind her back. "What brings anyone out during the dark of night? Who can say what true purpose is?"

"The simplest answer?"

"You." Meshi stepped forward. Her hand reached out for Lu's pendant. She held it in her hand. "Your first mission was a success?"

Success was not the word Lu would have used. In her dreams, she saw the faces of the man and woman. Some nights they would just stare at

her, eyes colorless and empty. She'd spend hours thinking of how things could have been different, but in the end, it was pointless. The hands of time could not be unwound and she could not undo what fate had decided. Her inner light worked overtime trying to counter the darker thoughts.

"A success," Lu repeated.

Meshi grabbed her face, red claw nails pinching into the side of her jaw; she forced Lu to look at her. "Did you keep your blade clean?"

Lu nodded.

Meshi's hand relaxed, but she did not let go. "You did good."

Lu pulled away. She took a few steps back from Meshi, staring at her from across the distance. "It was easy, you know. Like killing a child." Lu shook her head. "No, even that's not right. A child may run or scream. He lay there, unmoving. I raised my blade against him and all he did was look at me. What could be easier than that?"

"You're upset."

"My entire life you trained me. I've broken almost every bone in my body. There isn't a weapon I cannot wield or pain I cannot bare. All of that for this?"

Meshi tilted her head to the side eyes narrowing. "You think your talents are wasted helping the infected?"

"I think..." Lu's voice raised but she found herself unable to go on. She looked away for a moment and then back at Meshi. "I think I don't know what to think. You taught me everything I know about fighting, and I will never not be grateful for that, but there's still so much I don't know. Things I don't understand. And the longer I am queen the less they make sense."

Meshi stepped forward closing the space between them. She rested her hand on Lu's shoulder. "Then find out." Meshi's voice was just above a whisper. "You're right, there is still much you have to learn, but I can't teach you and they won't teach you either. There's power in keeping you ignorant. You'll have to learn for yourself."

"Who are they? And what do you mean ignorant? Ignorant of what?"

Meshi glanced around the room, eyes focusing on the door. Lu followed her gaze but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Meshi looked back at her. She leaned in close to Lu's ear. "I can't answer that. I have to go

soon. You've always been a smart girl. Ignoring your suspicions is doubting yourself. Do not doubt yourself."

Meshi dropped her hand away. "Work on your form. I will not have you disgracing my name."

Meshi turned to leave but stopped when Lu called out to her. She turned back around.

"Answer me one thing. Why did you train me so hard? Was it all for the sake of carrying out the Queen's mercy or... is there something more?" Lu asked.

Something darker to come. Lu pushed the thought away. Paranoia and sleep deprivation had a tendency to go hand and hand.

"Strong enough to survive. No matter what. No matter who.' That was my sole command when they gave me you. I hope I have done my job, but I can't lie. Most nights I pray your talents go to waste; that nothing and no one will ever push you as far as I have." Meshi turned and left the room without a single word more.

Lu stood there long after she was gone. Unsaid words hung in the air. She sensed that Meshi had given her as much as she could. Something was not right within her court, but if she wanted the truth, she'd have to find it for herself.

35

The darkness consumed Raven, but this time, she was ready. When Raven opened her eyes again she was sitting in a corner. Dark shadows stood all around her, blocking out the light. They loomed over her with hands reaching out to grab her. Raven tried to move back but she was already pressed into the wall. Her shoes squeaked against the floor as she tried to kick and push back. Her thoughts were already being overridden by Tiffany's fear.

Dark Tiffany, the one from before, pushed her way in front of the dark shadows. She smiled down at Raven, white eyes focused on her.

"Aren't you tired yet? Your entire life has been pointless. Why do you insist on clinging to it?" Dark Tiffany reached into her pocket and pulled something out. The metal shined in the darkness. She played with it in her hand. The sharp tip pressed into her thumb and twirled on its own.

"No one would shed a tear if you were gone. In fact, I'm almost sure it would be better for everyone," Dark Tiffany said. The dark shadow on Raven's right transformed into an older man. He had Tiffany's brown eyes and high cheekbones. Raven had seen Tiffany's father before but he looked weaker now. His eyes sunken and skin leathered.

"Tiffany, please, I can't get better and continue to support you and your mother. The three of us can't live off your mother's paycheck alone. Please do this for me. Please." His cries were full of agony. "If it's not you then it will be me. I can't keep living like this. Someone has to go. Please, don't be selfish."

Raven felt a wave of guilt and sadness wash over her. Her eyes stung with tears. She didn't want to keep hurting him.

Another shadow transformed. This time it turned into Dion. He smiled sweetly at her. "Just do it, Tiffany. If you really care about us you'd

end it. Raven and I can't be together as long as you're around. She holds back because of you and you know I could never love you like that. You know that no one could ever love you, don't you? You make them filthy. Every one of them you let inside. They all left their marks." Dion's voice wasn't harsh. The way he said it, each word filled with pity, only made Raven feel worse.

One shadow remained. It moved in closer. The shadow transformed into the other Raven. She took a step forward and bent down so that they were at eye level. Her saddened dark brown eyes stared down at Raven. "I won't leave you, Tiffany. You know that I can't. I'll die here with you. Slowly each day, hating you for what you've done to me. A real friend wouldn't want that. Set me free, Tif. Set us both free."

Raven knew she would never say that to Tiffany, but the hurt her words had caused, was unlike anything Raven had ever felt before. They ripped her world apart. All that was left was emptiness. She thought of the times they spent together as girls. With their pinkies linked, they'd promised each other forever. These thoughts only brought her more pain.

Dark Tiffany moved next to the other Raven. She bent down and took Raven's hand in hers. A cold sharp metal pressed into Raven's palm. She looked down at the razor.

"No one wants you here, Tiffany. Stop fighting it. Stop being a burden on the world. To everyone here, you're already dead," Dark Tiffany said.

"Do it, Tiffany," Dion said.

"End this now," Tiffany's father agreed.

Raven turned her head toward her other self. She felt a slight spark of hope as she looked at her. All those years they spent together had to mean something. They needed each other. Life had tried to pull them apart but they found their way back. They always found their way back.

The other Raven placed a hand on Raven's shoulder and looked into their eyes. "Save me, Tiffany. Please save me from you. One cut and it's over. One cut is all it will take."

Something inside Raven broke, shattering her into a million pieces. Raven glanced back at Dark Tiffany. She'd been right. Raven was already dead and this was her hell. She could feel the truth of it now. All she wanted was for it to end. Raven held the razor in her trembling hand. She hovered it

over her wrist. All she had to do was cut and every bit of pain she felt would flood out of her in waves of crimson. She wanted to be emptied.

“Raven!”

Raven mentally jolted from the sound of the voice

“Remember who you are, Raven,” the voice commanded. Raven recognized it as the girl's voice the second time.

Tiffany's emotions began to dull as Raven felt herself being pulled away. She could feel them separating. The pulling continued until she could no longer feel herself inside Tiffany's body. When Raven opened her eyes again she was standing behind the dark shadows. She could see Tiffany still sitting in the corner with the razor in hand.

“You have to stop her,” the girl said. She stood next to Raven looking at Tiffany. “You're still too closely connected. If she kills herself now, it'll completely break her mind and take you with her.”

“How do I stop it?” Raven asked.

“This is the darkest part of your friend's mind. Only light can destroy darkness. Reach inside of you and find my light. Use it as your weapon.”

Raven closed her eyes. She tried to think of anything that represented light. At first, she thought of physical things like a light bulb, a lamp, or a candle. When that didn't work she began to get more abstract.

She thought of the hot July sun. It reminded her of summer and fun. She remembered family barbecues from her childhood, back when they had been a whole family. Her mother smiled and laughed as they played together.

As Raven thought about her mother's smile she could feel something growing inside her. She opened her eyes. She could still feel it. It was a warm tingling just below the surface of her skin.

Raven looked back at Tiffany. The razor had already started to cut into Tiffany's flesh. Blood trailed down Tiffany's arm. Without thinking, Raven raised her hand. She pushed. Light erupted from her hand and surrounded her. It poured out of her in hot powerful waves. The darkness was replaced with blinding light.

36

The Heart Queensland

Lu sat on her bed. She'd awaken again in the middle of the night. It was becoming a pattern. Once awake, her mind was filled with too many thoughts to go back to sleep. She tried not to think of their faces but it was impossible not to. They haunted her.

There seemed to be too many unanswered questions. Who killed the previous king and queen? How did the man in the village know who she was? Who painted the roses red? The list of questions went on and on but one kept coming back.

Has he really returned?

The four words haunted Lu. She could not save her people from him nor could she save them from the wave of chaos that was sure to follow. The queens before her had tried to fight him and all had failed. What was she suppose to be able to do against something like that?

"Are you awake yet, your majesty?" Eleaa asked as she walked into the room. She carried bundles of red fabric in her arms.

"I just woke up not too long ago. What is that in your hands?"

"The Red Prince offers you a gift," Eleaa said. She placed the fabric at the end of the bed. She picked one from the bunch and held it up. It was a bright red silk. "It's the finest fabric in The Red Queensland. You could probably make three dresses for the price of one sheet of this stuff." Eleaa scrunched up her nose.

Lu stared at the fabric. It was thinner than most fabrics found in the Heart. The Red Prince must have never seen a Heart's winter. How would he fare when the first frost hit cold enough to freeze bear's blood? Would his fine silks keep him warm then?

"Tell the prince I'm grateful for his gift," Lu said.

“He also asked if you would care to join him for a stroll through the castle gardens.”

“Delightful.” Lu made no attempts to keep the annoyance out of her voice. Lacking in sleep, she was hardly in the mood to be in the company of royals. The only silver lining was that it would give them the chance to discuss the current standing of their queenlands. She needed to know how many of her men would be needed to protect the Red gardens. Now was not the time to be spreading the Heart’s resources thin.

Information about the Red’s resources would also be important. She needed to know just how much they were willing to offer. She was sure Lecive already had his input on the situation. She needed to know just how far his influence in the Red court went.

Eleaa helped Lu dress for the day. After she finished Eleaa left to deliver Lu’s message to the prince. Lu followed her out the door. Breakfast was being served in the main dining hall but Lu had other plans. She walked until she reached the golden statue of the goddess. The hallway was less crowded there. She waited until it emptied before pressing her hand against the wall.

The wall split down the middle, spreading wide enough for one person to fit through. Lu stepped into the opening. The door closed behind her. The stairway hidden behind the wall was darkly lit. She smelled lime and wet earth. Lu grabbed one of the torches off the wall before beginning her slow descent. She was careful not to slip on the wet steps. Water dripped from the stone ceiling. The stairway grew colder the closer she got toward the bottom.

A faint glow came from the bottom of the stairs. Lu followed it down the hall. Light peeked through the cracks of the door. Lu pushed it open, flooding the hall with light.

Lu stepped into the room. Green plants hung everywhere the eye could see. Amongst the foliage, Lu spotted her brother. He was bent over a desk, a familiar position to find him in. This was where he’d spent most of their childhood. This strange underground room had a hidden light source of its own. A variety of plants thrived inside the hidden oasis. The laboratory fit him perfectly.

“I thought I might find you here,” Lu said with a smile.

Leo sat up and turned to face his sister. He smiled at her but Lu could see the exhaustion in his eyes.

“I figured you come for me eventually,” Leo said. He stood and walked over to Lu. “Would it be too improper to hug you?”

Lu shook her head. Leo smiled and his arms wrapped around her. Lu hesitated for a moment but then buried her face into his chest. She wrapped her arms around him. Here she didn’t have to pretend.

Leo’s chin rested on top of her head. “I’m sorry I didn’t make it back sooner.”

“I’m just glad you’re here now,” Lu said, squeezing him tighter. She let him go and took a step back. Peering over his shoulder Lu saw his desk. Lu walked over to his desk and saw the white rose he’d been examining. She picked it up and held it in the air.

“Earlier, I got the feeling there was something you weren’t telling us.” Lu looked back at her brother. “What was it?”

Leo frowned. Lu held her breath. Usually, when Leo discovered something new she couldn’t get him to stop talking about it. Whatever he’d seen wasn’t good.

“When I was studying the substance I noticed something,” Leo said.

“What did you see?”

“There were a lot of unknowns inside the mixture,” Leo said pacing across the floor. “At least ten unknowns, maybe more. I was, however, able to detect one key element.”

Lu stomach turned. “Leo, tell me.” Every nerve buzzed inside her as she tried to keep still. This was bad news. She knew it. The only question was how bad.

Leo stopped his pacing and stared at his sister. “Blood sap.”

Lu stared at him. Her heart fell to her stomach. Of all the horror she could have imagined this was one of the worst. She was going to be sick. Her hands gripped the wood of the desk as she tried to calm herself.

“Blood sap is only found in the trees of the orcestral forest. How did it get into the garden?” Lu asked.

“That’s the problem. The person who tainted the roses would have had to go into the orcestral forest to get it. Perhaps a priest during their holy mission or someone disguised as a priest.”

“Are you saying you think one of the infected snuck past our defenses?”

“I’m not sure, but no average person could have created this. The mixture is far more complex than anything I’ve ever seen. It is both magic and science. They designed it specifically to target the white rose.”

Leo leaned back in his chair. His hand twisted at the golden ring on his finger. “Whoever created this was incredibly intelligent and knew what they were doing. It was no accident. The boy’s dead because of it.”

“So it is an attack,” Lu said. Her brother looked back up at her. She held his gaze. “They went after the king and queen first. Now they’re attacking the gardens.”

“There is no way to know that the two events are connected.”

“The queen and king were murdered and now suddenly someone has created a toxin that poisons the white rose. I’d hardly call that a coincidence.”

Leo didn’t seem to have a reply. Lu sighed and sat down on his desk. “We are under attack. People are going to die if we don’t do something but I can’t fight back if I don’t even know who I’m fighting.”

You know who. You just won’t admit it, the voice in the back of her head whispered. Lu ignored the voice. What she needed was evidence, a trail to follow and a killer to trap. At least if it was human they’d have a fighting chance.

Leo took his sister's hand in his. His hands were rough from time spent training under their father and working in the fields. “I’ll do whatever I can to find out what this substance is made of. Once I do we can begin working on a way to reverse it.”

She squeezed his hand. “Thank you, Leo.”

Lu stood up preparing to leave.

“Be careful, sister. If it’s like you say and we really are under attack, you need to be sure of who’s a friend and who’s not,” Leo said.

Lu turned back around to look at her brother. She thought back to life before the crown. If she was not training she was out in the gardens with her brother. He would read his book under the shade of the trees and watch her hunt rabbits. When the goddess glow reached the horizon, Leo would give his half sleeping sister piggyback rides back to the castle. Simpler times.

“All I’m sure of is, that outside of you and Eleaa, I have no friends,” Lu said and then turned to leave. Those times they spent together as children seemed so far away now. There was a physical pain in knowing she would never be like that again.

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37

The Heart Queensland

The passage door closed behind Lu, concealing itself again. No one, who wasn't looking, would be able to find it. She left her brother to his work. Hopefully, the fruits of his labor would be the very thing to save them all from this catastrophe.

“My queen.”

Lu turned around to see Domicin walking toward her. She stepped away from the goddess's statue. “Jack is there something wrong.” It seemed every time she talked to someone they had more bad news to bring her. Lu dreaded to hear what it was this time.

“No, my queen, nothings wrong. I've just been looking for you. You were not in your chamber when I stopped by.” Domicin said.

Lu folded her hands in front of her. “I was attending to some business.”

Before she became queen, Lu could disappear for an entire day and no one would notice. Eleaa was the only one who ever really kept track of Lu's whereabouts. She should have known her absence would have been recognized now.

Domicin looked at the statue and then back at her. “Are you heading to the dining hall?”

“Yes, I've missed breakfast, best not to skip lunch as well?”

“Then may I accompany you there.”

Lu nodded. Domicin walked beside her but did not offer his arm. She found she preferred it that way, though she could feel his eyes on her. He studied her face as they walked. Lu did her best to keep her attention forward but after awhile it became annoying.

“Jack if you have something to say, say it already,” Lu said.

“My apologies, my queen.” Domicin bowed his head. “I was just wondering if I’ve done something to offend you.”

Lu glanced at him and saw that he was looking at her again. “No, you have not. What would make you think that you had?”

“You’ve been different since we arrived from Zendel. I thought you might be avoiding me.”

“No, I’ve...”

Lu tried to think up an excuse but found none. She thought back to what happened in Zendel and the blood that had been spilled there. It was possible that she’d been avoiding Domicin but it had been to no fault of his own. She’d tried to mentally separate herself from that day.

“It was not my intention to make you feel that way,” Lu said at last.

Her words seemed to put Domicin at ease. He relaxed as they continued down the hall. As her Jack, it wasn’t right for her to be putting him at a distance, but he still felt like a stranger to her. She would have to make a point of getting to know him more. Friend or foe, ignorance was deadly.

“Marcella asked after you,” Domicin said.

“Did she?”

“Yes, she and the other’s were worried. You left before they could see you off. Usually, they get to see more of the queen after a mission.”

“I needed time to prepare for the council meeting. As you know The Red Queen’s arrival came as a bit of a surprise for most of us, but I will make time to show my gratitude for their service. It was with their help we were able to protect the people of Zendel after all.”

Lu tried not to think of Marcella’s sword slicing across the woman's throat or Kovin tossing her body to the ground. They had all done their duties that night. It would be more than hypocritical to blame any of them for what had happened, but Lu didn’t know how to face them. Everything had been so much different when they were all seated around the campfire.

“It honors them to be able to serve, but it’s hard to predict what will happen out there. No one would be surprised if it troubled-”

“It did not.” Lu stopped and turned to face Domicin. “I can assure you, Jack, I’m perfectly fine with what happened in Zendel. Right now I have other matters on my mind.”

“The flower.”

“No, currently my marriage, but yes also the white roses.”

“That isn’t the flower I speak of, my queen.”

“It should be. As of now they are the only flowers of importance.”

Lu’s tone was sharp. She knew which flower he spoke of, but she refused to waste time on it. There was no evidence that the bloody Lulana flower painted on the cabin was more than a coincidence. The threat on the white rose, however, was real.

They reached the dining hall. She stopped in front of the door to listen in. People were already inside. She could hear the muffled sounds of their conversation. Lu opened the door and stepped inside. Her eyes landed on The Red Queen first. She sat at the head of the table. Next to her, sat her son and Prince Lecive. Lecive had been whispering something to The Red Queen but when Lu walked into the room she turned her attention to Lu. They locked eyes.

“Queen of Heart, so nice of you to join us.” The Red Queen’s thin wrinkled lips pulled back into a smile. “We missed you for breakfast.”

“There were some important matters I had to attend to,” Lu said before walking over to her seat. Ramor was there as well, though he sat closer to her end of the table.

“So important you couldn’t make time to eat with your guest,” The Red Queen asked.

“Such luxuries as sitting to eat every meal are often not afforded to a queen at work, even when the company would be so delightful. I’m sure a queen such as yourself is aware of this.”

Lu really was trying to be polite but in the grand scheme of things political banter seemed minute. It wasn’t something she trained in. With everything she had to deal with, she didn’t need The Red Queen breathing down her neck. If it were up to her, she’d take her meals in her bedchamber.

“I hear the prince gifted you with some fine silk’s this morning, my queen. It must have been lovely,” Lecive said.

Lu looked at him. His fiery red hair was braided back into a ponytail and his clothes were pressed. *Dressing up for the queen?* Lu wondered. She still didn’t know what his play was in this whole game. It only made her more suspicious. She turned away from him in favor of the prince. He gave her a timid smile. She noticed the makeup caked around his acne and the touch of rouge on his lips.

Reds, always so concerned with their looks.

Lu smiled back at him. “They were beautiful. I had my handmaiden send my gratitude. I hoped you received it.”

The Red Prince’s smile brightened. “Yes, this morning. I am glad you liked it. That shade of red will look lovely on you. Prince Lecive was the one who suggested it.” He nodded at her brother.

Lu looked back at Lecive.

“I simply suggested that your wardrobe would benefit from some finer fabrics,” Lecive said.

