TALK ALL YOU LIKE

CHAPTER ONE: SHE'LL GO ALONE

Scoria trips up the last stair to the temple from the courtyard and curses quietly under her breath, and then covers her mouth as she remembers that she's not supposed to swear on temple grounds. It hadn't even been a swear, really, a low mutter of “knives”, but when it comes to aspects it's safer to dance naked on the rooftops slinging curses at the volcano than it is to accidentally invoke the power of the blades, in the temple, with a stand-in. The big room is empty, anyway, tall pillars bouncing back nothing but the soft shuffle of Scoria's footsteps as she pads across the main hallway. She doesn't know where Au is—out in the city, possibly, or talking fruitlessly to the dead again, as if it will help the three of them after all this time. Farfara – Scoria suppresses a wash of tingling pain as she thinks of Farfara – is probably in the courts, still, where she always is.

At the thought of Farfara the blade coils and grumbles in the pit of Scoria's mental stomach, imitating the low roll of thunder outside as the rain that's been hanging in the sky all day moves in. She stamps it down with a mental foot and ignores the senses she gets from it (reproach anger hurt need stone simplicity plea anger anger anger) like little hollows in her mind; she always gets the same feeling as lost teeth when she interacts with her aspect, a new hole in her mouth she longs to fill.

“Some holes,” she says, whether to the blade or to herself or to the temple at large she doesn't know, “can't be filled so easily.”

Au says that her aspect doesn't talk to her, exactly, but she can tell what it would say all the same. Scoria doesn't think that's entirely true: one thing about the gods is that its followers tend to anthrophomorphize, give life and voice to the things around them that don't have words to speak with. Aspects aren't people enough to tell their figures things. Aspects are sentient enough to have instincts and urges and needs and wants, but they aren't *people*. Scoria sighs and scuffs her foot against the smooth marble floor. It's an argument she's had with Au many, many times, and never one that's gotten them further than talking themselves in circles into the late hours of the night. She wonders how Farfara would weigh in. She wishes she didn't have to.

The temple is almost eerily deserted at this time of day. Everyone is likely out in the city despite the imminent storm, since temple duties pick up again tomorrow. Scoria walks loudly to soften the silence, and wonders if she'd know if she was part of the dead. A memory, unbidden: she and Au desperate in the chamber of the dead, only a few months after being elevated, asking the dead over and over *“how do we get Farfara back, how can we save her”*; Au painting her chapped lips with gold for the millionth time; Scoria biting again and again into the ghost apples, mouthful after mouthful of tasteless wet cotton, just waiting for the crunch. *“You're not going to die,”* Au had said, taking the apple from Scoria's hand. Already bruises from their fingertips were purpling the translucent flesh. *“You've already taken a bite and tasted nothing, so you're not going to die, so you have to deal with this.”* Au's voice cracking. *“You have to help me deal with this.”*

Scoria pushes the memory away. "I've got *stuff* to do," she says. Her voice isn't very loud but it echoes anyway, like her footsteps, and her thoughts. Two of her errands today will require her aspect: Scoria knows the cost of those particular errands, the flip of the power balance between herself and the blade, and mentally saves those for last. No matter how close it makes her feel to Farfara, no matter how necessary it is for her goal, Scoria dreads the memory of the feeling when the blade takes control.

But she needs to do those two today so that she can be centered and unshaken for the one tomorrow. Tomorrow's errand is an easy one; easy physically, at least, though in the morally soupy core of her heart Scoria is still herself and is therefore still unhappy that it must be done.

But it must be done, and it's easy, physically, so she'll do it first thing tomorrow.

All it requires is a deserted street, and an opportunity, and a knife.

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Chine is late. She's been late all day, actually: late for a sale, late for meeting up with Hollow, late for watching the most pink-and-purple sunset the city's seen in months, and now late for dinner, which is probably the biggest offense. Her family doesn't usually have group dinners, so Chine doesn't like to miss them, even by a few minutes; there's something that feels a little off about sliding between seats and reaching around and across people with their plates already full, listening politely to an already-started thread of conversation that she doesn't have any interest in. It's almost all friends, since none of Chine's extended family lives anywhere near the city and she doesn't have any siblings, but Chine cares and her parents care. Chine doesn't like to be late, really, in general.

Hollow had dashed to his own house to change out of his initiate's robes before joining the dinner, so Chine walks into the house alone, slipping in through the door and catching it carefully before it can pull itself closed with a slam behind her. The house is bright and full, everyone already eating (as she had guessed), and she lets herself be drawn in away from the soft quiet atmosphere of the cool evening outside.

“Chine, baby, you made it!”

“Yeah, sorry--”

“Is Hollow with you?”

“He stopped to change out of his robes--”

“Come over here, we saved your seat--”

“Thank you--”

“Did you see the sunset--”

“Just barely, I nearly missed it--”

“Oh, I nearly forgot, did you buy the--”

“Yeah, I have them right here--”

Chine settles into the talk and bustle of the dinner, getting up only to greet Hollow when he arrives. It's been a month or so since the last big gathering like this; for a while the two of them simply sit back and eat and listen to the chatter and gossip of friends catching up.

Someone (one of the sisters of the cousin of Hollow's father's best friends, Chine thinks, discreetly counting on her fingers) leans forward. “Did you hear that the law made another false ruling? The thief they convicted was innocent; they said that the blade herself made the request for a re-review of the evidence.”

There's a general outcry.

“The law making a false ruling? ~~In my city?”~~

~~“It's more likely than you think.”~~

“I've never heard of something like that,” Chine's father says. “And I should know, since I was in like for the position at one point.”

“You were not,” Chine snorts, elbowing him gently.

“The law is still young, she's barely twenty-two,” someone else says, not to be dissuaded from the conversation. “She's still learning... And with the previous law--”

Hollow's father cuts him off. “We've had holy figures even younger than the law is now; it's not a question of age, since the law--”

He's cut off in turn. “--I was *saying* that if you take into account that the previous law died before she could mentor this one—she's had no one to teach her, she's had to learn it all herself!”

“This is the fourth one uncovered this month,” Chine''s mother says stubbornly. “And the law herself doesn't seem to care, she doesn't look fazed at all--”

“Chine, Hollow, you see her more than us, being at the temple all the time,” Chine's father says. “What's your take on all of this? Do you think the law is just young?”

“Or do you think it's something more sinister?” Hollow's mother asks, but with a bit of a laugh in her voice.

“Something sinister,” Chine says, at the same time Hollow says, “She's just young.” They stop and look at each other for a moment, to the amusement of the adults; Chine is about to say something else when a joke from two other people's side conversation falls loudly into the pause in the main conversation, and everyone laughs, and the subject changes again.

Later, neatly dodging cleanup work, Chine offers to walk with Hollow back to the temple. Her house is only a handful of blocks away, so she doesn't room there like he does, but it's a familiar walk and the air is clean and cool and speaks of the long-awaited beginning of summer.

“It's so nice out,” Chine says, breathing the night deep into her lungs. “Did you remember your robes?”

“I have my spare ones back in my room,” Hollow reassures her. He's quiet for a few steps, then says, “Do you really think that there's something bad going on with the law?”

“Do you really think that it's just because she's young?” Chine counters. “You've seen her walking around; she's barely even a person! You've seen her next to the gods, or the blade, you have to see it too. She's... blank.”

“Stressed!” Hollow shoots back. “The law is a lot of responsibility for one person, I know *I* shut down when I'm stressed--”

“You shut down when you're stressed, absolutely, but not like this, do you--” Chine pauses, frustrated. “Do you really not see it? There's something wrong with the law, and she's been making mistakes, you don't think that's something sinister? The other two are young, too, but they're not imprisoning innocent people.”