“The queen’s attire is designed to be best suited for combat. Other fabrics do not handle wear and tear as well as the ones made in the Heart.” Ramor said putting down his fork and knife. Lu glanced over at him, thankful for the support. She didn’t know why there was tension between him and her brother, but it was clear neither was fond of the other.

“That may be true but your brother is right dear,” The Red Queen said, pulling the attention back to her. She bit down on a piece of fish and looked back at Lu. “Now that you are queen it is important that you distinguish yourself from the common folk.”

Lu could feel her annoyance rising. It was beyond her how the Reds could look down on her and her people when they so clearly needed them. When the treaty had first been created it had been The Red Queenland that sought their help. The Heart had been willing to put pass discretions aside for the good of the realm. Without the Heart, both the Red and the White would have torn themselves apart with petty wars.

“Here in the Heart we believe that everyone has a role to play and every role is important. We value harmony over separation. As the great Lolakia teaches us not everyone's value is clear upon birth,” Lu said.

The Red Queen smiled. “Right, the *anointed* sister.”

Lu gritted her teeth. “Do you doubt Lolakia’s claim.”

“No, how can I while looking at the proof of her lineage. Though you are the first of her line I’ve seen without the trademark red hair. Don’t take offense, dear. It’s refreshing. But you know, back to that old harmony pitch. I’ve always wondered if they drill that into you heart girls as children. Your mother was always going on about it. Do you know what I told her?”

Lu held her hands under the table, her nails biting into her skin. Her expression, however, showed no signs of change. Both queens stared at

each other. The challenge hanging heavy in the air.

When Lu said nothing The Red Queen continued. “I told her that while her harmony was a nice ideal she should be wary of its possible consequences. When the people start to believe that you are no different from them, they question why you have power where they do not. People start to believe that anyone could fulfill your role. Lolakia was second sister to The Red Queen, but what happens when they stop believing that royal blood even matters. It’s a quick way to an uprising. The queensland falls and we are no better than the east. Is that what you want?”

Lu’s composure slipped as she glared at The Red Queen. “Of course, not. I would die before I let the Heart become anything like the east. My people will be saved.”

The Red Queen smiled. The look in her eyes showed that she’d clearly won something from Lu’s admission. Seeing that look only further angered Lu. The dining hall was quiet as the two queen stared at each other.

The Red Prince cleared his throat. “I think talk of falling queenslands is a bit too harsh for such a fine afternoon. Perhaps something a little lighter would better fit the mood.”

The Red Queen leaned back in her seat. She placed a hand over her sons and smiled. “My son is correct. A different topic then.” Her voice now brighter than before. “Perhaps wedding preparations,” she suggested.

The rest of lunch was spent going over wedding details. Lu only half listened. She was still angry over the queen’s earlier words but she did not show it. She forced bits of food down her throat, waiting until everyone else was done before leaving.

“Queen.” Someone called for Lu.

She turned around to see the Red Prince standing behind her. His chubby face was redder than normal. She noted the beads of sweat on his face as he fought to catch his breath.

“Is there something you wanted?” Lu asked.

The prince nodded. “Earlier I asked you if you wanted to take a stroll.”

Lu glanced around the hallway. After dealing with his mother she didn’t want to be around another Red. Part of her wished Ramor would swoop in with some business that needed her immediate attention but that did not happen. She turned back toward the prince.

He waited for her answer. She'd previously agreed to it and it would be seen as an insult to decline now.

Lu smiled. "Please, lead the way."

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38

The Heart Queensland

The Red Prince smiled at Lu and offered his arm. Lu took it, allowing him to guide her towards the southern entrance. The royal garden sat behind the castle walls. It stretched around the castle reaching back to the cliff's edge. There were a variety of different plants and flowers but the white rose was most predominant.

The Red Prince led Lu to the center of the garden. The goddess glow shined bright above them. They sat down next to the water fountain. It was too cold to be out. She gazed out at the garden, debating if she should order another row of roses to be planted. Currently, the garden would be able to support only a mild outbreak within the inner city, but they could add more.

The autumn breeze carried the perfume scent of the garden around her. Strands of her hair flew free. She tucked them back behind her ear trying not to think of the queen's comments. Her hair would have been her mother's color were it not for her sickness.

"Queen?" The prince called.

Lu turned back toward him. His eyes stared at her expectantly.

"I'm sorry were you saying something?" Lu asked.

"I was just saying how lovely your garden is."

Lu smiled. "Thank you, prince--"

"Josivin. Josivin Malore Red," the Red Prince said with a smile.

"Josivin," Lu repeated, although, she doubted she would remember it. Why bother? After their wedding his name would vanish from memory just like hers had. The king was the only other member of the royal bond who needed the ritual to erase his name. Unlike the Jack and Ace, where

positions were libel to change, the bond between King and Queen was a marriage born of the goddess's blessing. Not even death could break it.

"It is a bit odd that we will marry without me ever knowing your name, don't you think," Josivin said.

"I suppose."

There were many things they wouldn't know about each other before their marriage; her name was just one of them.

"And to think, if nothing had gone wrong, in five months time I would have known your name."

"But only until the queen died and then you would have forgotten like everyone else," Lu said.

"Still, it would have been nice to know."

Lu tried not to make a face. The prince didn't understand that it didn't matter. How and when they met, whether or not they knew each other's names, none of it mattered. The results were the same. Their marriage had been arranged before either of them were born. She'd marry him and bare children as all queens were expected to do.

"Do you remember it?" Josivin asked.

Lu looked back at him a question in her eyes.

"Do you remember your name? Mother never told me if she remembers hers."

Lu nodded. Her eyes returned to the water fountain. She saw her distorted reflection in the pool. She blinked and in her mind saw the image of the bloody flower. "I remember it."

Silence fell over them. Josivin appeared to be thinking of something else to say. Lu dropped her hand into the fountain. Cool water rush past her fingertips. This was another spot she'd spent time with Leo. Once she'd attempted to swim in the fountain's waters and Leo had to stop her. She'd never appreciated the freedom of her youth.

She looked back at the flowers. When she left, she'd order some of the more decorative plants to be removed. Two rows of white roses could be planted, with the sacrifice of those plants beauty. When darkness descends only the strong remain.

Josivin cleared his throat.

Lu turned her head back toward him. In his hand he held a small black box. She stared at it. "I have another present for you," he said,

holding out the box to her. Lu accepted the box. She already knew what was inside before she opened it. The diamond ring glittered back up at her.

Josivin took the box from Lu. He pulled the ring out and placed it on her slender finger. "It's diamond because they are one of the strongest gems, much like you and your queensland," Josivin said, pointing at the diamond in the middle of the ring. Several other smaller ones surrounded it. "The rubies are from the deepest part of the Red mountains."

Two rubies sat on both sides of the ring. The Red Queensland received both its name and wealth from the vast deposits of rubies found in their mountains and on their land.

Josivin looked up at Lu. "You're brother told me gold was your favorite so I had the band handcrafted." His hand still held hers. Lu looked at the band of the ring. Gold and black hearts linked together circling her finger. It was beautiful but the mention of her brother made her want to rip it off her finger.

Lu looked back at Josivin "You and prince Lecive seem very close."

Josivin grinned. "We are. Mother is very fond of him, as am I. He's a real man, your brother. I feel there is much I can learn from him."

His words were sickening. Even her future husband seemed to want to align himself with Prince Lecive. Everyone loved her eldest brother, but no one knew him. Not like she did.

Josivin only confirmed what she already knew. Lecive was aligning himself with the Red court. He wanted control and he was willing to go through the future king to get it. With the wealthy queensland backing it wouldn't matter when Lu completed her royal bonds. She'd never be free of him.

"He told me about you," Josivin said gaining Lu's attention again. "When he came to visit he always spoke greatly of your strength and how you were faring in your training. He worries, you know. You are a very independent person Queen of Hearts, but this life can be lonely without friends. I, myself, am no stranger to the isolation superiority can sometimes bring. I'd like us to get along. You and I, together we can be more than just an arrangement."

Lu only half heard the rest of his statement. Her mind stuck on what Josivin had said about her brother. He had no right to talk about her like that. Pretending to care. Pretending to know her.

He knows nothing of me.

The thought of her brother speaking about her in such a way made her skin crawl. She turned away from the prince. Her eyes could not conceal the rage burning inside of her. He was a liar. A dirty retch of a thing, she would not dare call human.

Josivin reached out a hand to touch her arm. “Are you alright?”

Lu took a deep breath and turned back. She looked Josivin in the eyes, careful to control her tone. “I would like nothing more than to get along with you Prince Josivin, but as for my brother, he doesn’t always know about the things he speaks of.”

Josivin pulled back. “I’m sorry. I’ve spoken out of turn.”

“No, do not apologize. You’ve done nothing wrong. The cold is getting to me. Perhaps it is best if we head back now.” Lu stood and waited for the prince.

Josivin hesitated before standing up. He offered her his arm. Lu took it without looking at him. They made their way back to her chamber, stopping outside her door. Lu turned around to tell Josivin goodbye but he spoke before she could.

“He’s sorry about what happened,” Josivin said.

“What?”

“He never went into detail about it but I can tell it pains him. Lecive may not show it but I know he regrets what happened between you two. Perhaps if you were willing to forgive him you’d see it.” He looked at her with hopeful eyes.

Lu knew exactly which incident the prince was talking about. Anger rose inside of her again but this time it was cold as ice. The air chilled around her. Her cold gaze forced Josivin to take a half step back.

“You do not know my family as well as you presume to think, Prince Josivin,” Lu said, taking a step forward. “Perhaps if you did you’d be more careful with who you aligned yourself with.”

In that moment Lu didn’t care about the repercussions of her statement. Only later would she regret the biting tone of her voice. Only then she would look back and see the fear that had flashed across the prince’s face and know that she’d made a mistake.

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39

The Heart Queensland

Lu's hands pressed against the door closing it. Her nails scratched against the wood as she balled her hands into tight fist. Josivin's words stuck in her mind.

He's sorry?

Lu laughed, cold and bitter. She didn't give a damn about what he felt. She'd looked into his eyes that night and saw him for who he really was. There was a monster worse than any orcestral hidden behind his fiery red eyes.

Lu pushed away from the door. She walked to the center of the room. Her eyes fell on the fireplace. It was big enough to crawl in. Black stone and metal cage. Big enough to roast a grown man alive.

Leo sat with her on the chamber floor. He held up his hands, casting shadows against the back wall. Lu watched as his shadow bird fluttered against the stone wall. She held her hands up, mirroring Leo's to make a smaller shadow bird of her own.

"And then the bird swooped down." Leo's hands came down for hers. Lu squealed and pulled her hands away.

"You'll never catch me." She giggled.

Outside her window, it was still raining. Lightening danced among the dark gray clouds creating flashes of light. Thunder rumbled like drums, but she'd forgotten to be afraid.

Leo was good at distractions. He always came to find her during the storms. They kept their voices at a whisper, so not to wake Eleaa who slept on the other side of the wall.

Leo was twelve, which according to their father, meant he was no longer allowed to spend time in her room alone anymore. Lu didn't understand why, but she knew better than to question the King. He never touched Lu, but something about him had always frightened her. The King was much like the night storm. His body moved fast as lightning and his voice was thunder. Near him she felt the electric tension of a long awaited down pour.

"Do another one, Leo," Lu begged.

Leo began to reposition his hands. The cuts on his knuckles were turning to scabs. He told her they didn't hurt so Lu tried not to pay them much attention. The scars were not an uncommon sight. Wrongs becoming normal.

The door creaked open. Both siblings turn to see who it was. Lu's first thought was of her father and her heart skipped a beat, but she relaxed when she saw that it was only Lecive.

Lecive eyed them both. He smiled and stepped into the room. "Why are you up, little one?"

"We're telling shadow stories," Lu said. Lecive didn't usually come to play with them. He spent most of his time with their mother, but when they were together their interactions were usually pleasant enough. She thought she might like him, but wasn't sure. She knew she wanted him to like her, but Lu wanted most people to like her more than they did.

Leo was oddly silent. His eyes were on Lecive. Standing, he moved in front of Lu.

"Brother is everything alright?" Leo asked.

"Brother?" Lecive looked at Leo, cocking his head to the side. He nodded to himself. "Yes, I am. We are blood fully and truly. Though looks may be a bit deceiving. You looking so much like him and me so much like her."

"You mustn't listen to the rumors. They speak terrible things and they will soon pass."

Lecive smiled. "Rumors?" He moved closer to them. In the light of the fire Lu could see the cut on his lip and purpling bruise on his lower jaw. There was something in his eyes. A spark of fire that was not unlike the one she sometimes spotted in her father's eyes. She couldn't look away.

“I wonder if you could say that with the roles reversed. What privilege this face gifts you.” Lecive grabbed Leo’s jaw, but Leo pushed his hand away.

“You need to go back to your room brother,” Leo said.

“Why? Nothings wrong with me. I just came here to check on the heir to our family’s name. Is there something wrong with that? Or do you not want me to get close to my little sister? Perhaps you think if you’re the only one close to her she’ll show you loyalty. Maybe once she’s queen she’ll let you be her little lap dog.”

Lu couldn’t see Leo’s expression but she knew from the way his hands fisted and body tensed Lecive had upset him.

“Come on, little Leo. Bark for your master.” Lecive sneered taking a step closer.

Lu stepped out in front of Leo. She stretched her arms out to her sides and glared at Lecive. “Leave him alone.” She tried to look as intimidating as someone of her height and age could.

Lecive laughed looking down at her. “Look at you. So ready to defend the weak and helpless. You think you’re special because you’re a girl? You think they really want you, pale daughter? You’re just a placeholder. Once they have a second daughter you won’t be any different from the rest of us.”

Lu jumped forward. Her hands outstretched she tried to claw at Lecive’s face. She hated when people made fun of her skin. Leo caught her and held her back before she could reach him.

Lecive pulled back. “More like a wild animal than any real princess.”

“Stop antagonizing her, Lecive,” Leo said.

“Let me go,” Lu said still struggling against her brother’s hold. Lecive wanted a fight and she had no problem giving him one. Lu wasn’t afraid of getting hurt. Nothing he did to her could compare to what she’d experience in training. Meshi would be upset when she found out Lu was fighting outside of the arena but she didn’t care. She’d take the beating.

“You better listen to her, Leo. Soon she’ll be our queen and we’ll all have to follow her orders.” Lecive glared down at Lu. She could see the jealous hatred in his eyes. She glared back at him refusing to be intimidated.

“Stop, Lecive. Lu had nothing to do with it. Leave now before someone finds out you’re here,” Leo said.

“Do you mean father? You know why he doesn’t want us in here, don’t you Leo? You know what he’s afraid of. Imagine what he’ll think when he finds both of us here.” Lecive looked down at Lu. “Maybe then they’ll call you whore too.” Lecive took a step forward.

Lu kept her eyes on him. There was something electric in the air.

“Poor, Lulu. Even if you do become queen, what they’ve got planned for you is much worse than anything they could do to us. They’re going to hollow you out until there’s nothing left.” Lecive leaned down until they were face to face. She smelt something fowl on his breath.

*Leo pushed his brother back. “Stop it Lecive. She doesn’t need-“
Lecive screamed.*

Without both hands, Leo had been unable to hold his sister back. Her teeth sank into something fleshy and she tasted blood. Lecive shoved at his sister. Lu fell hard to the ground, her elbow slamming against the hardwood. When she looked up again he was stalking toward her.

Leo grabbed hold of Lecive stopping him. The two fought. Each struggled to overpower the other. Lecive was older and taller but Leo had more muscle. Their feet shuffled closer to the fire.

Leo’s foot tripped over the leg of the chair. It happened too fast for Lu to react. Leo fell down taking Lecive with him. The metal guarder around the fireplace clattered to the ground. The fire reached out toward them. Embers floating warm past Lu’s face.

Another scream, this time from Leo. Lu looked and saw how the fire licked his face. Leo struggled to get up but with his brother on top of him, it was impossible.

Lu listened to the horrific sounds of her brother screams. She stood up and ran over to her two brothers. Leo’s hair was on fire and his skin burnt and blistered. Lu shoved frantically at her oldest brother.

“Get off of him,” she yelled. Fear twisted her voice. Leo was dying and she was helpless to stop it. All signs of the brave little girl vanished. Lecive remained unmoving, staring down at his brother.

Lu tried to push him again, her hands beating against his side. “Get off. Get off. Lecive, please!” Tears streamed down Lu’s face.

The desperate plea was enough to shock Lecive out of his trance. He scrambled off Leo just as Lu's door opened. Leo rolled away from the fire still screaming. Eleaa rushed into the room followed by guards.

Lu sat by Leo trying to fan the flames away until one of the guards came to pull her away. The horrid scent of burnt flesh filled the air.

Lu fought against her captor. "Leo! Leo!"

The guards surrounded Leo while Eleaa called for help. Two of the guards picked up Leo to pull him out of the room. Lu continued to struggle against her captor. Her nails scratched against his metal arm.

Eleaa stepped in front of Lu. She took Lu from the guard and held her in her arms. Lu kept fighting to be free, her eyes on the door they'd taken Leo out of. She screamed her brother's name.

"It's alright princess. They're taking him to the medic. He'll be alright. He'll be alright. Shhh, hush now. Everything's okay," Eleaa said trying to calm the child down.

Lu cried on her shoulder. Leo had almost died. She had watched Leo almost die. He was her only companion, the only member of her family that she knew actually loved her and he had almost been taken away. It was not until that moment that Lu truly began to understand fear. Her fist clenched Eleaa's robes holding her tighter as she cried.

Lecive shifted in the shadow catching Lu's attention. In the chaos, no one seemed to notice that he was there. His widened eyes locked with Lu's. She glared at Lecive with a dark intensity she'd never felt before.

It's your fault.

"You die," Lu spat. Her words not even a coherent sentence but she felt them from deep within her. She glared at her brother, but he did not say anything. His eyes fell to his hands. He stared at them with an opened bewilderment.

Lu turned away from the fireplace. It had happened years ago but she'd never forgotten. She didn't have to wonder if Lecive had regretted his action. He'd never apologized for what happened that night, but she'd seen it on his face. He was shocked by what he'd done. Even if he hated Lu he still cared about his younger brother. Lu could care less either way.

That night she'd been introduced to an emotion she'd never felt before. Hate.

It was a ball of darkness in her other wise pure soul. She'd kept it hidden inside her over the years but it never faded. At any point in time, she could have cleansed herself of it. The problem was she didn't want to forgive him.

Lecive would suffer for what he'd done. Leo's scars would never fade; his whole life he would be marked by what their brother had done and she would never forget.

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40

Dion sat on the end of the bed next to his two motionless friends. After talking to the wall, Raven had touched Tiffany. He'd watched as her body went rigid before completely collapsing on the bed. Tiffany had frozen mid mumble. Her mouth was parted and her vacant eyes stared into the distance.

For a moment Dion had just stared at his friends.

"If you guys are playing some kind of joke it's not funny," He'd said.

They remained unresponsive.

Dion grabbed Raven's leg, shaking it and then squeezing. She was still breathing and so was Tiffany, but they didn't move. Desperate, Dion pulled out his phone debating whom he should call. He shifted through his contacts.

Tiffany and Raven gasped, springing up into sitting positions.

Dion yelled, dropping the phone from his hand. His heart thundered in his chest as he stared at the two girls.

Raven sucked in a gasp of air. Her body ached and her head pounded. She blinked a few times as her room started to come into focus. The first thing she saw was Dion staring back at her with wide eyes.

Dion placed his hand over his chest. "What the hell guys? Are you trying to give a guy a heart attack?"

"Rae?" Tiffany asked.

Raven turned to look at her friend. Tiffany's eyes were full of questions but Raven was just happy to see that she was all right. She leaned over and pulled Tiffany into a hug. "I almost lost you." She tightened her arms around Tiffany, crushing against her.

Tiffany hesitated before hugging Raven back. Her arms were slow to wrap around Raven but when she did, she rested her head on Raven's

shoulder.

“Ummm, I’d hate to interrupt this heart warming moment but would someone care to explain what’s going on?” Dion asked.

Raven let go of Tiffany and turned toward Dion. He looked at them waiting for an answer. She tried to think of one.

“Raven?” Tiffany’s eyes were on her. Raven could see the question in her eyes. Tiffany wanted answers too.