Hollow purses his lips, makes an *mmm* noise.

“I don't know,” Chine says. “I think she's been imprisoning people wrongly. I want to know *why*. She has to have a reason, and it can't be a good one.”

“Is that what we're talking about? A conspiracy?”

“Is that *not* what we're talking about?”

They both pause, to look at each other, and then groan with laughter.

“I don't know,” Chine says again. “The fact that anything is happening at all is weird, you have to admit.”

“I'll admit that,” Hollow says easily. “It's weird that anything is happening at all.”

They reach the temple and sit on the broad front steps, Chine reluctant to head back and Hollow reluctant to go in.

“Did you hear they're thinking about redoing these stairs next year?” Hollow says. “They're getting too worn down or something.”

Chine hmms, running the backs of her fingers along the smooth worn-down surfaces of the steps. “I hadn't heard that.”

“It's too bad,” Hollow says, doing the same, voice contemplative. “I love these old stairs. New ones won't be the same.”

Chine tips her head back and looks at the deep blue sky, trying to pick out some familiar constellations. “Even if you love them, I think some things have to be changed.”

“Maybe that's true,” Hollow says. “But I wish it wasn't.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

CHAPTER TWO: THE INCEPTION OF SORROW

Chine wakes with a storm tossing both the sky and her stomach. Nightmares, she thinks, although she can't remember any details clear enough to tell. It's early; temple duties start at sunrise and Chine is used to waking an hour or so before that to get dressed and walk over. Her parents are still sleeping, and she sneaks into their rooms and kisses them both on the forehead before letting herself softly out of the house and into the rainy predawn light. Somewhere, in a different universe and a different season but at the same time of day, a girl named Hazel does the same thing.

The route to the temple is so familiar that Chine can walk it in her sleep, has, in fact, walked it in her sleep before when her semi-woken mind has dressed and brought her there in habit while the rest of her mind continued sleeping. The cool early air is robbing heat from the folds of her clothes and chilling her into alertness; above her the sky rumbles.

Chine rubs her hands up and down her arms to quell the goosebumps. “The gods is with us,” she mumbles.

Hollow greets her at the entrance just as the sky opens up and the rain begins to fall; Chine dances up the steps between the rapidly spattering drops and jumps into the roofed safety of the building just as the weather gives up all pretense of politeness and turns into a downpour. Chine laughs, foreboding feeling temporarily forgotten, and joins the rest of the initiates with lighting candles and cleaning rooms and hallways before the day starts.

The temple combines contemporary education with the more specialized kind: initiates learn math, science, writing, history, efficient large-building cleanup, various rites relating to either the gods or the law or the blade, people skills, self-defense, and a whole host of other things. Parents who think their children may lean towards one of the three aspects can send their children to learn at the temple; parents who simply can't afford to pay for any of the other schools around the city can send their children to learn there too. The temple allows students to start as young as six years old, and as Chine and Hollow move around the building in a practiced dance they carefully direct and move around gaggles of small children wielding mops and giggles in equal measure.

“What's unfair,” Hollow says, laying out careful piles of bright long-stemmed flowers, “is that all the eleven-year-olds get to go around lighting the candles. We're teenagers! (bro we are late teens) Seventeen years old! Practically adults! We should be allowed to handle the fire.”

Chine arranges squares of gold leaf next to smooth long-handled brushes and steps back a few paces to check the effect. “Think about it,” she says. “You remember when you were eleven. You wanted to light the candles. They're eleven. They want to light the candles. Eleven is the perfect age to light candles. It's the ideal blend of fire and responsibility.”

Slowly the temple brightens with light and voices, the echoey patter of rain outside making the space seem even more soaring and hollow than normal. Chine's ominous feeling, briefly set aside, returns as the day rolls on into actual daytime. It's nothing solid, not grounded in anything real, just a twist of fear in the metaphorical corner of her eye as she turns, or looks out the window. The initiates take classes in rotating shifts, temple duties and generic education switching off days, and Chine wants to focus but she can't. She feels like something is watching her all through history class (Hollow keeps checking in circles around her, for which she is infinitely grateful), and twitches all though aspect theory, which is a pretty pretentious name for a class that's basically history again except more focused around the city and temple.

"Sorry," she says to Hollow during lunch, wearily rubbing her temples with her fingers and hunching down into herself. The eating hall is emptier than normal today, possibly due to the inclement weather, and most of the initiates are crowded at two of the long tables. On days with higher attendance the tables tend to group together by aspect lean, the gods / the law / the blade and then a table for the undecideds; today everyone sits together and Chine finds herself sitting next to a blade-biased initiate named Esther who is talking earnestly to Hollow about her preference for axes over knives ("They're still blades," Hollow says, and they nod wisely at each other), and across the table from two other initiates who are looking around as though they've lost something.

"A whole loaf of bread fell off my plate and now I can't fucking find it," one of them (Chine knows them: Karine, gods-biased) is saying disconsolately. "I just wanted some bread."

The other initiate (Maria, Chine thinks, leaned toward the law) tears off a piece of bread from a nearby plate and holds it out to Karine with a, "Here dude, want some of mine?"

Karine looks at it with disgust. "You've already ripped it up, it's tainted."

Maria looks appropriately offended and withdraws the proffered bread. "What the god damn hell is your damage?"

"Who even eats their bread that that? You tore it apart, like a caveman."

Maria takes a deep breath. "You. You. I tried to extend the hand of kindness. To lend you help when you were down. You lost something. I tried to replace what you had lost. And what do you do to me? You spit in my face- no, you throw the metaphorical dirt of rejection into my face. You are mean to me. You insult me. You dont appreciate anything that I--"

Karine cuts across them. "You offer me this bread, this mangled impure bread that I *never* asked for, and when I say no, when I deny you, you throw this.... fit! Never have I been more embarrassed for my fellow man you complete and absolute fool. You utter child."

Chine decides to go back to listening to Esther talk about axes.

“If we make the assumption,” she's saying, “that it's sword and shield versus axe and shield and that the fighters are completely equal in every respect, the axe will have greater force behind each blow due to the heaver weight of the axehead and the relatively concentrated mass of the strike, while the sword will have less force behind the blows but more versatility; the sword can parry more effectively than the axe, and it is typically possible to perform stabbing motions with a sword, allowing for a greater range of blows which can damage the opponent.”

One of Hollow's friends, Gavin, has joined in to what has become an animated debate. “What about daggers?”

“A last-ditch weapon,” Esther says dismissively. “If you're going up against a man with a sword and shield or even just a sword and all you have are a pair of foot-long daggers--”

“--if that,” adds Hollow, who seems to be thoroughly on Esther's side.

“--you are most likely going to die. Even if the swordsman is very unskilled, the longer reach will severely hurt the chances of getting under his guard and inflicting a wound. Daggers would probably have been used at the dinner table and in extremely close combat like grappling where the length of a sword would prohibit it from being used effectively.”

“So what you're saying,” Gavin says, “is that I should commit murder at the dinner table. Like here.”

“Absolutely,” says Esther, with an air of triumph. “Also, that axes are better.” She nudges the person resting their head on the table next to her. “What's your opinion, sweet pea? Axes or daggers?”

“Floor,” they say, sliding off the bench to lie in the aisle between the table everyone is sitting at and the empty one behind them. “It's time to lie on the floor.” Chine notices flakes of gold leaf under their nails; they must be gods-biased.