Raven licked her lips and exhaled. “Tiffany, what exactly do you remember?”

“You. You were freaking out in the bathroom. You seemed really messed up and I wanted to help you. I remember us sitting on the bath room floor and your hands bleeding.”

Raven looked down at her hand and saw the band-aids wrapped around her fingers. She closed her hand and looked back at Tiffany.

“I reached over to touch you and then...” Tiffany trailed off, remembering what happened next.

“And then what, Tiffany?” Raven asked. She needed Tiffany to say it. She needed to know that she hadn’t imagined it.

“And then it was like suddenly everything went dark. Not just the absence of light, but as if it was pouring out of me, filling the room until there was nothing left. Like it was being pulled out of me.”

“She’s talking about you, you know,” a familiar voice said. Raven turned to see the girl leaning against the bed. “That’s what happens when you go into people’s heads. You pull the darkness into the light. You were supposed to destroy it but, since you didn’t, it festered. You nearly cost your friend her sanity.”

“I couldn’t escape it,” Tiffany said.

Raven looked back at her. Tiffany shivered at the memory.

“Do you remember seeing anything?” Raven asked.

Tiffany looked away from Raven, her eyes falling down to her lap. “I saw you and Dion. You guys were heading off to college. I tried to reach you but I couldn’t. Then my dad was calling for me. He was sick again but I couldn’t get to him either. I was trying when she showed up.”

Raven would never admit to it but she felt relieved hearing the details of Tiffany’s story match her own. She wasn’t crazy, not yet.

“The *she* your friend is referring to would be the manifestation of her own darkness,” the girl said.

Raven ignored her, focusing on her friend.

Tiffany’s hands fidgeted in her lap. “She kept saying this really awful stuff. She made it sound so convincing I almost believed it. I just wanted it to stop. I didn’t want to feel...to be in that darkness anymore.” Her voice broke and she closed her eyes.

Raven reached out and took Tiffany’s hand. “You know nothing she said was true, right?”

“Yeah, Tee, it was just a crazy dream,” Dion said.

“Of course, I know that.” Tiffany pulled her hand back, looking at Raven and Dion. “I’m not suicidal. I mean my life’s not great but nobody’s life is perfect one hundred percent of the time. It was just...in that moment, all the bad things about life shadowed over everything else until they were all I could see. I don’t even feel that way anymore. Honestly, it barely makes sense to me now that I’m awake.”

“That’s because she’s cleansed now.” The girl moved to lay down at the end of the bed. She folded her hands under her head. “Your friend should actually be feeling lighter now, like a balloon. It should last her for a little while.”

“That still doesn’t explain everything. Why did this happen?” Dion asked.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense to me either. All I did was touch her. Right, Raven?”

They both turned to look at Raven wanting to see if she had any explanation. Raven opened her mouth but then closed it. She didn’t know what to say. Even when she tried to explain it to herself it didn’t make sense. Tiffany had been there with her in the dream world, but neither of them seemed to notice the girl lying on her bed.

“Tell them that your soul has been connected with a spirit from another dimension. I’d love to see the looks on their faces after that one,” the girl said with a laugh.

“Would you just shut up!” Raven glared at the girl. Her eyes were on Raven, a slow smile stretching across her face. The room grew silent as Raven realized the mistake she’d made.

“Uh, Raven?” Dion’s fearful voice was the first to break the silence.

Raven turned to her friends. They both stared at her, their expressions fearful. Her outburst had done nothing for her sanity plea.

“Who were you talking to?” Dion asked.

“I...”

The girl laughed. “This ought to be good.”

Raven fought the urge to turn back around and glare at her again. She wasn’t making this easy and her friends were waiting for her answer.

“I...um...” Raven rubbed at her neck. Their eyes were on her.

The girl sighed and sat up. “Oh for goddess sake, just get it over with. Touch the girl's hand with your right.”

Raven looked back at the girl. “How is that supposed to help?”

“Just do what I say unless you want to end up in the cuckoo-bird's nest,” the girl said.

Raven thought there was a high probability she’d end up there either way.

“Raven, are you okay?” Tiffany asked.

Raven looked at her friend and sighed. She didn’t have anything to lose at this point. Raven grabbed on to Tiffany’s hand. The ring on her finger glowed. Red light wrapped around both of their hands.

“Hello there cupcake,” the girl said over Raven shoulder. Tiffany’s eyes widened before she screamed and jumped off the bed. Raven’s hand fell away.

“What? What happened?” Dion asked, looking between Raven and Tiffany.

Tiffany raised a trembling hand and pointed toward Raven “Ghost.”

“Ouch. Your friends a little on the rude side, Raven. You know back in the old days I’d be tempted to kill her for that type of comment,” the girl said.

Raven didn’t pay her any attention. She was still surprised by the fact that Tiffany had seen her.

“What do you mean ghost?” Dion eyed Tiffany, worrying about the mental state of both of his friends now.

“Over there. I saw her but she disappeared when I moved. She was right there.”

Dion followed Tiffany’s gaze to the empty space behind Raven. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I know what I saw, Dion. She was there, now she’s not.”

“She’s still here,” Raven said.

They both turned to look at her.

“She’s still here.” Raven repeated and then gestured toward the spot next to her. “Right here actually.”

Their gaze shifted from Raven to the empty spot next to her. The girl waved at them but Raven was the only one who could see it.

Realization lit inside Tiffany’s eyes. “She’s the one from earlier, isn’t she? The girl you said you saw.” Tiffany took a step closer to the bed. She stretched out her hand trying to feel for the girl. “Can she talk? Can you hear her?”

“Please tell me you guys are joking right now,” Dion said.

Raven sighed. She didn’t blame him for not believing. If she’d heard this from someone else she’d probably have a hard time believing it too. Ghost only existed inside of horror movies.

The girl stood from the bed. “Fine, I’ll make this easy on you. You hold hands with tweetal-dee and tweetal-dumb and I’ll do the explaining. Chances are they won’t believe it any other way.”

Raven looked at the girl and then back at her friends. She doubted the girl could be trusted but didn’t see any other way to make Tiffany and Dion believe.

“She says that we have to hold hands and then she’ll explain everything,” Raven said to her friends.

Raven stood from her bed and held out her hand to Dion and Tiffany. They both looked down at it but neither made an attempt to grab her hand.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk to her,” Tiffany said. “All the horror movies say that talking to the dead only makes it worse. Maybe if we just ignore her she’ll just disappear and you know... move on.”

The girl snorted behind them.

Raven only shook her head. “I don’t think that’s how this works.”

“Are either of you hearing yourselves right now?” Dion took a step closer to Raven, his eyes searching hers. “Raven, you have to know this whole thing sounds-“

“Crazy. Yeah, I know. It’s been pretty insane these past few days. Even I thought I was losing my mind up until five minutes ago, but you have to believe me. She’s not going anywhere and I don’t want to have to do this alone. Please.” Raven looked at both her friends.

Tiffany sighed and placed her hand in Raven’s. “Fine, but if she turns out to be an evil demon who possesses my body you better get me a damn good priest.”

Raven smiled at Tiffany. She turned to Dion, who still stood at a distance.

“Please, Dion. If I’m really crazy and you don’t see anything then you can check me into the nearest psych-ward,” Raven said.

Dion hesitated for a moment before walking over to the two girls. He placed his hand on top of Tiffany’s. The moment all three of the hands were together the ring on Raven’s hand began to glow. They all stared down at it. Rays of red light wrapped around their hands, tying them together.

“Boo,” the girl whispered from behind them.

Both Tiffany and Dion jumped back and screamed. Their hands fell away from Raven’s, breaking the connection. The girl laughed, bending over and clutching her stomach.

“Oh my goddess. The look on their faces.” The girl laughed. Raven turned around and scowled at her. The girl looked up at Raven and started to laugh harder.

“Did you hear that?” Dion asked still sitting on the ground where he’d fallen. His eyes flicked around the room trying to find out where the sound came from. Tiffany answered with a nod. They turned to look at Raven.

After a moment the girl’s laughter died down. She cleared her throat and brushed at the skirt of her dress. She looked at Raven, her face taking on a more somber expression. She seemed older. The change was so instant Raven had to wonder if the girl had a double personality.

“Forgive me, it’s different over here. Some times the impulses are too hard to control. Tell your friends to do it again,” the girl said.

Raven got the feeling the girl was used to people following her command. Every sentence felt more like an order than a question.

Raven stepped towards the girl. “Is this some kind of twisted game to you?”

“No, this is more than life and death to me. But as I said, some times it’s hard to control the impulses. If you want to know what is going on I need to explain while my mind is still mostly intact.”

Raven stared at the girl. She pondered over her words. Perhaps, the girl truly was insane. Raven wondered what it meant for her if the girl inside her mind was crazy. Could she be trusted to explain what was happening? In the end Raven decided she didn’t have an option. She turned back to her friends.

“She’s sorry for scaring you and she wants us to try it again,” Raven said to them.

“She’s sorry? The little demon almost gives us a heart attack and all she can say is *sorry*?” Tiffany glared at the space behind Raven.

“I’m not really sure what’s happening here but she seems to have some answers. Please, Tiffany.” Raven held out her hand again. Tiffany hesitated a moment before grabbing on to Raven’s hand. Raven felt relieved the moment their hands touched. She didn’t think she could face this alone.

“Come on, Dion. This crazy train ain't leavin without you,” Tiffany said looking down at Dion.

Dion stood up. His unsure gaze shifted between Tiffany and Raven. Out of all of them Dion was probably the most rational. He had what most would consider a reasonable fear of the unknown. Raven couldn’t blame him for being hesitant.

There was a change in the air, a sense of stepping into the unknown. Very few moments had the ability to completely change the course of life. Raven got the feeling that this was one of those moments.

“Would you stop being a baby and put your big boy pants on. Unless, of course, you want Raven to have to do this alone.”

Raven looked at Tiffany. She stood with her hand against her hip, eyeing Dion. Raven thought back to what she’d seen inside of Tiffany’s mind. The way Dion looked and how he held onto the other Raven’s hand left a strange feeling inside of her heart. Before she’d thought Tiffany had been just teasing when she talked about Dion and her getting together. Now she questioned what was hidden in the undertones.

Dion narrowed his eyes at Tiffany and frowned. When he glanced at Raven his gaze softened.

Not good, the voice in the back of her head said, but Raven pushed the thought away. She sent a silent plea Dion's way. She needed him for this. Deep down she knew she couldn't do this without him.

Dion shook his head and placed his hand on top of Tiffany's. "Fine, let's do this."

The ring glowed again, wrapping their hands together just as it had before. They looked up at each other, understanding that this moment meant something more. A pack, sealed with the touching of hands.

Guilt swelled up inside of Raven's chest. She knew that whatever happened in the future, any shortcomings or mistakes would tie back to this moment.

"Hello."

The girl spoke from behind them. They all turned to look at her. She stood in front of them different than before. Her face was painted and hair pulled back. For the first time, Raven could sense an incredible amount of power inside the girl. It seemed to radiate off of her. She was something to be feared.

The girl folded her hands in front of her. "I am Lulana, fallen Queen of Heart, and I'm here to help you destroy the greatest evil this world has ever known."

41

The Heart Queensland

The Heart library was located inside the castle walls. It wasn't as grand as some of the White's libraries, but it held its fair share of information. The shelves stretched high above Lu and smelled of dust and yellowing paper. She probably wouldn't have known how to find it were it not for Leo. The library wasn't a place many women ventured.

As a princess, Lu's time was expected to be spent training, not reading. For the most part, the unspoken rule hadn't bothered her. Running around and fighting was much more fun than maintaining her studies.

There's power in keeping you ignorant. Meshi's words bothered her. Leo had taught Lu how to read and write, but she never considered the oddity of not being given a tutor. Even a princess should have been taught the basics.

Lu caught the attention of a few scholars as she passed down the aisles. Their eyes watched her, not daring to speak a word but sending silent messages that she was not welcomed.

"Excuse me." Lu looked down the aisles at one of the robed men.

He looked up from his book, eyes widening. "My queen?"

"Blessed morn."

"Blessed morn," The man repeated with a bow of his head. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for something, but I don't know where to start."

"You are looking for something in here?" The man sounded flabbergasted.

"Yes, here. Why else would I ask?"

The man cleared his throat. "Well, um, what are you looking for?"

"A book."

“A book?” The man’s brows rose into his hairline.

Lu did her best to keep the frustration off of her face. She may have been a woman but she was also his queen. It wasn’t like she wanted to be here surrounded by dusty old men and even dustier books, but she was tired of sitting around waiting for new information to turn up.

“My queen?” A voice called from behind.

Lu turned to see Tomerin standing behind her. They held a bundle of books against their hip and a candle in their hand. Lu’s eyes widened to see them standing there. She’d not seen them since their mission.

Tomerin looked different out of their uniform. The gray tunic they wore stretched down to their calves and their curly hair was pushed back by a simple silver pin revealing more of their oval face.

Tomerin leaned slightly to the side looking over Lu’s shoulder. “If you seek assistance, know that the minds of these men are often feeble and prone to confusion.”

Lu glanced over her shoulder at the man. He bowed his head low but did not say anything.

Lu looked back at Tomerin. Their eyes met and she saw a frustration in their eyes she understood perfectly. A gilú’s place inside the library was about as contradictory as a queen’s. The rules were neither forbidding nor welcoming.

“What book are you looking for?” Tomerin asked.

Lu moved closer to them. She glanced down at the books in their hands. The titles were on plants and herbs. She looked back up at their brown eyes assessing the risk. The less people who knew about what she was up to the better.

Tomerin waited patiently for her response. Their eyes did not plead for her trust or guarder any truths; they simply stared back at her.

“Research,” Lu said. She glanced at the shelves that surrounded them. “I wish to know more about our enemies.”

“‘To know your enemy is to know yourself’ Dona Cavila, *The Tale of Despriter*.” Tomerin held out their candle for Lu to hold. They turned and began walking. “He believed evil was individually defined. He was sentenced to fifty lashes when it was discovered that he was running an underground gambling house to fund his literature.”

Lu quickly followed behind gripping the candleholder with her fingers. “The enemy I look for hides beyond the wall.”

“Ah, there is much to be learned on the subject, and yet information is so very scarce. Why do you think that is?” Tomerin glanced back over their shoulder at Lu.

Lu stared back at them not knowing what to say.

Tomerin didn’t wait for her answer. “Though perhaps it is for the best. Most do not realize that even knowledge comes with a cost.”

They moved deeper into the library. Lu noticed how the lighting seemed to dim as they walked. There were the same amount of candelabras but the glow of the flame seemed to fade.

The darkness devours here. The thought chilled Lu.

They stopped near the back of the library. Tomerin gestured down the hall. “Here we are, my queen. All the information the Heart holds on the orcestral forest is inside these shelves.”

Lu’s eyes scanned the shelves of books. She plucked one randomly from the shelf. The book was bound in worn brown leather. Turning it over she looked at the title. *Alahin’s Labyrinth*, the story of the high priest’s holy journey through the orcestral forest. The only reason she knew about it was because of the passages Leo used to read to her.

Lu glanced back at Tomerin. “Thank you.”

Tomerin bowed their head.

Lu held out the candleholder to them but they shook their head.

“Keep it. I have what I need.” Tomerin shifted the books against their chest.

Lu nodded looking down at the candle. She took a breath and looked back at Tomerin. “About the mission, I...I just wanted to thank you again, all of you.”

She’d told Domicin she’d visit but somehow it slipped her mind again. Looking at Tomerin she felt the shame of her absence.

“Tyla misses you. She is excited to learn more about our new queen. Though, honestly, many things excite her. She is troublesome to understand at times, but worth the try.”

Lu thought of the multi-colored eyed girl. From what she’d seen the two were rather opposite, and yet, when Tomerin spoke of her, there was a softness in their eyes. It made Lu jealous in a way she did not fully

understand. The feeling was much like when they'd first set out for their mission and Lu recognized the bond between the other members.

"There is much I must see to right now, but when I have time I'd like to sit down with all of you," Lu said.

Tomerin offered another bow. "Thank you, my queen, but do not worry yourself too much. There will be more missions to come and through all of them we will be here for you."

They left her alone with the shelves. Lu stood for a moment thinking of the ninth. They were interesting people, perhaps even good. She was the one that was wrong. More missions meant more death. Her duties would not disappear; the only hope was that she grow numb to them. One day she might not even see them as deaths.

Lu turned her attention back to the shelves. Walking down the aisles, she grabbed several other interesting books. When she finished she walked towards the front of the library, arms full of books.

"My Queen."

Lu turned around and saw the same man from before standing behind her. She arched a brow at him.

"The books," the man said with a look of alarm.

"Worry not, if I can be trusted to keep a queensland safe surely these books won't be too much of a problem." Lu gave the man one final smile before opening the library door. Someone was sure to hear about this, but Lu would deal with it later. For now, she had what she came for.

42

The Heart Queensland

Lu dragged one of her chairs over to her chamber window. She placed the stack of books on the ledge and settled into the chair. Grabbing the first book she prepared herself for perhaps the longest unfortunate period of study she'd ever been victim to.

The backdoor creaked open a few hours later. Eleaa stepped in holding fresh bedding. She smiled when she saw Lu. "What kind of trouble are you up to?"

"The worst kind." Lu closed her book and rubbed her eyes.

Tomerin was right about information being scarce. The books were either filled with things she already knew or useless information. Scholars could be the strangest creatures sometimes. Their way of wording seemed almost purposely confusing. Reading through sections of the text it seemed like oracles, white ichion, and piker's vein, were descendants of the orcestrals, which was in clear contradiction of the agreed upon fact that the land of the three queens had been cleansed.

Sections on the mid to late Merion period were even less clear. There was mention of the eleventh Heart Queen's second naming ritual, but no clear mention of how or when the first ritual spell was broken. Everyone knew he was behind it, but the text made no point to connect the two.

Thinking about it made Lu's head spin. She focused her research on what Leo had told her about the roses. There was a thick section in one on the toxicity of blood sap but it only listed the white rose for treatment.

Lu's eyes hurt from reading. Written words did strange things when she tried to read them. They jumbled all around, switching places. Reading one passage took forever. Her finger tracked along each word to avoid any confusion.

“Poor thing.” Eleaa walked over to the bed and began to strip it. “You know you shouldn’t let those things fill your head with silly nonsense. Those old hajes in cloaks get to looking at those papers and think they know all there is to be known about the world.”

“They seem to know more than we ever will.”

Eleaa snorted. “If I wrote a passage that said rubbing shit on your head was the best cure for baldness and snuck it inside the shelves, half of those men be walking around with a nice stinky chocolate topping by midday.”

“But you can’t write.”

Eleaa turned around with her hand on her hip and eyes narrowed. “You know what I mean, my queen. You can’t go believing everything you read.”

“I need something to believe. I’ve spent hours looking at these and found nothing.”

“Stories, believe in the stories.”

Lu arched a brow at her maid. “Stories? Like those old tales you use to tell us.”

“Exactly.”

Lu shook her head. “I may be young, Eleaa, but not young enough to still believe those stories are real.”

“Why not? Because some man didn’t write it down and proclaim it as true?”

“No, because in those stories men talk to trees and marry them as wives.”

“They sure do.”

Lu chuckled. There was something stabilizing in Eleaa’s unchanging mannerism. So many other things in Lu’s life were different now. It was good to know that Eleaa had stayed the same.

“And what stories do you have of the blood sap?”

“Vengeance,” Eleaa said.

“Vengeance?”

Eleaa nodded. “A tale of injustice and the angered tree princess Carsathia.”

Lu leaned back in her chair. “Do tell.”

There was a knock at the door before Eleaa could start her story.

“Lord Ramor is here to see her majesty,” the guards announced from outside Lu’s door.

“Let him through.” Lu looked at Eleaa and said in a softer voice, “We’ll finish later.”

Eleaa bowed and stepped out of the room through the door she came in.

Lu stood from her chair and sat down her book. The doors opened and Ramor stepped through. Two guards followed behind him carrying a wooden chest. Golden scripture adorned the top and a thick lock held it together. The guards sat the chest down in the middle of the room before turning to leave.

Ramor smiled at Lu. “Good afternoon, your majesty.”

“What is that?”

Ramor looked at the chest and then back at Lu. His smile widened. “It’s a surprise.”

“I’m generally not fond of surprises.”

Ramor’s smile faltered. He cleared his throat before speaking again, “How are you? I know the last time we talked you were feeling a bit... unsettled.”

“I’m well. What’s in the chest?” Lu asked, wasting no time. She really did hate surprises.

“Um...well...It’s a gift,” Ramor said. He was fidgeting again. He walked over to the chest and opened it. Lu stepped forward to see what was inside. One egg, about the size of her head, rested on a satin pillow. It was covered in what looked like black scales, but when Lu looked at it from a different angle the scales seemed to be a dark greenish purple.

“Is it a-“

“Jabber? Yes, it is,” Ramor answered her unspoken question.

“How did you find it?” Lu asked in amazement.

“One of the traveling priests found it in an abandoned nest. I bought it from him. I’ve been holding onto it for some time now.”

“And you’re giving it to me?”

Ramor nodded.

Lu reached into the chest and pulled out the egg. It was heavier than she anticipated. She cradled the egg in her arms, enjoying the weight of it. The egg was warm with life, almost too incredible to believe.

Judging by the weight of the egg the baby inside was sure to grow up big and strong. Most jabbers grew to be as tall as her chamber ceiling and had a wingspan as long as her dining hall. Their size and speed allowed them to cover three times the speed of the fastest horses.

They were a grand sight to behold, or at least that's what the stories said. Lu had never seen one in real life.

"Do you think it is a boy or a girl?" Lu asked, looking back up at Ramor.

Ramor shrugged. "It is hard to tell when it is in egg form."

Lu admired the shiny scales. They were absolutely beautiful. "I think it will be a girl."

"Well, your majesty, there is only one way to find out."

Lu looked back up at Ramor. "You want *me* to do it?"

"You are the only one who can. Though, we could ask The Red Queen if you're feeling so trusting. She may let you see it for a moment before stealing it back to The Red Queensland."

"No, you're right." Lu wouldn't trust anyone with the precious egg. She was both excited and afraid. Jabbers were strong creatures but everything was vulnerable in infancy. If Lu messed this up she would never forgive herself.

"Do you think she's ready?" Lu asked.

Ramor nodded. He placed his hand on her shoulder and guided her back over to the bed. Lu sat the egg down. She crouched so that she was eye level with the egg.

Jabbers hatched very different from other eggs. The mother jabber used mental wavelengths to communicate with their offsprings while they were still in egg form. It was similar to the way birds knew how to fly in formation but far more advance. A mother jabber had to convince the baby that it was safe enough to come out of its shell in order for it to hatch.

Lu's great-great-grandmother had been the first to learn how to recreate the wavelength without the mother jabber. It was much like opening the third eye but required more focus. Not many could secure an egg and even less had the ability to hatch it.

Lu took a deep breath and focused on the egg. Meshi hadn't necessarily trained her to crack open eggs but Lu had spent years stretching

her mind. She imagined herself reaching past hard layers of scale, each layer harder to brake than the one before.

Lu felt for the jabber's mind. Once inside she did not stop. She reached deeper, focusing only on the task ahead of her. The world around her faded into nothingness. It felt as though she was forcing herself through a small straw. Her head began to throb but still she did not stop.

Suddenly the straw shattered and Lu felt a release. She could feel a soft innocent glow around her. It cautiously circled her.

"Hello," Lu said, her voice echoing in the black.

The glow paused for a moment before shifting hesitantly closer.

"Hello," the baby jabber answered. Its voice was light and sweet with a slight undertone of curiosity. "Who are you? You're not one of my kind. You do not feel the same."

"I am..." Lu debated on what she should tell the baby jabber. No one was supposed to know the queen's real name, but the jabber wasn't human. There was a chance it would work and if it did, the jabber wouldn't be able to speak the name to anyone else. What could it hurt to share this information?

Lu cleared her throat and tried again, "I am Lulana. People... the ones who cared for me... they used to call me Lu."

Lu hadn't realized how much she missed the sound of her name until she spoke it to another. It almost sounded strange to her now.

"I've never heard of a Lulana. What are you doing here?" The jabber asked.

"I've come to see if you are ready to hatch from your shell."

"Hatch from my shell? Why would I do that? It is very cozy in here." It wasn't uncommon for a jabber to grow fond of its shell. If the mother took too long to hatch the egg the baby jabber would become too attached. Many died without ever awakening from their shells.

"Yes, but do you not tire of being stuck inside here all day?" Lu asked.

"At least I know what it is like in here. Out there seems so very strange. I don't think I'll fit in very well."

"Of course you will. Once you are hatched you will be able to help people and they will love you for that."

One of the most useful abilities the jabber possessed was its screech. The high-pitched screeched cleared the mind of those who were mildly infected. When it was fully developed the powerful screech had a radius to clear an entire village. Next to the white rose it was one of the most effective ways to cure madness. This was the help Lu had been waiting for.

The baby jabber paused, thinking about Lu's words. "I don't know. It still seems frightening."

Lu could feel the baby Jabber beginning to pull away. She knew that if she did not convince it to come out now it would never hatch.

"I would be there with you," Lu said, stopping the Jabber from its retreat. "It must have been hard all this time with no one around. I know what it's like to live your life guarded. You spend most of your time surrounded by life but never really apart of it. I also know that even if you love your shell, part of you hates it too. Because even if it keeps you safe it also leaves you lonely and afraid."

Lu waited for the jabber's response.

"And how can I trust that you won't leave me. My mother was supposed to be the one to come for me but she is long gone," the baby jabber said.

The glow around Lu seemed to vibrate with its anger. Lu hadn't thought about how it would feel to be left behind by its mother. From its shell, it could only gather so much information about the outside world. The jabber had been smart enough to understand that its mother had left but it was not able to understand why.

"I would never abandon you," Lu said.

She never had a pet before. They would never allow her anything that might take focus away from training. She had no experience in raising or caring for anything but she knew she'd do everything to provide for the jabber.

"I'll be good to you. I swear it."

"How can I believe you? Your kind is known for their lies," the jabber said.

"You're right. My world is full of liars but that is why I need you. Your kind is loyal and honest. With you I would never hide who I am. You have already seen more of me than most of the members of my court.

Together we could be a team. My brother once told me that everyone needs someone. Will you let me be that someone to you?"

There was another pause. The jabber appeared to be thinking about what Lu had said. The glow around her came closer but then retreated. Lu's heart began to sink with the knowledge that she'd failed the jabber. It had been too long since she had to make friends. Perhaps she just wasn't any good at it.

"Okay, I'll do it. I'll hatch."

Lu looked back up at the glowing light. "Really?"

"I'm interested to see what you Lulana's are made of."

Lu smiled as she began to pull back. She'd done what so few had been able to accomplish. Even her own mother had not been able to secure a jabber's trust.

"Do you promise to be there when I come out?" The jabber asked in a small voice.

"Of course, I will. I'll be waiting for you when you're done."

Lu blinked, once again aware of her surroundings. She stood up but her legs were weak and her head pounded. Flopping down on the bed she sat next to the jabber egg.

"Were you able to convince the jabber out of its shell?" Ramor asked.

Lu turned to him. She'd almost forgotten he was there. "She has started the process." Lu's hand affectionately rubbed at the scales. They were warmer now. She hoped it wouldn't take too long.

"Then I suppose all that is left to do is wait for it to make its first appearance," Ramor said leaning against the bedpost with folded arms.

Lu studied him. "Why give her to me?" Her tone lacked its usual amount of skepticism. She was just curious to know the answer. "I'm sure there are people willing to pay top card for it."

"It would have been a waste in anyone else's hands. Besides, you will need it. Being queen can be a dangerous position. It's hard to know who you can trust. You have to be skeptical of everyone, even those closest to you. At least now you'll have something you can trust completely. I wanted to give you that peace of mind."

Lu's eyes rose to meet his. She was beginning to understand why her mother had chosen him to be her Ace. He was growing on her and she

wasn't sure how to feel about that. When he saw her falling apart he'd known what to say to pull her back together. Now he'd given her something that made her feel genuine happiness.

"Why did she never come to see me?" Lu asked.

Ramor frowned and looked down at the bed. "May I?"

Lu nodded.

He sat and let out a sigh. "Your mother was a complicated woman. She wanted a lot from the world. Tried to give it her all, but life often takes more than what it gives."

"Ramor, please, say it in a way I can understand. Just tell me the truth."

"She was afraid."

Lu looked at him but his eyes were focused straight ahead.

"More than most people knew. More than she let on. She was afraid of loving anyone. She never said it out loud, but she didn't have to. When you looked at her, if you were truly looking, you could see it. You scared her the most."

"Why?"

Ramor shook his head. "I can't say, not for certain."

"Was it because..." A lump formed in Lu's throat she fought to swallow. "Because of my ailment." Lu tried not to look at her hands. Tried not to see those pale boney things staring back at her.

Ramor reached over and took her hand. "No. It was not because of that. Despite what everyone says and believes, your mother never wanted a second daughter. I do know that for certain."

Lu looked away from Ramor. She did not want him to see her face or the shine in her eyes. "Thank you, Ramor."

Lu still didn't fully understand, but he'd given her something to think about. The one she really wanted to question was no longer here. She'd give anything to have one honest conversation with her mother.

"You don't need to thank me, my queen."

"Yes, I do." Lu looked back at Ramor. His skin was as pale as hers. She knew the rumors about him were as unfair as the rumors about her, but she still judged him.

"You've done nothing but try to help me since I became queen and all I've been is rude to you. I've always done things on my own. It's what

I'm use to, but I can't do this by myself." Lu hesitated before continuing. She thought of what she'd said to the jabber. Skepticism was a good trait to have but not when it kept you from making useful allies. "I need people on my side I can trust. Are you one of them?"

Ramor squeezed her hand. "I want nothing more than to help you become the queen the Heart deserves."

Lu took a deep breath and stood. She stepped in front of Ramor. "Then allow me to reinstate your position as Ace. Help me protect this queensland from those who would seek our destruction."

Ramor looked up at her. "Are you sure, my queen? I failed your mother. I could not bare to fail her heir."

"Then don't. They are dead and you are alive. That means you owe a duty to them. Stand with me now and prove yourself worthy." Lu held out her hand.

Ramor's gloved hand slipped into hers. Lu wrapped her fingers around his, never losing eye contact. "But let me be clear, if you feel that you are not able to service the queensland to the best of your abilities refuse me and my offer." Lu wouldn't blame him if he did. She gave him the one thing she never had. An option.

Ramor gripped her hand tighter. He kneeled down on one knee. His eyes never leaving hers. "I will give my all to help you and this queensland. My words and mind are yours, use them at your will," He said, tapping her knuckles to his forehead. Lu felt their bond wrapping around her the same way Domicin's had. This time instead of bringing strength, a wave of clarity washed over her.

Ramor rose from the ground never letting go of Lu's hand. He stepped closer. The sudden intimacy of their position surprised her. His gaze made an unwanted heat rise up into her face. "You will be the most unforgettable queen the Heart has ever known. I will make sure of it." He was close enough for Lu to smell the spiced tea on his breath.

Ramor raised his hand to touch Lu's cheek. It would have been a highly inappropriate gesture even for her newly appointed Ace. Ramor must have realized this because he stopped and took a step back. He smiled and the moment was gone.

Lu wasn't quite sure what had just happened. Nothing he'd done had been out of line but it was still unsettling. A number of unwanted emotions

rose inside of her. She pushed them away, too flustered to analyze any of them.

The egg on the bed rocked, catching both of their attentions. Lu walked back over to the egg and sat down in front of it. She watched as it shifted and listened as it cracked. The shell split at the top. From the top four long curled claws stretched out. The claws pushed through the crack until the shell broke from the tension. On top of the broken shell pieces sat the baby jabber.

The baby jabber raised its black head. Lu stared into its bright yellow eyes. They were oddly human. She looked into them and could feel the presence of the glowing form she'd spoken with inside the shell.

The baby Jabber blinked three times before unwrapping its wings. They stretched out to reach both sides of Lu's bed. Opening its mouth, a pink tongue rolled out in what appeared to be a yawn. The scales around her neck rattled with the intake of air. Lu looked at the razor sharp teeth and knew they would grow much larger in time.

The baby Jabber closed its mouth and shook its head. When it was done it looked back up at Lu.

"Hello," Lu said.

The baby Jabber's eyes lit up, happy to see her. Lu placed her hand on the bed. The baby Jabber climbed up Lu's arm and sat on her shoulder. Its spiked tale gently swept back and forth. A thin lizard tongue flicked out and brushed against Lu's cheek. She giggled, but then stopped surprised by the sound.

Lu cleared her throat. "I take that to mean you're happy to see me."

Ramor walked up next to them. He studied the baby jabber. The jabber narrowed her eyes at him, appearing to be doing the same thing. Finally, Ramor smiled and turned to look at Lu.

"She appears to be healthy. Have you thought of a name?"

Lu thought for a moment. She'd never given name to anything before. It took her a moment to find one that would fit the baby jabber. A variety of different historical figures popped into her head. Some of them she'd never heard of, but her link with Ramor opened her to a well of new information.

"How does Illzeta sound?" Lu asked the Jabber perched on her shoulder.

“Illzeta helped develop-“

“The second from of white rose tonic. She found that dried petals created a more potent effect when mixed with tumertin. Her tonic was widely adapted after her death during the Loron period.” The information poured from Lu’s lips.

Ramor smile. “Correct. It is a very fitting name.”

The jabber’s tongue licked at Lu’s cheek again.

“Illzeta it is then,” Lu said. Her hand stroked Illzeta. Her scales were warm to the touch.

“I see the prince has given you his ring,” Ramor said.

Lu’s hand paused in the middle of Illzeta’s back. She drew it back. The ring stared up at her. She’d hardly thought about it since the prince had put it on her finger. Looking at it now it seemed out of place. The ring was enchantingly beautiful. The stones were finely cut, showing off their expense and prestige. It was everything Lu was not.

“Is it not to your liking?”

“No, it is very beautiful. I am grateful to the prince and his generosity.” Lu dropped her hand down to her side.

Ramor took a step forward. His eyes searching hers. Lu flinched when he took her hand but did not move away.

“He’s the one who should be grateful, your highness. Everyone should be grateful for what you have done and will do for them, but most will not. They will live out their days never knowing of the sacrifices you’ve made for them. When times are good, they shall embrace you but when they are bad, they will blame you. Such is the way of this world. But know that I will never forget all you have done,” Ramor said.

Lu felt the urge to move closer to him. Perhaps through him she could become more like the queen her mother had been, but she held back. Ramor would never know how much his words today meant to her.

Lu looked down at her hands and smiled. “Is that supposed to be the renowned advice of the Ace?”

Ramor’s hand loosened as a slow smile crept across his face. “Yes, actually it is. I’ve been practicing it since this morning.”

“It was a bit lacking,” Lu said.

He laughed.

Lu smiled back, but despite the joking atmosphere, the weight of his words sunk in. Everyone seemed to glorify what it meant to be queen. They spoke with admiration of what it meant to be the Heart's savior. Now that the crown sat on her head, what Ramor said seemed closer to the truth.

Dark times were approaching their queensland. This wedding would not be the last sacrifice she would make on the queenslands behalf.

Rise or fall they would hold her accountable. She could only pray to the goddess that she was strong enough to see them through, but at least now she felt less alone.

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43

Raven stared at Lu. Her dress was red, black, and gold, like something out of a storybook. Raven thought the dress looked familiar. She remembered the dream she had in class. The red fabric of her dress had been torn apart and left on the ground beneath her feet. Lu was wearing the same dress Raven had worn during her beheading.

“They killed you. You’re dead. I saw it,” Raven said.

“I was betrayed.” Lu’s voice was cold but there was a hint of pain inside her eyes as she spoke. The look reminded Raven of someone else.

“Betrayal can only come from the people we trust. That is why it hurt so much,” Her mother’s arms tightened around Raven as she spoke. Alarmed, Raven turned towards her mother. She wasn’t looking at her. Her eyes were focused on something in the distance. She blinked and looked down at her daughter. Raven stared up into her mother’s brown eyes. Her mother hid her emotions, but not fast enough to stop Raven from seeing it.

At the time she hadn’t realized that her mother had been talking about her father. Things had yet to escalate that far, but it was the first clue. Looking into Lu’s eyes she could see the same pain.

Dion reached out a hand to touch Lu. His fingers passed right through her. He pulled back his hand, staring at it.

“How are you here now?” Dion asked, voicing the question all three friends had been wondering.

“I am but a projection of my previous self. All that is left of me resides inside that ring.” Lu’s eyes fell to the ring on Raven’s finger.

Raven looked at the ring on her hand. This whole thing started after her birthday. From the moment she put on the ring everything had gone from bad to worse. She reached for it.

“Don’t bother trying to take it off,” Lu said. Raven looked back at her. “It would be easier to remove your finger from your hand than the ring from your finger.”

“What is it?” Raven asked.

“Magic, forgotten and old. The blood of the sisters who once walked between worlds. Ever since you put that ring on my soul has been slowly interlocking with yours. It’s what keeps me connected to your world and allows you to utilize my powers.”

“That’s not possible. It’s just a little piece of jewelry I picked up from the flea market,” Dion said.

Lu turned toward him. “I do believe the old lady told you that old jewelry has soul, did she not?”

“Are you saying that the woman in the flea market is apart of this?”

“No, the woman knew nothing of the power within the ring. I imagine she would have said something similar to the next paying customer. It just so happens that in this scenario her words rang true. Now that the bond is complete, Raven and I are able to fully communicate.”

“Earlier you said something about your mind not being intact. Is that because the process was not complete?” Raven asked. She thought of how Lu had originally only been able to appear in dreams. Even then, her messages had been vague and confusing.

Lu shook her head. “I’m afraid there is worse reasoning for that. I died just as the ring was being sent to your world. My soul had to be pulled back from the shadows and locked into the ring for this to work. The spell itself was experimental. None of us knew if it would work, let alone the outcome. The process left me shattered. Keeping hold of all the pieces is strenuous and after a while I begin to lose them. I become not myself.”

“Why do it then? Why didn’t your spirit- I don’t know- move on? Why send the ring here,” Tiffany asked.

Raven wanted to know the answer as well. She could understand Lu’s spirit wanting vengeance for the betrayal but she didn’t understand what any of it had to do with her.

“The person who betrayed me did it so that they could help unleash an evil into your world. It is the same evil that threatened to destroy my world. My death made it so I couldn’t fulfill my duty to my queensland but I refuse to let the same thing happen again.”

“What is this evil you keep talking about?” Tiffany asked.

“For many years my people have fought against him and the spread of madness throughout the lands. No one really knows where he comes from. He appeared sometime during the white war. No one quite understands why. All we know is of his passionate desire to spread fear and chaos. For some reason he desired entry into your world and now he has it.”

A chill ran down Raven’s back. She felt something lurking behind her, standing just outside her view. When she turned her head the only thing that she saw was her J Cole poster staring back at her. Lu’s words were having an effect on her.

“So let me get this straight. You’re telling us that there is a madman from another dimension running around out there?”

Lu nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid so. Although I must warn you that he is not just any madman. He is far more powerful than you can imagine. Mad genius would be a more appropriate description.”

“I don’t understand. What does any of this have to do with me?” Raven asked. Even if what Lu said was true she doubted she could be of any help. There were better people suited to take on a madman. A doctor for example, someone who’d actually specialized in the treatment of the mentally ill. Why hadn’t Lu gone to one of them?

“I told you before that it was my duty to protect my people. All of my power resides inside of the ring. The people of my bloodline were given the ability to be able to fight madness. The third eye allows us entry into the minds of others. Once inside we work to fix what’s broken. That same power is inside you now. That was how you were able to help save your friend. That is how we must stop him.”

“Wait, so are you saying you can fix what’s wrong inside people’s heads?” Raven asked. She thought of her mother and of the many nights she’d prayed for a way to save her. She’d given up hope, but now she felt the spark of it returning.

“In some cases, yes. Although there is a point where one can no longer be saved. Once they are broken we are only allowed to bring them peace,” Lu said, but Raven was only half listening.