A hand, presumably connected to a body, snakes out from underneath the bench of the unoccupied table to make an emphatic gesture. “When is it *not* this time?”

“Well,” says Esther, apparently unconcerned by the disembodied floor voice. “It’s important to take occasional breaks to stretch, but you can always get right back to lying down afterwards.”

“You can stretch laying down,” the person who recently abandoned the bench for the floor says. “There's at least four yoga positions for this.”

“Every day great strides are being made in an effort to optimize our time honored tradition of lying down on a floor for days at a time,” says the disembodied voice under the bench. The two share a fistbump.

Chine likes the less crowded lunches for conversations like this, but even the variety of conversation can't distract her fully.

“What's wrong, exactly?” Hollow asks, noticing her increased hunch into herself. “Just, like, general bad feeling? Paranoia? Does it feel like someone's following you, because I get that a lot.”

“It's like a premonition,” Chine says. “As if the world is telling me that something bad is about to happen, but I don't know how to prevent it. Like a bad omen.”

“A [good world-specific term that means “the gods is warning you that some bad shit's gonna go down and there's still an off chance that you can fix it”, my tattoo is exactly where I rest my arm agains the edge of my computer and im dying]?” asks Karine.

“Have you been twitchy all day?” asks the person lying on the floor, the one with gold flakes on their fingers. Their voice is slightly muffled from being on the floor. What was that sentence. Their voice is slightly muffled, since they're lying on the floor and their face is kind of squished.

“Mmhm,” says Chine. Or 'yes', because mm hm doesn't seem very chine-like.

“That means there's still an off chance that you can prevent whatever's about to happen,” the person on the floor tells her. “If you can figure out what it is.”

“Is it always something bad?” asks Esther, taking a more scientific interest in Chine's suffering. “Like really bad? Could the gods be warning her about spoiled milk or something?”

“I guess it *could* be,” Karine says. “I don't know why it would, though.”

“I would like the feeling to go away,” moans Chine, resting her head gently on the table. “How do I make it go away?”

“You could ask the gods to stop it,” Gavin suggests.

“Or you could figure out what's going on and prevent it,” Karine says mercilessly.

Chine wouldn't even know where to begin.

After lunch ~~it's puzzles and darts and baking~~ there's math class, which Chine loves and Hollow hates; and then after that language, where they learn to speak the language of the volcano and the dead; and then after that everyone's afternoon schedules split off from their big blocks of coordinated either-or and into smaller, more individual classes. Hollow parts ways with Chine at the courtyard, where despite the weather the weekly self-defense class is being held. Part of Chine wants to join him just for a more productive distraction to lose herself in, but she doesn't enjoy physical fighting, and today she has a different matter to attend to. Chine checks the big timekeeping fixture in the main room of the temple as she threads through the pillars towards the entrance hall; she has a full two hours until [small elective class that i'll remember later]. The rain hasn't abated in the slightest. Chine hunches her shoulders uselessly into the coat she's borrowed from one of her friends, and steps out into the downpour.

The courts are located in the heart of the city, a fifteen or twenty minute walk from the temple: tall, regal buildings, intricately interconnected and all pillars and smooth white stone. The inside is labyrinthine and strangely dim even on bright days, and Chine loves it here. Or had loved it here, once, when she still visited just because she loved it and not because she had a mystery to solve.

The biggest courtroom is located roughly in the center of the courts, though the route there is anything but straightforward, and that's where Farfara Lee, one of the city's three holy figures, the law, can be found. The room is long, straight, and symmetrical, tiered so that at the far end of the room from the doorway the law sits elevated several yards above the proceedings. It is here that Chine slips, day after day these days, to sit at one of the benches and watch as the law, acting as just another judge despite her status as a holy figure, deals with cases that range from petty theft to murder to insurance fraud. Chine is still an undecided despite her years at the temple, so she has no specialized knowledge of the law, but even so she can't find any flaw in the law's logic and decisions, can detect no lack of impartiality, can think of no reason why the law would want to go against her aspect in so obvious a way as to make false rulings. And yet *something* about the law seems off, and Chine can't figure out what it is, and she can't let it go.

She doesn't realize that the stormy feeling in her gut has left her until hours later.

The law's behavior is strange, a simple and obvious as that. It's common, even traditional, for the holy figures to be found largely in or around the temple, staying available to listen or assist and generally making themselves known as a friendly presence as well as a holy one. You may not be personally able to speak to one of them, because of demand, but the offer of the possibility alone is an important one. Each aspect has delegates, trained to do the everyday versions of the jobs of the holy figures, so that the gods and the law and the blade can stay accessible. And yet here is the law, isolated in a courtroom and sitting literal head and shoulders above everyone else, doing jobs that many other judges and lawyers could easily do.

And she's doing those jobs so *impassively*, is what Chine keeps coming back to, staring at the law as though she can burn through Farfara's skull and understand what's happening underneath. Or maybe impassively isn't the right word. It feels like impassive if it was bigger, deeper, broader: transcending simple lack of emotion and becoming genuine detachment, a complete separation that leaves the law looking like a statue that moves. She looks like a person: tall, skin regal sepia brown, dark hair shaved close to her head, strong eyebrows over cool, slanted eyes. But those eyes are vacant, eyebrows forgotten. The law's limbs, when she moves them, seem unfamiliar the body that owns them. The law looks as though she's being *piloted*. Her sheer, transparent veil seems to cut her off from her surroundings more than it would if it had been opaque.

*What kind of drive*, Chine thinks, *must she have, to achieve this level of removal from herself and her aspect.* She doesn't know what the law is doing. She can't figure it out.

But she's going to.

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By the time Chine finally walks home, after the sun has set, she's not convinced the rain will ever stop. The city gets day-long downpours like this on occasion, something to do with proximity to the sea and the volcano, but every time it happens it seems like this is the time that the clouds won't clear up on the other side. She's alone on the walk and alone with her thoughts, streets cleared by the rain, mulling rinse-and-repeat over her questions and theories about the law. Is she someone with a vendetta, seeking to ruin the city from the inside out? Is she someone with a lot of grudges and a creative approach to the process of law?

The rain dampens even the smell of the fire, so Chine has no warning when she rounds the corner to a crowd and the charred outline of her house.

Hollow's mother sweeps Chine into her arms immediately, before Chine can even register people around her, before Chine can even take her eyes off the house.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Hollow's mother is saying. “I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.”

“My house?” says Chine, whose brain seems to be operating on a different plane of existence from her mouth. “What happened?”

“We don't know, exactly--”

“My parents?” Chine interrupts, mind emerging from its fit of glassy slowness. “Are they okay?”

The older woman's arms tighten around her, briefly and unconsciously. “We don't know,” she says. “The house is all burned, half destroyed, it's a mess in there but we can't find any bodies.”

“What does that mean?” Chine asks, because she can't quite seem to process words, or stop staring at the improbably smoldering state of her heart. I meant to type house what the fuck.

“We don't know where your parents are,” Hollow's mother says. “They're gone.” She takes a deep breath, which means that she's about to say something that isn't going to be comforting, which in itself is strangely comforting. “The fire burned hot in the basement, where the rain couldn't reach it and the heat piled in. It's possible that if they were down there... Well, there's a lot of rubble, and a lot of ash. It's not unlikely that...”

Her voice has gotten quieter and quieter until she trails off, seemingly physically unable to finish the sentence. Chine doesn't need her to. She feels like her mind has split in half. One part is preoccupied with shock, grief, anger, fear, details like possessions and housing; the other part has been catapulted into a state of sudden, burning clarity. Bits of the conversation at dinner yesterday float through her mind: the adults arguing, debating the law, suspicious, defensive, accusatory. *They knew something about the law.* And the law took action. A disappearance, of course, not an actual murder, no bodies in the house because that would be unjust, and whatever legal fabrications the law has been making they have been proportionate, a facsimile of 'just', nothing this drastic: this is just a cover-up for something else. Chine's parents are still alive. They have to be. The law has them.

Chine has no illusions about her own abilities: a rescue is out of the question, and there are too many variables and mysteries in play still to even consider that possibility. There isn't much Chine can do that's different from what she's been doing already.

“Chine?” Hollow's mother asks. “Talk to me, sweetheart. Are you okay?” Chine hears her like she's underwater. She's still staring at her ruined house with wide, unblinking eyes, but she can feel a grin pulling her mouth apart from the inside.

She's going to figure this out.

She's going to find her parents.

And she's going to bring the law to justice.

CHAPTER THREE: LIKE SLEEP LIKE SCYTHING

Hollow doesn't have anyone else staying in his room at the temple, so when Chine tells him she doesn't like staying at his parent's place (too far from the temple, especially if she walks a route that doesn't take her past the corpse of her house, and she feels like an intruder) he practically insists that she moves in with him. Chine acquiesces without much protest: she's been thinking about moving to the temple for the past year or so, and being so close to everything is comforting and safely routine. Hollow is equal parts subdued and delighted as she moves in with her meager possessions during the break before dinner: a heart-shaped piece of rubble from where part of her house's basement caved in, a few sets of gold wristbands, her grey linen initiate's robes.

“It's so fun that you're living here!” he says, ruffling up his already spiky hair in excitement, and then remembers the circumstances and adding, “I'm sorry.”

Chine waves her hand at him, laughing a little. “Don't be sorry. I'm excited too.” She catches his expression, skeptical and appraising, and adds, “*really*, I'm okay. I'm sad about my house, and worried about my parents, but--”

“Worried?” Hollow asks. “About your parents, they're--?” He cuts himself off before he says *dead*. “Chine,” he starts over. Looks at her, waits for her to explain, because she always has a reason.

Chine puts the piece of rubble on the windowsill and turns to face him in the bed across from her. She's touched by how willing he is to hear her out, how willing he is to believe that she knows what she's talking about. “I have,” she says, slowly, piecing together how to say it so that he won't think she's just in denial, “a theory.”

It takes only a few minutes for Chine to explain what she thinks the law is doing, and most of the rest of the evening to convince Hollow about it. They argue through dinner (in hushed voices, in a corner of the table where everyone gives them space and sideways glances; everyone knows about Chine's tragedy already) and then through cleanup afterwards and then outside on one of the benches by a fountain in the courtyard during the free couple of hours until bedtime. Hollow, still convinced of the integrity of the law, is taking some convincing.

They stop talking when they see the blade, striding down the wide shallow steps from the main hall of the temple to the courtyard. She pulls up short when she notices them, gaze wary and hard. She looks tired in the cool green twilight, skin scattered with tiny abrasions and with grey smudges under her eyes. She gazes at them blankly. Hollow looks away immediately, but Chine meets and holds her gaze, sparked into combativeness by something in the blade's stance.

“Hel,” the blade says quietly, not looking away from Chine. “Who's your friend?”

Hollow opens his mouth to answer, but Chine beats him to it, voice equally soft. “Why not ask me yourself?”

The blade's eyes open a fraction wider, eyebrows lift a hair. The expression shift is subtle but complete: without moving a muscle, her whole body broadcasts condescending incredulity. “It must not have occurred to me.”

“I'm Chine,” Chine says. She doesn't stand up, or offer her hand.

The blade looks at her for a moment, expression unreadable, before inclining her head slightly. “Scoria.”

Then she turns and continues across the courtyard, angling sideways to enter into one of the sideways porch things [lmao what are those even called im in a word war and cant check]. Chine can't seem to pull her eyes away from the tiny cuts and bruises scattered across Scoria's knuckles and fingers.

Hollow lets out a breath. “Chine,” he says. “What the-- what was that.”

“The blade,” Chine says evenly.

“You weren't very polite to her.”

“She wasn't very polite to me. Also, she called you Hel.”

“That's my *name*.”

“If she knows you well enough to know your name, she knows your nickname too. Not using it is deliberate.” Chine considers the retreating figure of the blade. The fading light outlines Scoria's shoulder muscles through the cutout in the back of her bodysuit. “I don't like her.”

Hollow lets out a laugh. “Good thing you're not blade-biased, then. Esther says she's nice, though.”

Chine hums noncommittally, not about to change her opinion, and lets Hollow talk his way through skepticism over her theory about what happened to her parents and into belief, or at least positive neutrality. For a while they sit there by the fountain in companionable silence, watching the sky shift entirely into deep blue. It's such a contrast from yesterday's ferocious clouds that Chine is already half-wondering if she imagined all the rain. At last the bells begin ringing throughout the building, tiny melodies echoing gently out into the night to signal that now is the time for sleep. The two wander back to the initiate's quarters, laughing softly, bumping each other with their shoulders. The bed in Hollow's – their – room is unfamiliar but comfortable and Chine drops into it already half-asleep and tired with partially-formed plans for tomorrow. Another afternoon at the courts, after classes that she's already having trouble focusing on. She mumbles goodnight to Hollow and is dreaming before she knows it.

In her dream she's sitting on the set of stairs leading up to the wide entrance to the temple, nearly hypnotized by the spread of the city block before her, running her cold fingers over the smooth undersides of her forearms again and again and again. “I want to start over,” she says, but she doesn't know who she's talking to. The area around her has a certain smoothness to it, blurred at the edges as though a fog has rolled in, or as though the sun is high and hot in the sky. There's a sound as soft as linen sliding across silk; as soft as a bird wing unfolding.

“I can't hear you,” Chine whispers.

There's a noise, soft and clattering, from somewhere. Chine thinks of dominoes falling over, or a handful of tiles being shaken gently. It sounds cool, blue-green, strange in comparison to the reds and pinks of the rest of the dream. It sounds like a question.

“It would hurt less to forget,” she says, like an answer, although she doesn't know who she's answering. She doesn't know what the question is.

She closes her eyes.

She wakes up.

It's an hour before dawn like she's still used to, even though (a twinge) she doesn't have to walk to the temple in the mornings anymore. Hollow is still asleep in the bed across to her, one leg hanging over the side, hopelessly tangled in the sheets. For a few minutes Chine lies in her own bed, staring at the ceiling. The dream sticks vivid in her head. Something about it: the smoothness, maybe, or the odd unbalance of senses (touch above sight far above smell or taste or sound), or the dizzying sensation of closing her eyes to see something entirely different in front of her. What had that whisper been? What had it been asking?

It takes a conscious effort of will to close her eyes after the reality-tipping feel of the dream: Chine steels herself, clutches the edge of the bed tightly in her hands, and performs a few deliberate blinks. Nothing happens. Still feeling shaken, but at least now a little more grounded in reality, Chine starts her day.

She knows where the baths are and makes her way there with a minimum of false turns in the dark; they're deserted at this hour. Chine bathes quickly and makes her way back to her and Hollow's room to get dressed. He hasn't moved. The sky outside the window is still dark, not even a few fingers of light reaching up to illuminate the horizon. Pressing a hand against the gold chains looped around her neck so they won't clink, Chine slips out of the room and into the temple. No one's awake, of course, so no candles have been lit, but it's easy enough to navigate by touch and memory alone. Despite her best efforts, her bare feet still make a soft sound that the nighttime acoustics of the hall pick up and multiply mercilessly, so it's a few moments before Chine realizes that her footsteps aren't the only ones in the temple. She stops; the noise keeps going, not just repeated but renewed. Chine remembers the soft rattling noise of tiles from earlier, thinks it must be that again, remembers with a soft sideways jolt that that hadn't been real.