I can fix her. She had done it with Tiffany. She saved her friend and thinking back on it, once she knew what she was supposed to do it hadn’t been too hard. Why wouldn’t it work on her mother?

Raven thought of what it had been like before the incident. She pictured her mother's smiling face and it almost brought tears to her eyes. It was possible for her to be like that again. Raven could fix her mother and they could be happy again. This could be the miracle she been waiting for.

"Raven," Lu called, gaining her attention again. There was a warning inside of her bright red eyes.

"I have to save her." Raven wasn't asking for permission. She'd do anything to help her mother and no one was going to get in her way.

"Raven, if you're going to stop a pigeon, you mustn't pluck his feathers," Lu said. The randomness of her words made them all pause.

Lu herself looked confused. She hadn't meant to say that. "A pigeon plucked becomes a duck," Lu said, trying again.

All three of the friends stared at her, trying to understand. Lu clenched her jaw and tried to concentrate.

"A pigeon-" Lu started again but stopped with a giggle. The laughter seemed to bubble out of her. She placed her hands over her mouth. The laughter continued, her body now shaking with it. Tears began to form in her eyes from the force of the laughter. She doubled over, looking pained.

"I don't think she can stop. She must be losing control again," Tiffany said.

Lu began to fade, her image changing as she did. The black liner smudged from her eyes down her cheek. A red line appeared around her neck and dripped blood.

Dion's eyes shifted between his friends and Lu. "Should we do something?"

"Do what?" Raven asked.

Dion didn't have an answer. He barely understood what was going on. He wasn't sure how they were supposed to fix something that logically shouldn't exist, but he thought they should be doing something. The girl seemed to be struggling.

Seconds later, it was too late. Lu's image completely disappeared. Raven dropped her hand away. For a moment they all stood still, staring at the empty space.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" Tiffany asked.

"Probably not, but she's already dead." Raven turned away. Walking over to her closet, she searched for her bag. She had it prepared

for *special* trips to see her mother. Pushing back the hangers of clothes, she reached inside. She shifted through the bag checking that everything was in place. Everything was where she'd left it.

"Damn Rae, that's kind of cold," Tiffany said, turning to face her.

Raven slung the bag over her shoulder. "It's the truth. There's nothing we can do for her."

Raven made her way out of the room. She was halfway down the stairs when a hand grabbed her. She turned to see that it was Dion.

"Wait, Raven. Where are you going?" He asked.

"I have to go see her. I have to try."

Dion frowned. "See who?"

"My mom."

"Raven, we still don't fully understand what's going on. She said a lot of confusing stuff and we haven't taken the time to understand any of it. Now is not the time to act rash."

Raven pulled her arm back. "My mother's sick. I'm going to save her. What more do we need to understand?"

Raven understood what Dion was saying but she also knew this needed to happen now. She knew that if she stopped long enough to think, doubt would sink in and hopes of saving her mother would be lost. This was her only chance.

"Raven--"

"What if it was Amber? What if it was Amber rotting away in that hospital? Can you honestly say you wouldn't do everything in your power to help her? Even if it seemed completely ridiculous, you'd still try."

Dion didn't say anything. Raven had already known his answer before she'd asked the question. He loved his little sister and would give his life to keep her safe.

"Raven," Tiffany called from atop the stairs. Raven looked back at her. She could tell from the worry in Tiffany's expression she didn't want her to leave.

"I'm going to save her," Raven said to both Tiffany and herself. This *had* to work. "Weather or not you want to be there is up to you but you can't stop me."

"We won't stop you and we're not going to abandon you, Raven. I just want you to understand the amount of danger you're putting yourself in.

You don't even have a plan," Dion said.

"I have a plan." Raven adjusted the straps of her bag. "Part of a plan."

"This is insanely stupid."

Raven shrugged. "You guys are the smart ones, not me."

"That's not funny, Raven."

Raven didn't respond. Dion closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine, we can use my car."

"Thank you." Raven was grateful he was willing to come along but any relief she felt was ruined by the anxiety seeing her mother stirred inside her. She didn't need to be told this was stupid. The voice in the back of her head was screaming it.

"Just hurry up before my more reasonable side realizes what's happening," Dion said, passing Raven on the stairs. He stopped on the bottom stair and turned back toward Tiffany.

"You too, Tee. Like you said this crazy train ain't leaving without you." Dion said with a smirk.

Tiffany crossed her arms. "I hardly think this is the time for jokes."

"Really? According to the girl, the world is facing emanate doom and we're helping our friend do something that could get her killed. Seems like the perfect time for a laugh if you ask me."

44

When Raven's father told her that her mother was being moved to a mental hospital, she'd immediately pictured a building out of a horror story. In her mind, Corvix hospital was a place that would sit on top of dark hill surrounded by thick iron gates. The doctors and nurses would all have sinister smiles. There would be big syringes, straight jackets, and bloody tools lying around.

Of course, the hospital was nothing like that. From the outside Corvix looked like any other care facility. It stood four stories high with brown bricks and square windows. The inside was full of plain white walls and the scent of disinfectants. They made emphases to stray away from anything too stimulating in designed. The littlest things could set the wrong patient off.

The front desk sat next to a door would not open without clearance. Raven walked up to the desk. The woman sitting behind the desk was as lackluster as the plain white walls. She didn't look up as Raven approached she simply slid a clipboard forward.

"Sign in. Everyone must be cleared for visitation. Both patient and doctor reserve the right to limit and restrict visitation. Those not cleared will be turned away. If you have any problem with visitation, please see the front desk located in the B wing." The woman said, flipping through the pages of her magazine.

Raven picked up the clipboard but did not fill out her name. Her mother was still on probation after attacking that doctor. Odds were she wouldn't receive her visitation privileges for a while. Instead, she wrote down Angelica Donovan.

Ms. Donovan had shared a room with her mother when she'd been considered well enough to have a roommate. Ms. Donovan had a daughter

named Angelica who she talked about often. As far as Raven knew, Angelica had never visited her. The first time she'd impersonated Angelica she'd almost thrown up from nerves. The second time was easier and fifth came almost naturally.

Raven handed the clipboard back to the woman.

"ID?" The woman asked holding out her hand.

Raven reached into her bag and pulled out her fake ID. The good thing about attending Rufus High was that with enough money, you could buy almost anything. She handed the ID to the woman. The woman glanced at the ID and the clipboard. She took one quick look at Raven and then handed the ID back.

"Several items are restricted beyond this point. There is a list of them located on this pamphlet," the woman said and pointed a finger toward the stack of pamphlets on her desk. The front of the pamphlet read *A safe environment is a happy environment* in bold letters.

Raven didn't pick one up. She'd been here enough to know their lists by heart.

"Feel free to go over them while you wait. Someone will be out to help you to the patient's room shortly. Thank you for visiting," the woman said, her eyes back on her magazine.

Raven turned away from the desk. Four blue chairs sat against the wall, functioning as the waiting area. Raven sat down in one, Tiffany and Dion followed suit. She stared at the door waiting for one of the nurses to appear. A hand rested on her knee. She turned to see Dion looking at her.

"Calm down. You look like you're ready to jump out of your seat," Dion whispered in her ear. Raven stilled. She hadn't noticed she'd been fidgeting.

"This has to work, Dion. It has to," Raven said. Her stomach was in knots. She closed her eyes and held her hands together. She tried to focus on her breathing. Dion pulled at one of her folded hands and took it in his. His warm hand held hers firm.

Raven looked back at him. His eyes were on her. She remembered the first day they met. His cardigan had been ripped and dirtied with the school logo falling off. He looked up at her through a swelling eye and she'd stared back at him. They'd both been quite a sight back then. His face covered in blood and hers in tears. She hadn't said anything to him at

first, just listened as his Spiderman bookbag hit the ground next to her. They sat on the swing set together without saying a word.

They were never supposed to be friends, but somehow he'd fallen into her world. She didn't remember the exact moment they became friends, but somehow, the marvel fanboy with the crooked smile had found his way through her walls.

"Thank you, Dion. You too, Tif." Raven said looking over Dion's shoulder at Tiffany. Tiffany reached over and took Raven's other hand. She gave it a squeeze. "I meant it when I said you didn't have to come but I'm really glad you did."

They were here together and that was all that mattered. When Raven turned back towards the door she could see a man in white scrubs approaching them. He opened the door and peered out. His eyes landed on them.

"Is one of you Angelica Donovan?" The man asked.

Raven stood from her chair. She walked over to the man and handed him her ID. "That's me."

He studied her for a moment. Raven's hand tightened around her bag strap. She wondered if he remembered her from a visit to her mother. If that had happened, he would know that she was not Angelica and they would be kicked out. Raven didn't remember seeing him before, but she didn't have the most reliable memory. Just as she felt the sweat forming on her forehead the man handed her back the ID.

"Right this way, Ms. Donovan and I can take you to see your mother." The man opened the door for her. Raven walked past him. She relaxed a little but knew this was far from over. Getting to Mrs. Donovan was easy. Getting to her mother would prove far worse.

45

Raven followed the nurse down the bright empty hallway. She glanced down at the checkerboard tiles. They reminded her of a game she'd use to play. The rules of the game were simple; if you stepped on the white tiles you died. Her mother always thought it was a silly game.

"But their like big checker boards mommy," Raven had told her. Getting caught in the white always spelled bad luck.

Her mother shook her head but smiled as she held onto her daughter's hand. "Then I guess that makes you the queen."

Raven found herself playing the game now. Her longer legs made the game easy but at least it was a distraction. She stopped once she noticed the strange look the nurse was giving her.

Raven kept her hands folded in front of her to stop them from fidgeting. Her nerves seemed to be getting worse the closer they got. She made sure not to do anything that might draw attention. One of the fluorescent lights overhead buzzed and flickered. Raven looked up. The flickering gave her an instant headache. She squeezed her eyes shut and looked away.

Black bird, black bird.

Raven looked behind her. The voice in her head was not her own.

What beautiful wings you have.

Checkered tiles stretched on in the empty hall. Raven's hands tightened around her bag.

You can't stop me. Don't even try, Raven sent her thoughts out, assuming the ghost girl was up to her tricks again.

"Ms. Donovan?"

"Coming," Raven said, turning back to the nurse.

They stopped in front of one of the many doors along the wall. The nurse pressed his card against the keypad. It beeped. The light on the keypad flashed green as the door unlocked. He stepped through with Raven following close behind. He put the key card into his pocket and stopped in the middle of the room. Raven bumped into the tall man, her weight causing them both to stumble. The nurse turned slightly, eyeing her.

“Sorry,” Raven said, her voice shaking. The longer the man stared at her the more uncomfortable she grew. She prayed that he hadn’t figured her out.

The man’s eyes dropped down to Raven’s scar before meeting her eyes again with a sneer. “Try to be careful. This is a hospital. You can’t just go stumbling about.”

Any bad feeling Raven had for bumping into him quickly dissipated.

“Mrs. Donovan, you have a visitor,” the nurse said. He turned back to face the other side of the room.

“Who is it?”

Raven stepped out from behind the nurse. She smiled at the woman sitting on the bed. She was in her late fifties and wore a purple cheetah print sweat suit. The morning newspaper sat neatly folded in her lap. Raven could see that she’d been working on a crossword puzzle.

“It’s me, mama,” Raven said, her voice bright.

Mrs. Donovan picked up the bifocals that rested around her neck and put them on. She squinted.

“Angie, is that you?” Mrs. Donovan asked.

Raven smiled and stepped closer to the bed. “Yup, it’s me, mama.”

Mrs. Donovan’s eyes lit up as she smiled back at Raven.

“Well don’t just stand over there. Come in and give mama a hug.” Mrs. Donovan said holding out her arms.

Raven walked over to the bed and pulled Mrs. Donovan into a hug. She smelled of rose perfume and hairspray. Mrs. Donovan held on tight to Raven. Despite her skinny arms, Mrs. Donovan was surprisingly strong. After a moment they pulled apart. Mrs. Donovan’s hands moved to Raven’s face.

“It is so good to see you, my angel,” Mrs. Donovan whispered. This close to her face, Raven could see the tears beginning to swell in the older woman’s eyes. “Tell me baby, have you forgiven your mama yet?”

Mrs. Donovan's words tore at Raven's heart. She knew it was wrong to manipulate Mrs. Donovan like this. Because of early dementia, Mrs. Donovan often confused younger women with her daughter. Something had happened between Mrs. Donovan and her daughter. Mrs. Donovan had never been specific, but whatever it was it was bad enough to tear the two apart.

The older woman regretted it. Raven could tell from just hearing her talk about it. It didn't matter what happened. From what Raven had seen Mrs. Donovan was a kind person. She didn't deserve to be left here alone.

The guilt Raven felt was almost enough to make her walk away. She looked back at Mrs. Donovan and smiled.

"Yes mama, I forgive you." Raven placed a kiss on the older woman's forehead.

"Oh my angel, you do not know how happy this makes me. Come sit and tell mama all about your life. It has been too long since we spoke." Mrs. Donovan moved over on the bed and patted the spot next to her.

Raven stood but turned back to look at the nurse. He was still standing by the doorway with his arms folded over his chest.

"You're free to go. I can handle it from here," Raven said to the nurse.

The nurse glanced between Raven and Mrs. Donovan.

"Go on now, you sour puss, my angel says she does not want you here," Mrs. Donovan said shooing the nurse away.

The nurse narrowed his eyes at the woman. His jaw twitched and for the first time, Raven noticed how intimidating the big man looked. She watched him, half expecting him to do something, but the man simply pointed at something above Raven's head. Raven turned to see a red button hanging on the wall above.

"Any problems hit that button and help will be here before you can say 'nutcase'"

Raven glared at him. No, she definitely didn't like this man.

"Thank you nurse, but your services are no longer required here," Raven said.

The man glared at Raven but then turned to leave the room. Raven watched the door close behind him. Once he was gone she sat down next to Mrs. Donovan on the bed.

Raven reached into her bag and pulled out the gardening magazines. “Look at what I brought you, mama.”

Mrs. Donovan’s eyes lit up when she saw them. She reached for the magazines and Raven let her have them. “Oh thank you. They don’t know how to get the good stuff here.” Mrs. Donovan said, already flipping through the pages.

Raven stayed with Mrs. Donovan for a half an hour. She had to wait to make her move to avoid suspicion. They talked about Angelica and her struggles with college. Raven made sure not to go into any specific details. She spoke of the general struggles of college students, while still making sure to paint a happy overall picture. Her version of Angelica might have had problems but she was still a happy girl with a bright future ahead of her.

Mrs. Donovan placed a hand over Raven’s.

“Don’t worry, my angel. I am sure that you will be able to work through this. Many people look at us and think that we are fools. That’s what everyone said when I ran away with your father. They told me that a black army man was sure to leave me without a penny to my name, but I knew my Robert was a keeper. I saw what no one else could see in your papa.” Mrs. Donovan squeezed Raven’s hand and leaned in closer. “We Donovan women are far more cunning than they give us credit for, my little birdy.” Mrs. Donovan smiled and for a moment Raven thought she saw a glimpse of something behind the older woman’s eyes.

Raven sat still not sure what to say. She wondered if Mrs. Donovan had seen through her charade. It wasn’t possible. Raven had done this before and the woman had never noticed but...

The woman leaned back and smiled at Raven. The intelligence in her eyes was replaced by a softer kinder look. “You are my daughter after all.”

Raven sighed and smiled back at Mrs. Donovan. “Thanks mama, it really helps being able to talk to you about this stuff. I’ve missed you.”

Raven’s words had their intended effect as she saw Mrs. Donovan's eyes start to tear up again. The older woman pulled her into another hug. Raven held her, hoping this would make up for what she was doing. Mrs. Donovan wanted to be loved and needed by her daughter. It wasn’t hard to figure that out. She could tell from the way the woman spoke about

Angelica. Even if her words were false they would give the woman a sense of peace.

“I’m just glad I could help. I’ve missed you so much.” Mrs. Donovan whispered. They held each other for a moment longer. Even though she knew this hug was not meant for her Raven found herself enjoying the embrace. This was what she’d missed most the four years her mother had been locked up.

Raven was the first to pull away. This was not her mother. Her mother was here waiting for Raven to come save her.

“Is something wrong, my angel?” Mrs. Donovan asked.

Raven shook her head. “No, it’s nothing mama, I just have to go to the bathroom.”

Mrs. Donovan smiled, the worry disappearing from her face.

“Oh well, the bathroom is down the hall. The key is right over there on the dresser,” Mrs. Donovan said.

Raven walked over to the dresser and picked up the bronze key.

“Hurry back, okay,” Mrs. Donovan said just as Raven was turning to leave.

Raven turned back around and stared at the older woman. If everything went according to plan she’d never see Mrs. Donovan again. In a few days, Mrs. Donovan would forget all about the fake daughter who came to visit her and the loneliness would return.

Raven walked back over to Mrs. Donovan. She bent down and placed a kiss on the woman’s forehead.

“Thank you...and...I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for, my angel?” Mrs. Donovan asked.

“Everything.” Raven gave the woman one last sad smile.

46

Raven stepped out of the room and left Mrs. Donovan behind. She walked down the checkered halls heading towards the bathroom. She kept her head bowed. There was still a chance that someone might notice her and ruin everything. Two nurses walked past her. She moved to the far right of the hall. Raven looked up and saw the blue restroom sign with an arrow pointing to the left. She rounded the corner, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one was following.

A thick solid mass slammed into Raven. She fell to the floor, landing hard on her bottom. Pain shot up from her tailbone. She cursed and looked up to see what she'd hit. Drake Murphy stared back at her.

Drake sat across from her rubbing at his elbow. "You really do have it out for me, don't you?"

Raven didn't say anything. She was still in shock from seeing him there.

Drake stood up and brushed off his pants. He held a hand out to Raven. She grabbed onto it without thinking and allowed herself to be pulled into a standing position.

Once they were eye-to-eye Raven realized how close they were standing and took a quick step back. Her face heated and she cleared her throat.

"I'm, ah, sorry about that. I didn't mean to..." Raven trailed off. Her voice had taken on an embarrassingly high pitch. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves.

"It's okay, don't worry about it. Did you hurt yourself?"

"Nope, I'm good, a-okay," Raven said holding up the okay sign. She mentally slapped herself for doing it afterward. She was acting like a

complete idiot. The last time they met she got to see a different side of Drake. Now it seemed she no longer knew how to act around him.

“Where were you headed in such a rush?”

“To the restroom, you know how it is when you really have to use it,” Raven said with an awkward laugh. After this, she’d probably have to avoid him for the rest of the year. There would be no coming back from this level of embarrassment.

“Oh, okay then, well I guess I better not hold you up any longer. I was actually just coming back from there. My tour guide is probably waiting for me.”

“Tour guide? So you’re here to check out Corvix?”

“Yeah, I told you I know someone who might be transferring here.”

“Right, well that’s good. I mean it’s good that you’re checking it out. Not that it’s good that someone you know is here- will be here.” Raven was babbling. The longer she stayed here the more likely it was she would get caught. This conversation needed to end now for both their sakes.

“I should probably just go now.” Raven stepped around Drake.

“Hey, Raven,” Drake called.

Raven stopped and turned back to look at him.

“I um...” Drake started but then cleared his throat. He seemed nervous about something. Raven stared at him. She couldn’t imagine what he had to be nervous about.

“We’re good, right? You won’t tell anyone that I was here, will you?”

It took a moment but Raven understood what he meant. She knew what it was like to have her family business on display and have others poke at it. Even with his elevated social status, Drake wouldn’t be able to stop the gossip. She understood his reluctance to go through that, but then again, he’d never done anything to stop the gossip about her mother. Why should she help him when he never helped her?

Because you’re not like them. You won’t exploit a stranger’s illness for a laugh, the voice in the back of Raven’s head whispered.

Raven sighed and nodded to Drake. “We’re good, Drake. You’re secret is safe with me. Just do me a favor and don’t tell anyone you saw me here.”

“Okay, but why?”

“It’s probably better that you don’t know. Plausible deniability and all,” Raven said which seemed to only further confuse him. She sighed. “Look, I really don’t mean to be rude but I have to hurry.”