“Hello?” she says softly. The footsteps stop.

“Who's there?” the other person asks, and Chine manages to tense and relax at the same time as she recognizes the voice.

“What is the blade doing up at this hour?” she asks, making only a cursory effort to keep her tone respectful and not overtly belligerent.

“What's a lowly initiate doing up at this hour?” Scoria asks. Chine can't quite pinpoint where she is in the hall, voices too soft and echoes too scattered through the pillars, but she sounds close. Ish?

“Aren't all initiates equal in rank if not in age?” Chine counters.

“In the eyes of the *temple*, yes.”

Chine snorts softly, despite herself. She still feels a little off from her dream, like she's tipping between two realities, but Scoria's voice seems to keep her steady on her feet. The blade is associated with the body, with resolution, with stone. Maybe Scoria, just by being nearby, can be a steadying force. That seems like a useful ability, Chine thinks. Does the mere presence of the law offer mental clarity? Could being near the gods soothe someone's heart?

“Breakfast doesn't start for another twenty minutes or so,” Chine says, instead of voicing her questions. “I thought I would get some fresh air before the day begins.”

Scoria says nothing. The room is briefly, disorientingly still, devoid of footsteps and voices alike.

“Well?” says Chine. “Are you going to tell me why you're up so early?”

“No,” says Scoria, and the tiny echo of footfalls begins again as she walks away, leaving Chine behind standing there infuriated and much calmer than she had been before the brief, strange conversation.

By the time she finds Hollow for breakfast he's halfway into a nervous breakdown.

“You can't do that!” he says, shaking her by the shoulders. “After telling me about this whole conspiracy theory with your parents! I woke up and you weren't in your bed and I was convinced that you had been-- kidnapped by the law, or run away to rescue your mom and dad, or *something*, don't do that to me--”

Chine puts her hands on either side of his face and moves his head back and forth. “Calm down, Hollow. Look into my eyes. Take some deep breaths.”

Hollow does so.

“I'm just used to waking up early,” Chine explains, letting him go once he looks like he's calmed down a little. “I didn't want to lie in bed, so I walked around a little bit before the day started. That's it. Nothing sinister. *Which*, by the way, you shouldn't yell about so loudly *in* the temple.”

“She's never here, you said so yourself.”

“But the other two are. They could all be working together, there's too much we don't know.”

“Cahoots?” Hollow asks, struggling to maintain seriousness.

“Cahoots,” Chine says, with equally false solemnity.

The rest of the day passes without incident, but Chine is so on edge that even this seems suspicious. Everything is almost *too* normal, as though the world itself is struggling to convince her that the strange dream and the short encounter with Scoria hadn't happened at all. Temple setup is rote. Classes are normal. Lunch is uneventful. There's nothing untoward at the courts. By the time they're at dinner again, Chine is filled with a mounting, baseless frustration that weights her to the core, and something about the feeling from her dream this morning has come back to her: a kind of vertigo, a faint tipping sensation. A whisper on the edge of her hearing.

“You okay?” Hollow asks, nudging her with his shoulder as she mindlessly shovels food into her mouth. Chine shrugs at him.

“I had a weird dream,” she says. “It was like it was... real. The kind of dream where you wake up and you're not sure if it was a dream or not.”

“What happened in it?”

“I was sitting on the steps at the front of the temple,” Chine tells him. “I could see the whole city in front of me. My hands were cold and I was just running them up and down the underside of my arm, back and forth, back and...” She realizes that she's mimicking the motion now and forcibly stops her hand. “It felt like something was trying to talk to me, except it wasn't *talking*, exactly. It was more passive than that, it hardly even felt like talking. It was a vague sense of attempted communication.”

“Does this happen to you a lot in real life?” Hollow asks. “Because this doesn't sound like the kind of dream that I would wake up from and have trouble telling from reality.”

“Part of it was the way I woke up,” Chine says, feeling vertigo stealing away at the edges of her vision again and discreetly clutching at the edge of the table to balance herself. It doesn't work, since the table just feels like it's tilting too, but at least it's something solid to hold onto. “I closed my eyes and woke up. There was no... disconnect.” She grasps for the words. “Normally when you close your eyes it gets dark, you can't see anything, of course, because your eyes are closed. But it didn't get dark. I felt myself close my eyes, and then I was looking at our room, awake.” Chine looks at Hollow like she's searching for something in his face. She doesn't know what she's searching for. “If I closed my eyes and now I'm here, am I awake? Am I asleep?”

Hollow reaches out to tug at her hand; she realizes she's been repeating the motion of the dream again, and lets him. “It's real right here,” he says, opening her palm to put, for some reason, a piece of bread in it. “Promise. You're not dreaming.”

Chine shoves the bread into her mouth and tries very very hard to believe him.

Two days later she wakes up early in the morning clutching her own hand like it's a lifeline. She swings her legs over the side of her bed without really thinking about it, puts on her clothes, and walks out the door of her and Hollow's room. She's careful to make her bed neatly, so that Hollow won't be worried if he wakes up and finds her gone. Her route this morning doesn't take her through the main hall of the temple, so there is no chance encounter with Scoria and no tiny chorus of footsteps either; instead Chine leaves the building from the initiate's entrance and makes her way towards her house. It's her usual hour, with no predawn light, and the still-night air plays around her like a living thing, pressing and sliding across her skin and tugging gently on her initiate's robes. Something about the chill, or the tiredness, makes Chine hyperaware of the light, rough feel of fabric against her arms. She thinks she can feel every thread of the linen as it pulls against her shoulders. Above her the sky is smooth green-blue, reminiscent of tiles underwater. The pavement is uneven and bumpy under the thin soles of Chine's shoes: everything seems to be a contrast, smooth / rough, smooth / rough. She hardly realizes it when she reaches her house. It's a calm, inviting bunker in the midst of the hot, hazy-pink day, and she slips through the gate and up the steps and inside immediately.

“Chine!” her mother says, from the kitchen, opening her arms for a hug. “What are you doing home so early?”

Chine falls into her mother's embrace and stands there for a moment, eyes closed, breathing. Her mother is warm and solid around her and Chine suddenly finds herself fighting back tears: why, she can't quite figure out.

“I'm so happy you're safe,” she mumbles.

“Safe?” Chine's mother repeats. “What do you mean?”

Something whispers through the house.

Chine wakes up.

There are tears making tracks down the side of her face and Hollow is kneeling by her bed, eyes concerned, forehead knitted. Chine is suddenly struck by the smell of the room, the taste in her mouth, the sound of her own ragged breathing: it feels like her senses had been switched off before, and someone had just brought them back online.

“Are you okay?” Hollow asks. “What happened?”

“I don't know,” Chine says. “I don't know.”

–

Scoria doesn't sleep very much these days, consumed by her own one-man war; and even when her duties are done for the day, it's not her own room that Scoria lets her feet take her to. More often than not, when Scoria allows sleep to have its turn, it's Au's quarters that she goes to: there's a couch there that's become basically hers, and it feels better, somehow, than her own rooms. But that's to sleep. Scoria's destination this late evening is less pleasant, less restful. Au had compared it caustically to “willingly swallowing broken glass”, an analogy that echoes through Scoria's head now as she treads her way to Farfara's room.