Raven glanced down the hall. There could be a nurse coming at any second.

“Alright then, we have a deal. I won’t say anything if you don’t say anything. Just be safe, okay Raven?”

Raven nodded to him before turning back around.

“Oh, and Raven,” Drake called again.

Raven looked back at him.

“Nice hair. The new color looks good on you.” Drake smiled at her.

Raven tried not to frown. She’d almost forgotten about her new hair color. At some point, she’d have to return to school and then everyone would get a chance to see it.

“Thanks,” Raven said before turning to leave.

She speeded toward the bathroom without looking back. Time was running out. The restroom stood at the end of the hallway. Once inside she reached into her pocket. She pulled out an ID card. A photo of the mean male nurse stared back at her. Raven smiled at it. She couldn’t believe that she’d felt sorry for taking it from him. When they’d bumped into each other he hadn’t even noticed her hand slipping into his pocket.

Raven would have to work fast. He might have already noticed that it was missing.

Raven checked the stalls making sure they were all empty. She sat her bag on the sink and pulled out the white lab coat. The last time she was here she managed to smuggle one out. Raven slipped it on over her clothes. If anyone saw her on the camera feeds they’d think she was another doctor visiting her patient.

Raven opened the cabinet under the sink. She pulled out the trashcan. Pushing her bag to the back she placed the can back in its spot and closed the door. The bag would go unnoticed there.

Raven stepped out of the restroom. She held the key card firmly in her grip as she made her way to the left staircase wing of the hospital. Patients who were more likely to hurt themselves or others were kept on a separate floor. She made her way up two flights of stairs and used the ID to unlock the automatic door.

Raven quickened her footsteps but not enough to draw attention. There were more cameras on this end of the hall. Two for every five doors she passed.

Raven reached the part of the hallway that was gated off. A woman dressed in blue stepped into view and Raven jumped back behind the corner, flattening herself against the wall. She peeked out around the corner. The woman strolled down the hall. The badge on her right sleeve told Raven she was hospital security.

The security guard moved closer. Raven took a step back behind the wall. She held her breath. Her mother was only a few feet away. She'd come too far to get caught now. Sweat beaded against her forehead.

After a few moments, Raven peeked back out past the wall. The woman was farther down the hall with her back towards Raven. Raven waited until the woman completely disappeared before rushing back over to the gate. There was no telling how long it would take the woman to turn back this way.

She pulled the keycard out of her pocket but cursed when it fell to the ground. The sound of the card falling seemed amplified by the empty hallways. Raven reached down to pick it up. Her hand shook. She pressed the card to the keypad. The keypad beeped. Raven pushed the gate open. She rushed down the hallway looking for the room with her mother's name on it. She'd reached the middle of the hallway when she finally made it to the room she was looking for.

A sticker with the name "More A. Denise " was posted on the basket outside the room. Inside the basket were her mother's medical reports. Raven pressed her card against the keypad again. It flashed red.

Raven glanced down the hall. She didn't see the woman but she could have sworn the footsteps were getting closer. She pressed the ID to the keypad a second time, this time making sure to keep her hand steady. When the door unlocked she quickly slipped into the room.

Grabbing one of the chairs leaning against the wall, she barricaded the door. It wouldn't hold long. If someone tried to bust in it would only take a few minutes, but every second counted.

A soft moan came from behind her. Raven turned around to see a woman lying strapped to the bed. Her wrist and ankles were cuffed with two big straps over her chest and stomach.

Raven's heart clenched at the sight of her, "Mom."

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47

The Heart Queensland

Lu knew what it was like to be pushed to her physical limits. Her training required it. No matter how hard it had gotten, she refused to let herself quit. Meshi had never gone easy on her, but even her training could not prepare Lu for an evening of dress fitting with The Red Queen.

“Hold your breath, your majesty. It will make the fitting easier.” The tailor pulled tighter on the golden strings of the bodice. Lu felt as though the woman was trying to squeeze her stomach into nonexistence. She could feel the bruises trying to develop around her rib cage.

“I still do not see the point of such things,” Lu said to The Red Queen, who sat on the sofa watching her. Lu’s waist was already small enough. She didn’t need this stringed contraption making it any worse.

The Red Queen took a slow sip of her tea. When she was done she placed it back on the tray and looked back up at Lu. “The point darling is that we must make sure you look your best for this wedding. You are marrying my son. You must project an image of sophistication.”

“Yes, I understand that. What I don’t understand is why your tailor seeks to torture me in order to make that happen. This dress lacks all practicality.”

“My apologies, your majesty. I tried to mix in the Heart clothing style to the best of my ability. Please forgive me if it’s not to your liking,” the tailor said. She shook as she bowed. Lu raised her hand to wave her off but the woman flinched back as if she feared being hit.

Lu turned back to The Red Queen. Her eyes narrowed. She wondered what the queen had done to make her servants respond this way. Perhaps a beating for not stitching the gold into the fabric just right?

Goddess, they're worse than the rumors.

“The point, my dear, is to make your waist appear smaller. A smaller waist might make people forget other lacking areas. It is something I’m sure your mother would have taught you had she had the time.”

Lu glanced down at her chest and knew The Red Queen was referring to her lack of curves. She’d only started her bleeding a year ago. Her body was still making the transition into womanhood. As of now, her body had the shaping of a young boy.

Eleaa reassured her that she would develop as time passed, but Lu wasn’t so sure. She didn’t care either way. As she saw it, her current body shaping was more beneficial. It was easier to move around without the extra bits setting her off balance.

Lu’s acceptance of her body, however, did not remove the sting out of The Red Queen’s comment. She’d been saying things like that all evening. Lu hated the snide way the woman made insults. On the battlefield, an attack could be met with immediate counter attack. Here in the palace, most fights were done by a slow circling of one opponent. Pushing the boundaries without ever stepping over. It was an annoyingly tedious effort.

This was what the King was for; political warfare was too trivial for a queen to be distracted by it. The only reason The Red Queen was so equipped at politics was because her land wasn’t under constant threat. Ever since the end of the war, The Red Queensland had gone back to their lazy privileged ways, leaving the Heart to do all the real work.

“My mother understood that the main role of a queen is to protect the queensland. A role I cannot complete if I die of suffocation,” Lu said, her arms folded.

The Red Queen stared at Lu for a moment before looking back at the tailor. She gave the woman a small nod. The tailor stepped forward and began to loosen the strings that bonded Lu. Lu sighed as she felt her insides shifting back to the proper placement.

“The royal wedding is approaching, it is important that all our affairs are in order,” The Red Queen said.

“I am aware. I’m sure you have done everything to make sure it is all going according to plan.”

The past three weeks had tested Lu in ways she’d never known possible. The threat of war was the only thing keeping her from pushing the

woman out of the nearest window. Being with The Red Queen made Lu almost grateful for her mother's indifference.

Lu had not been the only one to feel the strain of the approaching wedding. Her entire inner castle was in a frenzy. The servants looked exhausted from trying to fulfill The Red Queen's never ending demands. When Lu had said as much to Ramor, he'd simply sighed and promised they'd all be able to relax once it was over with.

"Yes, although there were some issues I was able to work through them. You've been absent for most of the decision making. Have you even given thought to your offering?" The Red Queen asked.

Lu brushed her hands down the fabric of her yellow dress. "A wine?" If she remembered correctly that's what her mother had given in offering for her wedding. The people were typically pleased by food or drink.

"Then I'm assuming you've sent your ship man out to the Esha sea to collect a substantial amount of purple algae, as it will be rather hard to produce that much wine within the time constraint if you have not." The Red Queen leaned back against the sofa eyeing Lu.

"Yes, well, perhaps not wine."

"These are decisions that cannot be put off."

Lu sighed. "Forgive me, I misspoke about the wine, but there are other things the Heart has to offer. I'm sure a suitable offering will be found. As of now, we're still looking into the problems with the red roses. I know I haven't been as available as you'd like, but I assure you this matter takes precedence over all others." Lu stepped back behind the curtain. She longed to be back in her own clothing.

"I forget you are still new to this. Wouldn't want to put too much on you by asking you to focus on multiple things. I suppose this is for the best. I took over the design for your dress and look how well it turned out. We both know the Heart isn't exactly known for its fashion sense," The Red Queen said from the other side of the curtain.

Lu stepped out, now dressed in her royal garbs. "No, we're just known as the realm's finest warriors. The only thing protecting the united queenlands from complete collapse. Which reminds me, Ramor told me you had the guards sent ahead of you back to your queenland.

How are they fairing? Does everyone sleep soundly knowing they have the extra protection or do they just complain when the capes are dusty?”

The Red Queen narrowed her eyes. “Their performance has been acceptable so far. Our boys are grateful to be back home amongst *civil* society.”

I’ll show you civil. Lu held her breath trying to quiet the rage growing inside of her. How easy was it for the Reds to judge them from the comfort of their northern homes. The only thing the Red Queen had to worry about on her wedding night was the decoration of dresses and quality of wine.

“Luckily, there haven’t been any attempts on our gardens. Have you discovered anything new about this red paint?” The Red Queen asked.

Lu exhaled. “No, but we’re still looking.”

Leo had spent the past few weeks locked inside his laboratory studying the roses. A week after Leo reported on the red rose another report came in. This time the report came from a western garden. The problem had been discovered before any civilians came in contact with it, but it had set everyone on high alert.

Lu ordered the roses be cut down and burned. Leo had insisted on being allowed to collect samples. She’d agreed under the condition that he promised to act with extreme caution. The thought of having the toxin in her inner walls terrified her but she knew that he had to be allowed to study them. She prayed to the goddess for his safety.

“I think that should be enough for today, your majesty. I have your measurements and if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get started on the final edits to the dress,” the tailor said.

The two queens had almost forgotten she was there.

“You’re dismissed,” The Red Queen said.

The tailor turned to leave but stopped when The Red Queen called for her again. The tailor turned back towards them.

The Red Queen smiled. “I trust that you will do everything in your power to make sure the dress is perfect. This wedding will be the first time the public will see the Red and Heart united. Any blemish made on that reputation would be seen as a personal attack on my queenland and myself.” The Red Queen’s murky gray eyes flicked toward Lu and then back at the tailor. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-yes of course, my queen. I will deliver you perfection.” The tailor’s voice trembled with fear. She gave the two queens a quick bow before hurrying out of the room.

“Well if we are done in here I have some business to attend to,” Lu said, preparing to leave. She didn’t want to spend another moment in the queen's company.

“Don’t go. Sit. Have some tea.”

Her words sounded more like a command than a request. Even without all her power, Lu was still queen and this was her queensland. Ordering her around like a servant was unacceptable.

Lu turned back to The Red Queen. “I appreciate the offer but as I said-“

“You have business to attend to.” The Red Queen rolled her eyes. “I heard you the first time you said it. I just wonder if this business is so important you can’t make time for tea. Soon you will take my son away from me to join your royal court. Are you really incapable of making time for a cup of tea with his mother?”

Lu paused for a moment. She wanted to walk out of the room, but relationships between her and the prince were already frosty. After their last conversation about Lecive, Josivin had been distant. Lu needed to do her best to amend the relations between the Red and the Heart.

Lu walked back over to the sofa and smiled. “One cup shouldn’t hurt.”

“Lovely.”

The Red Queen poured Lu a cup. Lu noticed for the first time that The Red Queen’s middle finger was missing a nail. She’d assumed the gold was painted on but up close she could see the metal was real.

“Here.” The Red Queen held out the cup to Lu. Lu took the cup and sat down next to her on the plush sofa. She took a sip. The tea was from the Red Queensland. Sickeningly sweet, it left a sugary residue on her tongue. Red tea was very different from the spiced tea they brewed in the Heart. Lu suffered through another sip before setting the cup down.

The Red Queen studied her over the rim of her own cup. After a moment, she too sat her cup down. She leaned over, raising her hand towards Lu’s face. Lu flinched back. She eyed the queen. Her movement had not been threatening but Lu still did not trust her.

The Red Queen continued to reach forward, unconcerned with Lu's reaction. She grabbed onto a piece of Lu's hair that had come undone during her dressing. She pushed the hair back behind Lu's ear, studying her face. After a moment The Red Queen drew back. Lu watched her, still confused by her actions.

"You really are a young one," The Red Queen said.

Lu sat up straighter. "I am old enough."

The Red Queen laugh. "I was nearly twice your age when I assumed the throne and married my husband. Even I was not old enough then."

Lu said nothing. The sound of The Red Queen's laughter surprised her.

"Have you ever lain with a man?" The Red Queen asked.

"Of course not."

The teachings of the goddess forbid extramarital affairs and the church had always been strict on the royal family. Lolakia had been an example to them all. Part of her trials of faith had been forgiving the man who defiled her and turning him into a king worthy of the goddess's blessing.

There was also the fear that mixing bloodline with someone the goddess hadn't given her blessings to would taint the queen's abilities. What the goddess gave could be just as easily taken away. To even imply that a queen was impure was dangerous.

"No, I thought not. I also doubt your mother went into great detail what it means to lay with one before her death. You are, however, aware that it is expected of you, correct?"

"Ensuring the continuation of the bloodline is the duty of any queen." Lu was still not sure what point the queen was trying to make. Everyone knew one of the queen's main duties was to give birth to the heir. Without a daughter to take her place, their connection to the goddess would be lost upon her death. No matter what, the queensland must live on.

"Ah yes, the bloodline." The Red Queen gave a small smile. "It's the very thing that binds us to the throne and will continue to do so. You will be expected to give birth soon after the wedding. My son will take you and hopefully put a girl inside of you, but if he does not, you will be expected to try again and again and again."

Lu shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She had heard horror stories about the birthing process. Mothers were ripped apart and died on the midwives table. She tried not to think about it. Even the idea of something growing inside of her seemed strange.

“My mother birth seven boys before the goddess saw fit to give her a daughter. You may think you know what it means to be a mother but you have no clue. They tell you that giving birth is just another duty of the queen, but it’s not. I could tell you what it’s like to hold new life in your hands. At first, you will try to distance yourself from it, which can only be expected. As queens, our lives are supposed to belong to the queenlands we serve. We stand at the edge of destruction. Love is nothing but a distraction from our true purpose.

Knowing this will not stop you. Your heart will grow selfish. You will love the child. You will love it knowing that you will ultimately lose it. The girls will be bad. You are slowly coming to understand what it means to be queen. That it’s not all pretty dresses and sparkling crowns. You know of the sacrifices we have to make. Every time you look at her you will be reminded that she will one day fill your role. She will suffer and sacrifice just as you do, simply because she had the misfortune of having you for a mother. It will be hard but at least you will be prepared for it.”

Lu thought of her mother and the way her eyes avoided contact. Before talking with Ramor she’d always assumed it was because of her appearances, but he said she was afraid. Lu wondered what her mother had seen when she looked at her.

“The boys will be worse.” The Red Queen continued. “After a while, you start to think that maybe you will be able to hold onto them. You love them more freely because their fate is not decided the way hers will be. You start to envision a future for them. One that is happy and whole.” The Red Queen’s voice cracked, the look in her eyes becoming distant.

She blinked, eyes refocusing. “This is what makes it hurt more.” The Red Queen turned back to Lu. “Their loss will come as a surprise. Your shield will be down and it will cut you like a knife.” The Red Queen’s last words carried an edge.

Lu stared back at her. In that moment Lu saw her as more than The Red Queen. There was something broken inside her eyes. She hid wounds that would never heal. A woman behind the crown, buried deep under the

jewels and the gown. Hidden, just as her mother had hidden her true self. The same way Lu was being forced to hide.

Though not as tight as her wedding dress, Lu still felt the fabric pulling against her chest.

The Red Queen looked away from Lu. "I already lost one son. First to the priesthood, then to the madness. Now I send another away, to a queensland nearest the darkest part of our world, engaged to a queen whose known womanhood for less than a year." The Red Queen made a face of disgust.

"Our engagement was orchestrated by you and my grandmother. These are the terms you agreed to for the treaty." Lu would not be blamed for something she had no part in. She never asked to be Josivin's bride.

"I know the terms, child." The Red Queen's voice grew sour. It was that same tone of superiority that made Lu want to push her off a mountaintop.

"If we did not come to terms my queensland would have still been at war. The White army matches mine in size. Any war between us would have lasted for generations. Countless lives had already been lost. The trade of the white rose had stopped and our reserves were gone. Your grandmother and The White Queen would have let thousands of my people die without lifting a finger. So I agreed. I gave up my unborn child to keep my people safe. To stop Red families from butchering each other in the streets. That is the sacrifice a queen must make. It is not just her life or her blood. It is everything she is."

Lu was at a loss for words. She felt the need to defend her grandmother but wasn't sure how. Surely her grandmother hadn't actually intended to leave all those people to suffer. This was an exaggeration on the Red Queen's part. Even if they had threatened it, it had to be a bluff. Besides what did Reds expect from constantly getting into wars with others?

The weight of the silence hung heavy in the air. The Red Queen picked up her tea and took a sip.

"Of course I tell you this knowing you will not understand." Her tone was once again indifferent. "You can't understand. Not as you are now. But one day you will look back on my words and see the truth. Live long enough and you will see what this world makes of you. The real reason I'm

telling you this is because I want you to know why I agreed to this marriage. The Heart protects the wall. You said so yourself that you are the realms greatest warriors. We send you boys and you make them men. It is because of this that I have given more than just wealth to ensure the success of your queensland. I took a gamble the day the treaty was signed, one that depends solely on you. Whether or not you are too young for the task will not matter. You are the only one capable of the position. If you fail, we die. Thousands of corpses...oceans of blood... all on your hands.”

The queen put her cup back down and looked back at Lu. “Do you understand?”

Lu hesitated a moment before nodding.

“Then achieve the impossible. Become a queen capable of seeing us through. Destroy the girl.” The Red Queen reached out another hand to touch Lu’s face. She raised her chin and stared into her eyes. “You may pretend that she disappeared after the name was erased, but I can still see her in you. You must do it better than your mother, better than me. The girl is useless to us. Destroy her before she destroys our world.”

I’m trying.

Lu pulled away from her but said nothing. She understood even if she did not want to. Words were easier than actions. She’d been trying to hide herself away ever since she put on the crown, but it all felt like pretend.

“Finish up your tea, Queen of Heart. There’s work to be done and I do believe you said you had some important business to attend to.”

Lu looked at the cup of tea. She could not imagine swallowing down its sweetness now.

The Red Queen stood, dusting off her skirts. “I myself have to go meet with the cooks now. I wish you well, Queen of Heart.” She turned and left the room.

Lu sat still watching as she left. She remained sitting long after she was gone.

48

Raven raced over to her mother's bedside. The straps that held Denise to the bed were locked tight. Raven stared down at her mother's face. Her skin looked pale. Raven touched her cheek and felt damp sweat. She was cold as a winter storm.

Denise moaned again. Her face twisted but her eyes remained closed.

Raven brushed the sweat-drenched hairs away from her mother's face. She'd lost weight since her hospitalization. Raven could tell from the new hollows that appeared on her mother's face. The dark circles under her eyes had become a predominant feature.

"Mama," Raven whispered. Tears slipped down her cheeks. She hated seeing her like this. "What have they done to you?"

Nothing, that's what. As far as Raven could tell she'd only gotten worse since being admitted. They were sucking the life out of her mother.

"Don't worry mama. You won't be staying here much longer."

Raven, Lu's voice called inside Raven's head. Raven glanced around the room. A few rays of sun slipped in between the blinds offering a dim lighting. The room was a small perfectly rectangular box. Raven didn't see the girl anywhere.

"Where are you?" Raven asked.

I seem to be struggling with my projection. Lu's voice was a whisper. Raven noticed the way the volume of her voice constantly changed, going in and out. She was weaker than the last time they'd spoke.

It doesn't matter. You have to listen to me, Raven. This isn't safe.

Raven's hands tightened around the bars of her mother's bed. "You're not going to stop me."

Don't be stupid, Raven. You saw what you did to your friend and at least she had her sanity before you entered her mind. What do you think happens when you mess with someone like your mother? She's been tormented for some time now. Do you honestly think you can handle what's inside her mind?

Honestly, the thought of what might be waiting for her inside her mother's mind terrified Raven. All she could think about was that day of the attack. Her mother's weight crushed down on her until she couldn't breathe.

"Stop," Raven said with more force than she'd ever used on her mother before. Her mother froze, staring back at Raven with dark brown eyes. Blood squished between Raven's fingers dripping onto the carpet. She held her mother's wounded arm tight. The tears were wet against Raven's cheek.

Raven didn't understand what was going on. Her thirteen year old mind too horrified to process the situation, but she knew she couldn't let her mother continue to hurt herself.

Denise snarled. She yanked back her arm, pulling Raven along with her.

Raven refused to let go of her mother. They entered a tug-of-war, her mother yanking her from left to right. Blood dripped, smearing everywhere. Raven tried to hold on but she was no match. Her mother pushed back and Raven lost her balance. She fell to the ground, her head slamming against the floor. Stars exploded behind her eyelids.

Her mother crawled on top of Raven. She sat on her chest, too heavy for the young girl to breathe. Her bloody hand pushed down on Raven's face. Nails bit into Raven's cheek as Denise dragged her hand downward.

Raven screamed, her face on fire. "Mom," she cried.

"They're coming." Her mother laughed. "They're coming for you, little bird." Her nails raked along Raven's jaw. Raven gripped onto her mother's arm trying to push back but her hand slipped on the blood.

"We're all mad here, dear."

"Mom!"

Raven squeezed her eyes shut blocking off the memory. It wasn't her mother who attacked her. It was the illness. "She's my mother. I have to save her."

You're not ready for that. I told you that I was here for a reason. Your mother isn't the only one who needs saving.

"I don't care about the rest of the world if I can't save her."

You don't? Lu's voice sounded doubtful. Flashes of fires, death, and pain shot through Raven's mind. So much death. Bodies piled on top of bodies reaching so high they blocked out the sun. The scent of their burning flesh filled Raven's nostrils. She closed her eyes attempting to block out the images.

"Make it stop," Raven cried.

A woman carrying her crying baby fell to her knees spitting blood as the bullet pierced through both of them.

Why should I? You don't care about their pain.

A man entwining his bloodstained fingers with his lover as they took their final breath together. The smell of gas thick in the air.

Their suffering means nothing to a selfish girl like you.

Small bodies floating face down in a river, bobbing with the waves.

Raven pressed her palms into her eyes. "I didn't mean it. I don't want anyone to get hurt I just--"

You just want to save your mother. You can't have it both ways, Raven. Sacrifices have to be made.

"Why? Why can't I have it both ways? I just want to fix her. I owe it to her. Help me, please. Once she's back I'll do anything you say. I'll fight the devil himself if you ask me."

No. You will not survive if you do this. Even I cannot save you if you choose to continue. Make your choice, Raven, but know you will not be the only one forced to live with the consequences.

Raven opened her eyes. She could no longer feel Lu's presence. She'd vanished leaving Raven alone to make the final decision. Guilt weighed heavy in her chest. She'd already made her choice before she came here.

Raven wiped at her tears. Lu *had* to be wrong. She shouldn't have to choose between saving her mother and saving others. Once she fixed her mother she'd figure out how to save everyone else.

The image of the bodies flashed in her mind again. Raven shook her head.

I have to do this.

She walked back over to her mother. Denise was still sleeping. In her drug induced state, she probably wouldn't wake even if the world were ending. Raven leaned over her mother but then hesitated.

It was impossible. Raven wasn't anyone important. Her whole life she'd never expected to amount to anything. Just another black girl born in the hoods of Detroit. Even if she died here, the world would go on. Lu could find another savior; her mother would not.

Raven brushed back her mother's hair again taking one final look at her face. "I love you."

When this was over they'd all be able to start over again. Raven would have the life she always wanted. She closed her eyes and opened herself up. She tried to recreate the same effect she had with Tiffany. This time the darkness came faster than before.

It was almost too easy.

Something was wrong. Fear pumped into Raven's chest. She fought against the darkness as it wrapped itself around her. The dark yanked her deeper into its depths. Something slammed against her, hard and unyielding. The darkness continued to pull at Raven, smashing her against the wall.

Raven screamed. Her hands pressed into her temples trying to relieve the pressure. Everything hurt. Pain became the only thing she could feel. Her eyes rolled back as blood began to spill from her nose.

The pain became blinding. As Raven's body fell to the floor she heard a distant screaming. She couldn't make out what the voice was saying.

Her body convulsed and mouth widen with screams of terror. *This is how I die?* Raven thought as the world faded to dark. *Here is where it all ends.*

49

The Heart Queensland

Lu wandered through the halls. She replayed the Red queen's words in her mind. With all that she had to deal with she hadn't given her pending marriage enough thought. The future seemed to be such a vague thing.

Lu touched her flat stomach. A child would grow inside of her that was part Josivin and part her. In order for that to happen they would have to...

Lu imagined Josivin touching her. The cold metal of his ringed fingers grazing up her sides. She closed her eyes with a shutter, pushing the image from her mind. She held her pendant between her fingers.

My body is a vessel. It does not belong to me, only to the goddess.

Most of what the Red Queen said was not new to her. She'd known what she'd signed up for the moment she stood in front of the altar and bent the knee.

"My queen?"

Lu looked up to see Ramor staring at her. She glanced around the hall. Her wandering had brought her to his workroom. That seemed to be happening more often.

"Hello Ace, I was just taking a stroll around the castle." Lu glanced around the hall. The ceilings were higher than she remembered. They made her feel small. Tall red columns and dark painted marble, a hall that was too big and yet too small. A group of servants in their black and red dress walked pass them.

Ramor took a step closer to Lu. "Are you well, your majesty? You looked a bit troubled."

Lu smiled at him. Their relationship had developed to the point where she no longer felt the need to constantly guard her emotions around

him. He was her Ace now and it was important they were honest with each other. With Leo so busy and Domicin organizing the search parties, Ramor was one of the few people she could still talk to.

“Queens are often troubled over many things. It is not easy to run a queensland,” Lu said.

“Perhaps you would like to join me for a cup of tea. You can unload your burden on me.” Ramor said, opening the door to his study.

Lu smiled at him. “Are you sure you have time for that?”

It had become an inside joke of theirs after she’d noted how often Ramor seemed to check his pocket watch.

Ramor smiled back. “I always have time for you.” The warmth in his voice made Lu’s face heat. She looked away in embarrassment. Her pale skin had always been quick to redden.

“It is an annoying trait for those of us with paler skin,” Ramor said guiding her into the room. It smelled like old books and spiced tea. A scent that was so oddly, yet rightfully, him. He closed the door behind them. Lu turned around to face him.

“I hate when you do that,” Lu said.

Ramor smiled. “Do what?”

“Read my mind. I hate that you know what I’m thinking.”

Lu walked over to his desk. Like always, his study was in complete disarray. Several scrolls lay strewn out across his desk. She looked at the scroll on top. It said something about a tax notice.

“It is my job to know what you’re thinking. How else am I supposed to know how to advise you on the best course of action,” Ramor said. Lu turned around and was surprised to see that he was standing directly behind her.

He smiled at her. “Tea?”

Ramor gestured toward the sofa and coffee table. Lu sat down on the sofa. Old and worn, she imagined Ramor spent a great deal of time sitting here going over documents. Ramor poured her a cup of tea before taking a seat next to Lu on the sofa.

“I never had this problem with the Jack,” Lu said after taking a sip of her tea. The brown liquid warmed her insides.

“The Jack is probably able to sense some of your feelings, it just isn’t as obvious. He represents your strength. When you are weak or in need

he will sense that something is wrong. I, as the Ace, represent mental clarity and therefore am better at picking up on details of what bothers you. He is the body; I am the mind.”

Lu thought about what he said. It made sense and explained the new level of connection she felt whenever she was around the Ace or the Jack. She often heard the queen referred to as the centerpiece with all things flowing through her. Apparently, that flow went in the opposite direction as well.

“Well, it’s still annoying,” Lu said with a frown.

“My apologies, my queen, I’ll try to work on making it less apparent.”

“Don’t. It’s better if I just try to get use to it. I don’t want you to hide things from me just because you’re afraid I can’t handle them. I can. I will.”

Lu sat up straighter. She took another sip from her cup. The spiced tea burned at the back of her throat. She preferred it far more than the sweet concoction the Red Queen and Prince insisted on drinking.

“So are you going to tell me what troubles you or do I have to ask?” Ramor said, setting his own cup back on the table.

“My dress will be finished soon.”

“And this upsets you?”

“I do not know if upset is the right word.” Lu’s fingers tapped on the side of her cup. “I just...I just do not know if this is an appropriate time. There are so many things that require my attention. Perhaps we should think about postponing.”

“I do believe that your marriage is supposed to help you, not harm you. The bond will be complete and your power over the queensland will be whole. Trust me, once this is over it will be easier to deal with everything else.”

“I know but...” Lu looked down at her cup. She saw her reflection in the brown liquid.

Hideous. What type of child could she ever hope to make with the prince?

“Do not worry. It is natural to feel this way before a wedding, but this is a good change. You were not meant for politics, my queen. Your time is wasted here. A husband is just the thing you need.”

“Have you ever been married?”

Lu realized she knew very little of his life outside the queensland. She wasn't even sure how old he was. He looked too young to be her mother's adviser, but from what Lu had heard they'd known each other since they were children. Ramor could have had an entire family hidden away somewhere. Lu found the thought very unsettling.

Ramor shook his head. “No, I've never been married.”

“Why not?”

“I am devoted to my queen. I have very little time for anything else,” Ramor said.

Lu thought of Lecive. She wasn't so completely removed from the court that she hadn't heard the rumors. Of course, she knew they weren't true. Her mother was queen and a devout woman. Sometimes children just don't look anything like their fathers.

At least he has mother's beauty.

“You and the previous queen were close. You must miss her,” Lu said.

“Your mother was an amazing woman and our relationship was always respectful.”

“I didn't mean to imply-”

“Don't worry. There's often much talk in the court. I'm honestly surprised though that people would think a woman of your mother's caliber would pick a man such as me.”

Lu looked down at her cup and smiled again. “You're not that bad.”

“I assure you, my queen, I'm absolutely atrocious.”

They both chuckled.

Lu looked back up at him. “But don't you ever wish for a family?”

Ramor shifted back, combing his fingers through his white locks. “I do not believe a family is apart of my future.”

Lu didn't ask why. Despite his attempt to hide it, Lu saw how his eyes darkened when he said it. Whatever it was he didn't seem willing to share.

“I will be a mother soon,” Lu said after a moment. Her voice was a little louder than she intended. Ramor looked at her. Lu blushed. She cleared her throat before continuing again. “I mean that if all goes according to plan I will be expected to bear a child soon after the wedding.”

Lu thought back to the look on the Red Queen's face when she spoke about childbirth. She pushed away the thought. There was nothing she could do about it. If that was the fate the goddess decided for her than she would just have to accept it.

"Ah yes, and we must all do what is expected of us, less the queensland fall into utter chaos." Ramor said with a hint of bitterness in his voice. Lu watched him. She was not sure what reaction she was expecting but this was not it. For some reason, she felt slightly disappointed. She quickly pushed the feeling aside.

Ramor turned to her, his expression growing softer. "My apologies my queen, I'm not being of much help, am I?"

"No, it is not you, Ace." Lu folded her hands in her lap. "It's just that the old queen died not too long ago and now I am expected to become a mother. I can be a queen, I think. I've trained for it my entire life, but I've had no training in being a mother. I don't know how to not be afraid." Lu stared down at her hands as she spoke.

Meshi would surely be ashamed if she could see her now, too afraid to perform even the simplest of her womanly duties.

"Your mother was not perfect, my queen. She was not a perfect queen and she was not a perfect woman. You do not have to be her to fulfill her role. You do not have to be like any of them. You can be better. I think you will be."

Lu looked at him. She could tell from the look in his eyes he'd meant it.

"It seems odd to be thinking of families and future plans in light of all that is happening," Lu said

"You are still worried about the red rose."

Lu sighed. "Well, that is one of the many problems. We still do not know who is responsible for the previous queen's death."

They'd tracked down all their leads but still hadn't gotten anywhere. Whoever was behind it was good at covering their tracks. Lu would not be able to relax until they were caught.

"But you have someone who you suspect might be behind it, don't you," Ramor said.

Lu hesitated before answering him. She'd long assumed that someone inside the royal court was responsible for the deaths. It would be

impossible to do without help from the inside, but there were consequences for speaking such things out loud.

“I might but what about you, Ace. You know my mother’s enemies as well as she did. Surely you have your own suspicions about the matter.”

Ramor stared back at her. He too sensed the sensitivity of the topic. “I believe the same thing that you may have already suspected. Someone inside the court played a major role in the queen's death.”

“But who would gain from killing the queen and who would be bold enough to risk the consequences.”

“I do not wish to offend you, my queen, but it seems your brother has gained a substantial amount of power within both the Red and Heart queensland since your parents' death.”

Lu nodded. This fact had not escaped her notice. She’d been suspicious of her brother since the beginning but she didn’t want to jump to conclusions. Her general dislike of her eldest brother might have been responsible for swaying her judgment. If it was really him, she needed to be sure of it.

“Lady Doshervich was hosting a ball that night. She and several others swear that Prince Lecive was there the whole time,” Lu said.

“Perhaps that was apart of the plan.”

“Perhaps.” But speculation wouldn’t be enough. If her brother had really been apart of the queen’s murder that would mark him as a traitor. Their laws demanded the highest form of punishment for such an act. The people would not support her executing her brother without a solid amount of evidence.

“I can have some of my people look into it if you wish, my queen,” Ramor said.

Lu shook her head. “Don’t bother. My brother is no fool. If he senses anyone getting too close he will become even harder to catch. I will deal with him.”

“As you wish, my queen.”

Lu picked up her cup and drained the last few sips. She placed the cup back down and stood.

“Thank you for the tea, but it is late and I do not wish to keep you any longer.”

Ramor stood and gave Lu a half bow. “It is my pleasure. Should you find yourself wanting another cup my door is always open.”

Lu nodded to him before leaving. Once outside she glanced back at the closed door. Being with the Ace really did have an effect on her. It was becoming clearer who her friends and enemies were. Lecive was proving himself to be the man she’d always known him to be. With all the pieces falling into place she just needed to decide her next move and act on it.

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50

Dion sat watching the door. It had been exactly an hour and twenty-three minutes since Raven left. Every passing minute only increased his anxiety. His eyes glanced at the clock posted on the wall next to the front desk.

Tick-tock.

Tick-tock.

“What do you think is taking her so long?” Dion asked, glancing at Tiffany.

“I don’t know, which is the exact same thing I told you five minutes ago.”

“Aren’t you worried at all?”

Tiffany sighed and rolled her eyes. Of course, she was worried. Her best friend was somewhere sneaking around a mental institution. The probability of her getting caught was actually one of the more positive outcomes. Tiffany was so nervous that she could suck down an entire bottle of antacids and still find no relief, but there wasn’t much she could do without drawing attention to herself.

“You know what, why don’t you go up there and ask her,” Tiffany said looking at the woman behind the desk. “I’m sure she’d be glad to help you locate our friend who’s in the middle of a B & E,” Tiffany hissed under her breath.

Dion glared back at her but held his tongue. Tiffany had a point, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. He settled back into his chair and tried not to fidget. The blue plastic chairs were far from comfortable.

The door buzzed. They both jumped and turned to see it creaking open. Hopeful to see Raven, they were sadly disappointed.

“What’s he doing here?” Dion asked.

Tiffany didn't answer. She quickly turned around, grabbing Dion's arm and turning him with her. She couldn't let him see them. The last thing she wanted was Drake Murphy recognizing who they were.

"Tiffany? What's-"
Dion started to ask but Tiffany shushed him. She listened as Drake moved closer. He was speaking with a man in a black suit.

"As you can see Mr. Murphy, Corvix is a great facility that values all our patients. I assure you we will take great care of Ms. Murphy while she's here. But, should the need arise we also have wonderful programs for our more long-term patients," the man said.

"Thank you, Mr. Foster. Right now we're just looking for hourly appointments but this tour has been very...informative," Drake said.

Dion looked at Tiffany. His face was one of confusion. Tiffany had a similar look on her face. She knew Drake threw mutual friends. Sometimes they even partied together, but she didn't know him on personal bases. This was the first time she'd heard about a Ms. Murphy.

Tiffany watched from the corner of her eye as Drake said goodbye to Mr. Foster. She turned her head away, suddenly interested in the wall, as Drake passed them. When he was gone both Dion and Tiffany turned back around.

"What was he doing here?" Dion asked.

Tiffany shook her head. "I don't know but it doesn't have anything to do with us."

"Can't be just a coincidence. Mental institutions aren't exactly popular hangout places for kids our age."

"I was just about to say the same thing," a voice said from behind them.

Tiffany and Dion turned to see a woman in a white lab coat standing behind them. Their eyes widened as they tried to think up an excuse.

"You two wouldn't happen to know anyone by the name of Angelica Donovan, would you?" The woman asked holding up Raven's fake ID.

Dion looked at the ID and then back at the woman. His heart dropped as he thought of all the horrible things that could have happened to Raven. It must have been something bad. Why else would the doctor have her ID?

"We don't know anything," Tiffany said.

"You don't?" The woman asked with a raised eyebrow.

Tiffany stared back at the woman with a straight face. Her arms crossed over her chest. “Nope.” Tiffany said popping her ‘p’.

“What about you?” The woman looked at Dion.

Tiffany shifted in front of him. “He doesn’t know anything either.”

The woman’s brown eyes flicked back to Tiffany. Their gazes locked. Tiffany didn’t back down, this wasn’t her first rodeo. It would take a lot more than a look of disapproval to get her to rat out a friend.

The woman was the first to look away. She put the ID back in her pocket.

“Fine, if that’s how you want to play it. Raven’s father has been contacted. He will be picking his daughter up from our care unit. You two can return home,” the woman said turning to leave.

“Wait, what do you mean care unit. Did something happen?” Tiffany asked. Her arms fell to her sides. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Fear as cold as ice washed over both Tiffany and Dion.

“I don’t see what that has to do with someone who claims to know nothing,” the woman said.

Tiffany’s fist balled at her sides. Fear and anger mixed together.

“Natasha, give these two thirty seconds to evacuate the premises. If they're not gone by then contact security,” the doctor said looking at the woman behind the counter. For the first time since they’d entered the clinic, the woman behind the desk seemed to be showing genuine interest.

“Yes, ma’am,” the woman said.

The doctor opened the door.

“Hey, wait! What about Raven? Is she okay?” Tiffany asked.

“You can contact her father later if you want to know the answer to that question.” The woman disappeared behind the door. It hissed as the lock slid into place.

Tiffany stepped forward, fully intent on following the doctor. Dion gripped her by the arm stopping her pursuit. She pulled against his restraint but Dion was stronger than her.

“Let me go.” Tiffany snapped.

“So you can do what? Break down the door and go searching for Raven?”

“Yes!”

Tiffany pulled back again. She knew it was stupid. There was no way she'd get through the door, but she felt helpless knowing that her friend was hurt somewhere beyond the door.

"You heard her, Tiffany. They're not going to let us through and if we don't leave now we could be in some serious trouble," Dion said.

"She's hurt, Dion."

Tiffany looked back at Dion. His face was stony but in his eyes, Tiffany saw that he was just as worried as she was.

"I know, but there's nothing we can do. Come on, Tiffany." Dion tugged on Tiffany's arm. Tiffany followed dragging her feet. He led them out of the clinic and to his car.

Clouds blocked out the sun, making the chilly fall afternoon colder. Dion got into the driver's seat and gripped the steering wheel. His hands tightened, twisting the mesh covering in his grip. Raven would be okay. She had to make it out of this. She just had to.

51

The Heart Queensland

By the time Lu made it back to her chamber the goddess glow had fallen to the east. The white glow of the smiling moon rose to take its place. She closed the door behind her with a sigh. What would happen should she ever try to barricade herself within the room?

The sad truth was that there wasn't a lock in this world strong enough to keep all her problems out.

It could be worse. She was not as alone as she'd previously thought.

With the Ace, Jack, and her brother's help, they stood a chance of defeating Lecive and stopping his control over the Heart once and for all. When the time came she would be the one to carry out his punishment.