Her aspect quiets when she speaks to Farfara, a curious feeling after being used to the uneasy arm-wrestle balance of control day in and day out. Scoria's mind quiets too, the part relentlessly anchored to the way things had been before they had been inaugurated as the three new holy figures. The rest of her steels a little more after each visit, resolve a little more strengthened, im so mad I cant make a rika joke here, fuck.

*It would hurt less to forget*, whispers the quieted part of Scoria's mind, merciless.

*You can't go back*, the sharp blade part of her mind whispers steadfastly. *But you can stop going forward.*

Her aspect sends her only hunger, and the feeling of the hollow point of her ribcage that longs for the knife.

If the door is closed Farfara is back from the courts; if she is back from the courts then she is asleep, or nearly so. Scoria thinks that Farfara is most herself in the limbo state of almost-asleep, but it's been enough years that a small part of her is afraid that she can no longer tell between Farfara as the law and Farfara as herself. The corridor leading to Farfara's quarters is dark, lit by nothing but a stray stripe of moonlight, reaching desperately for the bottom of the doorframe. Scoria lets herself in, losing her purpose for a half second in the sudden wash of memory: sleepovers in this room--giggling late into the night--in the brief, bright period where the power and the self were equal--

Nothing in the room stirs, but Scoria can hear the soft sound of another living person. In the back of her mind, the sense of the law brushes against the sense of the blade.

She makes her way by memory to the side of the bed: the floors are piled with carpets and rugs five or six deep, woven fantastically in shades of deep burgundy and warm crimson and light pink. Scoria sinks down onto the floor and leans her back agains the bed and draws her legs up to her chest.

“Hey,” she whispers, draping her wrists over her knees and tipping her head back. “Are you awake?”

A soft mumble, barely vocalized, barely more than an exhalation of air. Farfara doesn't shift at all in her blankets.

“How was your day?” Scoria asks. Farfara never answers, but Scoria doesn't expect her to, not anymore. Instead she spins Farfara's answers herself, pieced together from fiercely clutched memories and remembered mannerisms: high-tension court cases, innocents wrongfully accused, adventures and stories far and fantastically removed from Scoria's own memories of the tall, dim, straight-lined rooms in which Farfara had found so much joy.

Finally, Scoria runs out of topics to talk about and sits in silence, gazing blind into the dark room, listening to Farfara breathe, trying to convince herself that her friend is still alive.

“I'm not going to lose you,” she whispers at last, standing. For a second she hesitates there at the side of the bed, hand half out to smooth across Farfara's head or take Farfara's hand. Then she turns and remembers her way to the door, and down the corridor, and back past her own rooms to Au's. Au is already asleep, rooms dark, so Scoria remembers her way through here too, to the couch that feels more like home than her own bed, and lays down, and doesn't sleep.

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“What we need to do,” Chine says the next morning, “is an experiment.”

An experiment is in no way something that Chine *wants* to do; the dreams still hang vivid and heavy in her mind like the hesitation that forms around her eyelids, and she doesn't want to experience them again. But she doesn't know what else to do.

Chine wolfs down her food during breakfast and then goes out to the courtyard and tries to figure out what to next. The courtyard had been a whim, but underneath it she feels a tug of something like instinct, and she follows it to one of the fountains. The morning is a little more chilly than she would like if she's going to be spending time next to water, but as far as experiments go, the results are already promising. She hadn't had that little pull before. Hollow runs up behind her, the last of a piece of toast still in his mouth.

“Do you have a plan?” he asks.

Chine eyes the setup in front of her, considering.

“Maybe,” she says, “if I just kind of... try to fall asleep here, something will happen.”

“Is there anything I can do?” he asks.

“Just... stay close.”

Chine lays down on the bench next to the fountain and tries to relax her mind. Next to her Hollow sits down on the ground and gets comfortable, murmuring to himself, hands flitting across the garden stone and briefly across the side of the bench.

Chine looks at the sky and thinks about the thin cushion separating her from the smooth marble its laying on. The fabric is worn soft and is a faded pink-purple that must have once been vibrant and deep. It's old but well-maintained, like the bench beneath it and the dusty courtyard they're in and the temple itself and the volcano and the whole city. The sensation of Hollow to her left is pleasant rather than unbalancing, and she can hear the soft shift of his breathing, guess the tune he's tapping out with his fingers: an old river child lullaby. Chine needs to remember to suggest a visit down there sometime after the volcano festival. The fountain on her right gurgles and splashes and ripples, layering on more sound and noise the more Chine pays attention to it. It smells of... her eyes unfocus further as she tries to identify scents past 'water' and 'stone'.

She's not really sure what she's supposed to be doing.

“Anything?” Hollow asks. Above, against the clouds, a bird floats past. Chine thinks its wings are too narrow to be any of the birds commonly around the temple, but maybe it's a trick of the sun.

“I'm gonna close my eyes,” she says.

She opens her eyes.

The courtyard is pink, bathed in the soft glow of late-afternoon instead of the greyish light of an overcast morning. Chine sits up and feels her head swim.

“It's hot,” she grumbles, eying the dried-up water fixture to her left with longing. The mornings are still too cold for the temple to turn on the fountains for the summer, even though the afternoons are already simmering. “Why was I sleeping out here?”

A bird calls far above Chine's head, but by the time she squints into the bright rosy sky it's gone. She swings her legs over the side of the bench. The grit of unfinished stone against the back of her legs is almost shocking in its clarity; its a sharp contrast to the smooth heat haze of the courtyard around her.

Something whispers through the air.

“What?” Chine says, even though the whisper hadn't been words, or a person. It had been like a sensation, like if you could feel someone's thoughts.

“I can't hear you,” she says. She doesn't know who she's talking to.

The small courtyard stretches an impossible, dizzying distance. Everything recedes strangely, angling like melting rubber towards the cool, dark entryway of the entrance to the temple hall. Chine can't seem to take her eyes off of the wide shallow steps lining the building.

She reaches her fingers up to her mouth like something else is pulling them, fitting her thumbnail against the right incisor, unsure how anything in the world can be so smooth and sharp as a human tooth.

When she pulls the tooth out it comes easily, sitting between her thumb and index fingers like a jewel. From the hole left behind pours a thick, tiny river of blood, pooling in her mouth, trickling over her lower lip, rolling down her chin to drip in smooth bright drops to the ground beneath her feet.

It bubbles in the corners of Chine's mouth when she says, “I can't understand what this means.”

Something colorless floats down to land on the tooth still hanging in her fingers. It opens its wings, closes them, opens them bright green-blue and iridescent. She moves her hands. It flits away, is colorless again, is gone.

Something about it reminds Chine of flower petals, and she keeps moving her hands until they form the symbol of the volcano and the gods and the temple: power, safety, stability. The tooth, forgotten, falls in spinning slow motion to the far-away ground. Her index fingers and thumbs touch together to form a triangle.

She opens her eyes.

Hollow is kneeling over her, shaking her. “Chine?” he's saying. “Chine?”

She sits up and grips his arms. Lets go of his arms, presses her thumb to her right incisor. Grips his arms again. Her hands are shaking. She stares into his wide eyes and feels sweat slide down the side of her face.

“We need to do something about this,” Chine says.

Hollow nods.

Chine closes her eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR: SECRETS BETWEEN GHOSTS or FUCK YOU CHARLOTTE

“The gods is associated with the heart,” Hollow reasons as they walk clattering through the temple. Neither one of them appears to be entirely sure where they're going. “So she may be able to help.”

“Doesn't this problem seem more... mental?” Chine asks. “Shouldn't we go to the figure who's associated with the head, instead?” She can't seem to stop checking on her teeth with her tongue. She takes comfort in the chatter throughout the temple, the sound of the city and, further out, the ocean; the smell of incense and flowers and gold; the taste of earth and smoke in the air. Chine hears the contradiction before Hollow can even say it, though; the thought had slipped out without intention, a lifetime of trust and study taking autopilot while Chine makes sure, again, that all of her teeth are steady and still in her mouth.

“You said yourself, the law...” Hollow trails off, possibly seeing the distracted, wide look in Chine's eyes. “You know.” *And your relationship with the blade is antagonistic at best*, he politely doesn't add.

“Sorry,” she says. “I'm just...”

“It's okay,” he says. She is so grateful for Hollow suddenly, because he says things like 'it's okay', and he means it.

The rooms of the three holy figures are hidden deep in the recesses of the temple: they're not exactly secret, but they are secluded, with the implication that the holy figures should not be disturbed there. But most initiates learn the routes there sooner or later, running errands or delivering meals or even invited by one of the holy figures themselves. Chine and Hollow are taking one such route, searching for the gods in the hopes that she can help Chine with whatever is happening to her.

Chine is still struggling to define it. “It feels mental,” she says helplessly, “but at the same time not exactly mental in the law kind of way. The law is logic and black-and-white, but this feels...” She gestures. “Bigger. This isn't just part of the head. This is the mind in its entirety. The whole thing, even the weird parts.” Chine fits her thumb over the edge of her incisor to make sure it's still there, shudders as she realizes the parallel with the dream. She doesn't want to close her eyes.

~~“You said you had one other dream, didn't you? Yesterday?” Hollow asks, watching Chine with concern. She's clutching his hand like it's the last thing on earth, and she knows she's still pale, still shaking.~~

~~“Yes,” Chine says. “Three big ones, now, and one small one. Even though the small one was so small it doesn't seem like it should count at all, but I can still tell that it's the same.” She flexes her free hand, closes it into a fist, flexes it again. “At least, I~~ *~~think~~* ~~it was a dream.”~~

~~“What was it?” Hollow asks. They turn down a small hallway and just like that are nearly to the gods's quarters. Through some trick of mirrors and sunlight, the light here always seems to be emanating from the floor.~~

~~“I remembered it when I was in the dining hall, because I was looking over at that big brick oven they have in the kitchen and I thought, 'That reminds me of the time I tried to fire a clay pot in that oven, but I couldn't get the heat high enough and it collapsed,' and I then I realized that that hadn't happened. Didn't happen, I dreamt it.”~~

~~“How could you tell it was the same?” Hollow asks, all curiosity, no skepticism.~~

~~“It's the senses,” Chine says. “I can feel so much and I can see but everything else is so muted--” She stops both her words and her steps; Hollow, who had been walking slightly behind her, runs into her shoulder.~~ *Thiiis was part of a subplot that I scrapped but god damn it I am not giving up the words*

The reason she had stopped so abruptly is because at the other end of the corridor, the gods has just exited her rooms. Im crying at how stilted this feels go back and fix this so it actually flows properly later please.

“Hello,” the gods says, less wary than curious.

“Hi,” says Chine, trying not to sound desperate. “I really, really need your help.”

–

“It was fortunate that you found me when you did,” the gods says, leading Chine and Hollow back through the halls of the temple, which are labyrinthine and ever-shifting, as suits my needs. “I am on my way to speak to the dead, and it sounds as though you could benefit from its answers as well.”

The gods is beautiful, Chine thinks, studying her discreetly. She's three or four inches taller than Chine, and big and soft in a way that makes her feel safe. She handles the long length of pink gold-embroidered cloth draped over one shoulder and around the rest of her body with an ease that seems to surpass that of long practice; the bodysuit underneath is a deeper pink that complements the cool tones of her brown skin perfectly. At the base of her throat, a thick gold hoop holds the straps of the bodysuit together. The hoop looks just as heavy as the gold earrings in the gods's ears, which in turn match well with her short cloud of light pink hair. Her entire presence is a cohesive color scheme. Chine doesn't know how she does it. Even the gods's eyes match the rest of her, a deep warm gold, half-closed as though in rest or contemplation, ringed with impossibly long lashes.

“What do you want to ask the dead?” Hollow asks, practically skipping along to keep pace, staring at the gods just as openly as Chine. This is the first time the pair have seen her this close, and they don't want to waste the opportunity to drink in the presence of one of the three holy figures of the city.

The gods spares him a glance that's both amused and quelling. “That's private.”

“Okay,” Hollow says, not put off in the slightest, and keeps asking questions. Chine watches him with amusement. She and Hollow are both still undecideds, but Chine can picture him leaning towards the gods as a devotion sometime soon. He has the temperament for it, warm and open and somehow a part of everything around him. Chine herself thinks that she might be an undecided forever, but if things were different, maybe the law--?

“Here,” says Au, cutting off Hollow's chatter and Chine's train of thought. They've reached their destination: the room of the dead, the ghost room, the chamber of the remembered. Chine gazes up at the tall carved door and thinks back to the first and only time she'd been here before, a few years ago as part of a classroom excursion.

“You should go first,” Chine tells the gods. The older woman inclines her head and steps into the room. Chine and Hollow follow her in, slipping smartly through the door before it closes.

The gods looks at them with amused resignation. “Do you remember when I said 'private'?”

They shrug at her in unison, and she lets out a sigh that is also a laugh.

“Okay,” she says. “Make sure to stay outside of the square when I start.”

The room is rectangular, lit by torches. The floor is gold-colored stone flags, inlaid roughly center with a square ring of smooth, palm-sized red tiles, which itself is divided neatly into two halves. On three sides the walls around the tile square are set with long, hollow containers—Chine remembers when she first saw them thinking that they wouldn't look out of place in courtyard, holding plants. The containers on the left and right are filled with two different kinds of gold. Liquid on the left, for seeing; powder on the right, for speaking. The container in the center is filled with ghost apples.

*The apples are central to speaking with the dead*, Chine's instructor had told the class, picking one up and passing it around to the initiates. *They're special.* By the time the fruit had reached Chine, its pale white skin was already bruised with the imprints of a dozen fingers, though it had been pristine when first plucked from its resting place.

*What's special about them?* one of Chine's classmates had asked.

*Only the dead can eat them,* the instructor had said. A hush had settled over the class immediately. *To the living, the apples are, well, disgusting,* she had continued. *They're too soft, they're mealy, they have no taste. You're welcome to try a bite – it won't taste like anything at all.*

Chine hadn't tasted the proffered apple, but two other people had. One had spit out their mouthful in disgust and dismay, while the other swallowed their bite with a look that wouldn't have been out of place, ironically, on the face of a dying man.

*But to the dead,* the instructor went on, *these apples are delicious. It's a little disorienting, honestly, to see it bite into an apple you know for a fact is softer than a rotten peach and hear the crunch. The apples are a gift for the dead.*

One of Chine's classmates had raised his hand. *My grandfather died last year,* he said. *My mother said when he found out he was dying he came here and tasted an apple and thought it was delicious.*

*That's correct,* the instructor had said. *These apples were seen as bad omens centuries ago, because they were believed to 'foretell' death.* She looked somber. *It's hard to get the time frame down exactly, of course. But if you eat a ghost apple, and think it tastes good, then you have a month or less to live.*

The room is quiet.