An image of Lecive's head on a spike popped into her head, his eyes forever drained of their fiery red. The end he deserved.

Lu walked farther into her dark bedchamber. Only half the room was lit. The other side was submerged in shadows. She wondered why Eleaa had not finished lighting the candles. It was so unlike her to leave a job half done.

Lu grabbed one of the candles from the lit side of the room. The wax had only just started to melt. She turned back around, staring into the shadows.

There was no movement inside of the room, at least none Lu could see. Wind rattled the windowpanes. The light of the smiling moon was blurred by clouds. Another storm was approaching.

Lu held the candle out in front of her. She walked over to the other side, intent on lighting the remaining candles. Her foot hit something. She took a step back. Holding out her candle, she examined the floor beneath her.

The candle fell from Lu's hand. Flame licked at the rug before she stomped it out. Lu stepped back. She stared at the motionless body. In that moment she forgot everything: how to breathe, how to think, even how to move.

"Eleaa?"

Eleaa remained motionless on the floor. Her chest absent of breath's rise and fall. Lu dropped down beside her. She raised a shaking hand to touch Eleaa's face. Her skin was cold. She brushed Eleaa's gray hair away from her face. Her fingertips came in contact with a warm wet substance around her temple.

Fear shot through her like white hot lightning. Lu's other hand gripped Eleaa's shoulder. She gave her a hard shake.

"Eleaa," Lu called in a louder voice. The woman did not move. Lu's grip tightened, bruising skin. She shook the woman harder. Tears began to blur her vision.

"Eleaa. Wake up, Eleaa," Lu yelled at the woman. Tears fell from Lu's face and landed on Eleaa, but still she did not wake. Images of her parent's lifeless bodies flashed inside her head. She'd not been able to save them and now the same thing was happening to Eleaa.

"Help! I need help in here," Lu yelled.

Lu's door burst open seconds later. Two guards rushed into the room. They stopped a quarter of the way in.

"Go get help. Bring me, my brother. Bring me Prince Leeano." Lu cried, not taking her eyes off of Eleaa. Her hands were shaking.

The guards were unmoving. Their widened eyes merely stared at the scene before them.

"Go!" Lu screamed, snapping her head in their direction. The thunder in her voice was enough to shock the guards into action. They hurried to leave. The door slammed shut behind them.

Lu looked down at the bleeding woman. More tears fell from her face as she pulled Eleaa's body into her arms. This was her fault. The woman in the village had been right. Now, because of her and her failure to handle the attack, Eleaa might die. She'd been so worried about protecting herself from an attack; she hadn't even considered the harm that might befall the ones closest to her.

Lu's hand wrapped around her pendant "Please goddess, save her. She doesn't deserve this." She held onto it as though it was her last lifeline. Eleaa was her maid, an elderly woman who'd never hurt anyone. She was not a threat. Most of her days were spent locked inside of the castle. She was supposed to be safe.

Lu looked down at Eleaa's face. She was the one who'd raised Lu. When Lu was hurt or sad Eleaa had always been there. She never expected there come a day when she wasn't.

Lu opened her third eye seeking out Eleaa's mind. There was nothing. She couldn't feel her. The emptiness was a reflection of the hollowness growing inside Lu.

"No, goddess. Please, no." Lu squeezed her eyes shut. Her hands tightened around Eleaa. More tears fell down her face. She didn't try to hold them back anymore. There was no point. None of it mattered. She could not deny what she knew to be true.

"The Heart will fall," a voice said.

Lu's eyes snapped open. She searched the room before looking at Eleaa. The maid's eyes were now opened. They were clouded over in pale green swirls. No whites, no pupils, just clouds of green. Lu had seen eyes like this before in a textbook. She remembered looking at the pictures on the old text and thinking what awful creatures must possess such eyes.

"The Heart will fall," Eleaa said again.

Lu knew then what was happening even if she did not want to believe it.

"The sister's blood lives. Daughter of Catani, she who walks through worlds will arrive. Madness will reign supreme and he will have what he has waited for. Fire to scorch the earth and vengeance to satisfy the hunger. From the ashes, he rises again. Only then, once it is too late, will he leave this world the way she came."

Lu didn't want to hear anything Eleaa was saying. She would have covered her ears were she not frozen in place. It wouldn't have helped. Some truths cannot be unheard. Some truths broke you apart, leaving only shattered remains.

*Madness Madness
Infects them all*

Eleaa's hands reached up to touch Lu's face. Lu tried to move away but was too slow. Eleaa's finger grazed across Lu's cheek. Images of her queensland burning flooded Lu's mind. She could feel the heat of flames against her skin. Smoke filled her lungs, choking off her air. People were screaming. Their cries rang inside her head. They were tearing each other apart. She watched as the queensland's flag fell to the ground.

Oh goddess no.

At the last minute the image change to a girl sitting under a tree. The goddess glow was bright and the air warm. Lu stared at the young girl. She wore a blue dress with a white apron. Her face was covered in shadows. When Lu tried to get a closer look the image disappeared.

Lu's vision cleared. She coughed, sucking in deep gulps of air. The images would not leave her memory.

"Remember her name, for she is the start of the end. Remember Alice," Eleaa said.

Lu looked back into Eleaa's cloudy green eyes. There was no denying what she was now.

Eleaa dropped her hand away from Lu's face before slumping back down on the ground. The pale green clouds over her eyes faded. She closed her eyes and her breath returned to normal.

Lu opened her third eye again. She could sense Eleaa's mind reaching out toward her. Panicked, Lu slammed her third eye close. Fear of touching the tainted mind left her shaken. She stared down at her maid. Eleaa, one of the few people who'd cared for Lu, was an oracle.

It had been centuries since anyone had seen an oracle north of the wall. Everyone assumed they were dead. The church had been thorough in their extermination of the creatures. The ones who survived were chased deep into the orcestral forest.

Oracles were bad omens. Wherever they went death followed close behind. The churches preached that they were evil spirits sent to spy on the goddess. Even listening to a prophecy was forbidden. The future was something only the goddess was supposed to know.

Lu stared at Eleaa. She knew what their laws required her to do next. Eleaa had betrayed them. The fact that she'd lived this close to the royal court and concealed her identity had endangered them all. To let

her live would be an affront to the goddess. The survival of the Heart depended on it.

“My queen!”

Lu turned to see the door swing open. Domicin, Ramor, and Leeano stepped into the room. Light from the hall glowed behind them, stretching their shadows against Lu’s floor. They paused to stare at her. Leo was the first to spring into action. He raced over to Eleaa. Crouching down next to her, he began to pull herbs out of his bag.

“What happened to her?” Leo asked, looking back up at his sister. Lu didn’t answer. Her eyes remained locked on the woman who’d taken care of her all her life. The woman who’d kept secrets.

Born an abomination.

“I need to know what happened in order to treat her,” Leo said.

Lu’s eyes shifted back toward Leo. She had to tell him. If she protected the oracle the goddess would punish the queensland for her actions. Without the goddess’s blessing, her queensland would not survive. Famine, drought, infection, anything could happen.

“She...” Lu’s throat went dry. Her words stuck inside her like glue. She thought of Eleaa’s smiling face and her warm hugs. She’d felt safe inside her arms. She’d felt love, but now a rot had set inside of her heart, decaying everything until there was nothing.

How could you?

Lu placed her hand over her chest. There was actual physical pain there.

“My queen,” Leo said again, his voice urgent.

Lu closed her eyes. There was no other way around it. The same hopelessness Lu felt during the village woman’s execution returned. The knife Eleaa had placed in her heart dug in deeper.

“My que-“

“She fell down.” Lu opened her eyes again to see Leo staring at her. Their gazes locked, seconds passing like hours. Lu pointed to the bedpost. “She hit her head over there during the fall. I came in and I found her unconscious. I moved her to see if she was alright...She didn’t wake up... She hasn’t woken up.” Her words were flat on her tongue.

“Is that so?” Leo turned his attention back to Eleaa. He lifted her head up. When his hand came back his fingertips were covered in blood.

“The cut doesn’t seem to be too deep. I should be able to fix it. Jack, order one of your men to take Eleaa to the infirmary,” Leo said.

Domicin nodded before stepping out of the room. When he returned two men followed behind him. They picked Eleaa from Lu’s arms and carried her out of the room.

Leo turned to leave with them but stopped when he saw the look on Lu’s face. He squatted back down and rested a hand on his sister’s arm.

Lu flinched back. Her heart was still racing inside of her chest. It was almost impossible to breathe.

“Eleaa will recover. She hasn’t lost too much blood. You saved her, my queen. You saved her.” Leo placed a kiss against Lu’s temple before leaving out of the room.

Lu did not move. She stared at the closed door. Leo’s last words hung heavy in the air. Her fist clenched the fabric of her skirt.

What have I done?

She’d saved a maid at the cost of an entire queensland.

You weak little girl, the voice hissed inside her mind.

Lu bowed her head, hiding the tears that rolled down her cheeks. She barely noticed them. Her thoughts focused on Eleaa’s cloudy green eyes. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t kill Eleaa. All her training, every broken bone, every lesson-- all for nothing.

“My queen, are you alright?” Ramor asked.

Lu had forgotten that he was still in the room. She closed her eyes forcing the tears to stop. Her hands released the fabric and she stood. When she looked back up at Ramor her gaze was colder. She turned from him.

“You may leave, Ace.”

“My queen, perhaps-“

“Leave.” There was a clear warning in her tone. She turned to meet his gaze full on. Ramor looked as though he was about to say something else but stopped when he saw the look in Lu’s eyes. He nodded, then turned to leave.

“Should I send someone to clean up the mess?” Ramor asked at the door.

“No, no one comes near this room. Not a soul.”

Ramor hesitated for a moment but nodded as he closed the door behind him.

Lu stood alone in her chamber. As she stared at the pool of blood on the floor hurt and anger mixed inside of her.

The Heart will fall, Eleaa's words repeated inside Lu's head. Her fist struck out, hitting the bedpost. Wood splintered from the force of her hit. She placed her other hand over her face. Her parents' death, the bloody flower, the tainted roses. Not an enemy from afar but a loved one hidden inside of her chamber walls.

Stupid, stupid girl.

It was all Lu's fault. Now she'd turned Eleaa's words into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Her weakness would be the destruction of her people. Even if Eleaa was not directly behind the attacks this was the goddess's punishment. Doubt begets death. All her life she'd been trained not to hesitate.

Remember Alice.

Lu raised her head. Her hand fell from the bedpost. Blood dripped from her knuckles, the skin already beginning to stitch itself together. She was still queen. A truth stolen from the goddess was still the truth. As long as Lu breathed she would do everything to protect her people.

Lu repeated the name over in her head. Eleaa said Alice was the one to start the end; maybe she'd be the key to stopping it. The image of the girl in the blue dress returned to her. She prayed this Alice never found her way into the Heart but if she did...

Destroy the girl, The Red Queen's words echoed in her mind. Lu would see the end to them both before she let her queensland fall.

52

Raven woke to the sound of voices. Muddled, she couldn't make out what was being said. She tried to open her eyes but her lids were too heavy. She shifted her body. A mistake. The slight movement caused a jolt of pain to shoot up from her toes to her skull. She cried out and bit her lip. Everything ached.

“Ma’am, I think she’s waking up.”

Again Raven tried to open her eyes. Her eyelids began to slowly pill back. The light of the room was too bright. She shut her eyes again, wincing in pain.

What the hell happened?

“Miss, can you hear me? I need you to nod if you can hear me?” Another voice asked. This one sounded closer than the one before.

“...It... hurt...” Raven said. Her voice was cracked and dry, every word a labor. Her sore throat ached and tears welled in her eyes.

A hand rested on Raven shoulder. “Careful, your body has been through a great deal. You don’t want to make it worse.”

Raven opened her eyes again. The light still stung but she fought to let her eyes adjust. The blurry image of a tall woman in a white lab coat came into focus. Her heart-shaped face and crooked nose seemed familiar. Her eyes were focused on Raven’s face.

“Where...?” Raven started to speak.

“You’re in the emergency care unit at Corvix treatment center. I’m Dr. Nisswa. One of the nurses on staff found you passed out inside of one of our patient’s rooms. There was a heavy amount of bleeding but we couldn’t find any signs of physical harm. We’ve been monitoring you since then,” the woman in the lab coat, Dr. Nisswa, said.

Raven tuned out her last statement. While Dr. Nisswa was retelling the events of her capture Raven's memory had come flooding back. She remembered why she'd come here. It was for her mother. She was supposed to save her mom, but something had gone wrong. Something was not right inside her mother's head.

At the last minute Raven had fought against the pull, but the darkness had overpowered her and pulled her in. Then came the pain. Unimaginable excruciating pain that caused her to blackout.

"Miss?" Dr. Nisswa asked. Raven turned her attention back to the woman. "Miss, I need you to tell me what you were doing in there. I need you to tell me everything that happened so that I can better treat you."

Don't. Lu's voice hissed in Raven's ear. *Don't tell them anything. Something's not right here.*

"I, uh, I don't remember," Raven said, looking down at her lap.

Dr. Nisswa frowned at Raven. She didn't look convinced. She turned toward the nurse and held out her hand. The woman in blue scrubs handed Dr. Nisswa a white lab coat.

Dr. Nisswa held it out for Raven to see. There were stains of red around the collar left from Raven's bleeding nose.

"Ms. More, you are aware that breaking into a patient's room and falsifying identification is a crime, correct? We found you with two IDs on you. One was Nurse McCall's and the other belonging to one Angelica Donavan. Imagine our surprise when one of our nurses identified you as Ms. Raven More. He said he remembered you from an earlier visit you had with your mother a Denise More. The same patient's room you broke into," Dr. Nisswa said with a raised eyebrow.

Raven closed her eyes and sank back into the bed. This was exactly what she didn't want to happen. She'd failed in every way possible.

It's over. It's all over.

"Miss More the last thing I want is for the police to get involved. It would be bad for both you and your friends in the waiting room," Dr. Nisswa said.

"No." Raven opened her eyes. It still hurt to speak but she ignored it. "Please, they didn't have anything to do with it. They didn't even know what I planned to do. I told them that I was just visiting my mother. They're innocent."

Raven tried to sit up. The movement caused her head to spin and her vision to blur. She couldn't let her friends get in trouble because of her. This was her dumb decision. Her hand tightened around the metal frame as she pushed up.

"Calm down Ms. More," Dr. Nisswa said. She put a firm hand on Raven's shoulder, guiding her back toward the bed. Raven laid back down. She had to take several deep breaths in order to stop the room from spinning. "As I said before I don't want to get the police involved. If you tell me what happened, maybe this is a problem we can settle internally."

Raven looked down at her hands. She couldn't tell the truth but she couldn't let Tiffany and Dion get in trouble either. She had no choice.

"I really don't know what happened," Raven said looking up at Dr. Nisswa. Her eyes watered. "What you said is true. I did come here to see my mother and I did lie. After they told me my mom was being put in isolation I knew I had to see her. With the way she's been acting recently, I knew I probably wouldn't get to see her before I moved."

Tears fell down Raven's cheeks. She wiped them away. "Everything seemed to be going according to plan, but then I started to feel sick. Honestly, I haven't been feeling all that great lately. It's all the stress of normal life and everything that's been going on with my mom. I was just talking to her when I started to feel really dizzy. I'm not sure what happened next."

Dr. Nisswa pulled out a small flashlight. She flicked it back and forth in front of Raven's eyes.

"Did you take something before coming here? How are you feeling now?" Dr. Nisswa asked.

"No, I'm not on drugs. I just wanted to see her. I didn't know I was that sick but I'm better now. If you allow it, I'm sure my friends could take me home. I won't try that ever again. I was stupid and wasn't thinking, but I know better now."

"Not so fast Ms. More." Dr. Nisswa crossed her arms and gave Raven another stern look.

"I told you the truth. You have to believe me," Raven said.

Dion and Tiffany were waiting for her. She wasn't even sure how long she'd been out. They would probably be worried by now. She wouldn't blame them if they got angry with her for this.

“I believe you Ms. More. You weren’t on drugs. We ran some test on you while you were out. They came back clear but that doesn’t mean I can just let you go. What you did was incredibly dangerous. Your mother is in isolation for a reason. Her visitation is canceled now but in the future, if you want to see your mother, I think it would be best if you don’t come without a guardian. As for your friends I’ve already sent them home. We had your father’s number on file so we called him to pick you up,” Dr. Nisswa said. She picked up the clipboard at the end of Raven’s bed.

Raven just stared at her. She’d never be allowed to see her mother without her father there and her father would never come. Her eyes watered but she swallowed back the bitter emotions. She’d known this was coming. This was the price of failure.

Dr. Nisswa scribbled something down on the clipboard before looking back up at Raven.

“You hit the floor pretty hard so I’m prescribing something for the pain. Take them only when necessary. Your father should be here soon,” Dr. Nisswa said.

“I’m surprised he even picked up,” Raven whispered to herself. Neither the nurse nor Dr. Nisswa heard Raven’s comment as they exited the room.

Raven listened to the sound of the door closing. The empty hollowness she’d felt returned to Raven. She’d failed her mission. Even with this new power, she wasn’t able to save her mother.

Raven tossed her arm over her eyes. She was so tired of crying.

Raven. Lu’s voice called.

“Please, just leave me alone,” Raven said. She didn’t care if anyone saw her talking to herself.

Dear goddess, pull yourself together. Lu’s voice hissed in her ear. *You need to be alert. It’s not safe here.*

“You said that before. What do you mean it’s not safe here? We’re in a hospital.”

Something went wrong when you tried to enter your mother’s mind.

“I’m fully aware of that,” Raven said between clenched teeth. “I failed just like you said I would.”

No, Raven, I said you’d die if you entered your mother’s head.

“Well I’m sorry to disappoint you but I’m still here.”

Would you please stop being so melodramatic and use that brain of yours. I know for a fact that if you entered your mother's mind you would have died. But here you are still breathing with your sanity intact. Don't you think that means something?

Raven thought about what Lu said. It did seem odd that she was still alive. She remembered the excruciating pain she'd felt when she tried getting into her mother's head. It was like being smashed into a wall.

"I didn't get in," Raven said, everything finally falling into place. "Or at least I didn't make it all the way in. Something stopped me."

Finally, we're getting somewhere. Lu's voice whispered.

"How?"

There was a mental barrier around your mother. Someone made sure that no one could get in. It was probably the same person who broke your mother's mind in the first place.

"Who? Who would do that to her?" Raven asked. Her mother was a good woman. Before the incident, she'd never hurt anyone. She didn't have any enemies. What reason would anyone have for hurting her?

I told you there was an evil in this world. He is an infection that untreated will spread until there is no good left.

"But why would he pick her. She doesn't have anything to do with him. I didn't have anything to do with this until I put on this stupid ring." Raven said holding up her hand. "My mom's been sick for four years."

I'm not sure but it can't be a coincidence. Nothing he does is without reason, Lu said and then after a pause added, *I need time to think.*

"Wait-" Raven called but she felt Lu pull away before she could finish. Raven search the deeper parts of her mind but she could not feel Lu's presence anywhere. She sighed.

Raven thought back over Lu's words. She'd been right about her mother. What happened to her had not been natural. There was still hope. This supposed madman had purposely turned her mother into a crazy woman. There had to be a way to undo it.

Anger boiled inside of Raven as she thought of him. Four years her mother had been locked inside this place. For four years she'd lived with a void in her life where her mother should have been. Now because of him, her mother might be trapped like that forever.

He'd pay for what he'd done. She didn't care if he was supposed to be a super powered villain from another world. She'd make him release her mother and then she'd watch him suffer.

"Lu?" Raven called. There was no response.

"I'll do it. I'll fight for you." As Raven spoke the words, Lu's presence slowly began to return. She felt it inside of her, not as strong as before but it was there.

"How do I stop him?" Raven asked.

Find the gate and destroy it. Cut the ties he holds on this world. Destroy the Hatter.

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A. M. Miller is a Detroit born author with a love of story telling and dark magic. Her hopes are to increase the amount of diversity available readers. When she's not writing or reading she spends her time searching the city for hidden stories.

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