*So,* the instructor had said, clearly attempting to lighten the mood. *Does anyone know why we can't talk to all of our dead ancestors and see how they're doing?*

It was Chine who had raised her hand that time. *The dead is a singular thing*, she had said. *When you die, it absorbs you.*

*Exactly!* the instructor had said. *When you're dead you lose your individuality and become part of the many that is one. But your knowledge doesn't go away—your knowledge isn't lost. So when you talk to the dead, it can access the wisdom and experiences of every person in this city who's ever died. But it won't ever* be *any of those people. It will always be simply itself: the dead*.

*So how do you speak to it?* the boy with the dead grandfather had asked. *Do you just, throw an apple into the ring, or--?*

The class had let out a soft murmur of giggles at the question, and the instructor had smiled as well. *There's three parts—remember, threes for stability, fours for change, and you want the dead to be stable—there's three parts of speaking to the dead. One part is the apple. One part is the language. One part is the gold.*

Chine and Hollow watch in respectful silence as the gods picks up a small, long-handled brush and dips it into the container on the right. The small, close bristles come away coated with fine gold powder; the gods applies this to her lips until they are smooth and shiny, looking like living metal. She replaces the brush in its holder and moves to the lower half of the bisected tile square. Then she moves to the other container, the one on the left, and picks up a small palm-sized glass. She dips this into the container: it comes out brimming with liquid gold. The gods reaches briefly into the center container, takes a ghost apple, moves back into the lower half of the square. She takes a deep breath.

Then she speaks.

The temple has only one mandatory language class for initiates: everyone is required to learn the language of the volcano, a dead language passed on now only verbally. Chine loves it for its blocky feeling and bubbly sound; Hollow, who doesn't enjoy languages as much as she does, tugs on her sleeve for a translation.

The gods's invocation is surprisingly brief, nothing ornate or overwrought. It should seem like a contrast to the splendor and seriousness of the room, but instead it blends well, another complementary appearance that the gods seems to be so good at.

“She said, 'dead, are you there? I need to ask you a question',” Chine whispers to him without taking her eyes off the gods.

Chine can't sense or see any change, but something must happen to satisfy the gods, because she tosses the liquid gold high into the air. It arcs into a million drops and falls into the other side of the square, where it lands on...

...something.

*The apple is a gift,* Chine's instructor had told the class. *It comes last, after you've summoned the dead to speak with you. To summon the dead, you have to talk to it in a dead language—like for like, you understand. It can't understand a language that's still alive. You talk to it in the volcano's language. But gold is central. Gold lets you speak to the dead, and gold lets it speak back.*

The droplets of gold spin and slide, falling in whorls and sprays in midair, forming smooth and impossible lines. Slowly, among the threads of floating gold, a face is outlined. The idea of a forehead, the suggestion of a nose, gold in the weighted parts of the ears and dripping down the chin to form the neck. The lips form last, pulling gold towards them like a thousand tiny rivers, until they are as solid and outlined as the gods's own.

“Hello, Au,” the dead says, and holds out the gold-swirled idea of a hand.

Au reaches out and puts an apple in its fingers. Chine half expects it to fall through the faint lines of metal, but it doesn't.

The dead brings the apple to its gold lips, and takes a bite. Chine can't believe the crunch. Juice runs down its chin.

“Will you answer my questions?” the gods asks.

“Yes,” the dead says.

The gods spares a glance back at Chine and Hollow, who are watching with wide, curious eyes, then seems to fully resign herself to asking her question with an audience.

“How,” she says, “can I balance the law and the blade?”

The 'face' of the dead flickers, for a moment, stretches, changes. “That,” it says, “is a question I can help you with.”

The gods says something to the dead; the dead says something back. Even Chine, who enjoys the language and has therefore studied it more than Hollow has, can't keep up with how fast they're speaking. Instead she nudges Hollow and whispers, “Maybe that has something to do with all of this.”

“What does?” Hollow asks. “All I caught was the word 'balance'.”

“She wants to know how to balance the law and the blade.”

“Isn't that her job?”

“Yeah, but she's... it looks like she's having trouble. Maybe that's why the law making false rulings, and the blade is... Well, maybe Scoria's just like that.”

“You really don't like Scoria, do you?” Hollow asks.

Chine sniffs primly. “My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.”

Hollow laughs.

“Hold on,” Chine whispers, as the gods quiets and lets the dead speak uninterrupted. “I can understand a bit of this.”

“What is it saying?” Hollow whispers back. Chine goes still in some kind of attempt to absorb as many words as possible, but she slumps, frustrated, as the dead's voice speeds up again and she loses the thread of the conversation.

“I only caught a little bit. Something about about 'consuming', and... it told the gods, 'it would hurt less to forget'. But I don't know what that means.”

“I don't know why she was so insistent on going in alone,” Hollow mutters. “We can't understand anything she's saying.”

“Probably she forgot not everyone is fluent,” Chine says.

For a few minutes more the two stand there watching the gods converse with the strange, ever-shifting form of the dead. Though they can't understand most of what's being said, watching the dead is like watching falling water, and interesting enough in its own right. The timbre and cadence of its voice changes constantly; its face warps and changes, it gestures with its faint hands.

“What do you think they're talking about?” Chine whispers to Hollow, who is staring mesmerized at the conversation. “Are you getting any more than I am?” She doesn't think he is, since his grasp of the language isn't as strong as hers; that being said, he's better at picking out individual phrases than she is. Chine can understand a sentence but forget a word; Hollow can stare blankly at a sentence but perfectly define a word.

Hollow shakes his head.

Finally, after what Hollow complains feels like years and Chine knows can't have been more than a few more minutes, the gods says 'Wait' (Chine knows that word) and turns to the two of them. She looks at Chine.

“Your turn,” she says, in the living language.

“What do I do?” Chine asks. She knows the basics, but...

The dead has gone still at the gods's request – command? – and the gods steps out of her section of the tiled square to pluck an apple from the container, and to take the gold-covered brush from its place on the wall on the right.

“Do you speak the language of the volcano?” she asks, beckoning Chine into the square. Chine steps obediently in and says, “Yes, but nowhere near as fluently as you do.”

“That's all right,” the gods says. Her eyes are so gentle. “As long as you speak some. Okay, hold still.” Chine closes her eyes as the gods tips her chin up and paints cool gold powder onto Chine's lips. The feeling is strange, smooth and almost liquid feeling, and Chine can feel herself tipping on the edge of dizzy unreality before she deliberately breathes in the smell of the gods, a few inches from her face, listens to the sound of Hollow breathing, tastes the faint scent of smoke in the air. Anchors herself with that.

“You're ready,” the gods tells Chine, putting the ghost apple into her hand. “Introduce yourself, offer it the apple, and then ask away.”

Then she steps out of the square and goes to stand next to Hollow, leaving Chine feeling both very alone and uncomfortably self-conscious.

“My name is Chine,” she says to the dead in clumsy volcano tongue. She holds out the apple app(le)rehensively. The dead reaches out with delicate, insubstantial fingers, and takes the fruit, and brings it to its mouth. The apple looks almost unreal among the dim reds and golds of the room, glowing among rings and arcs of gold as the lips open and invisible teeth crunch, again, impossibly, into the white flesh.

“Hello, Chine,” the dead says. It's speaking slowly and clearly, which Chine appreciates. She appreciates less its slightly condescending tone. “What do you wish to ask?”

“I have been,” Chine says haltingly, trying to figure out how to fit her experiences into her limited grasp of the language, “having dreams.”

“Everyone has 'em,” the dead says, languid, flippant.

“In these dreams,” Chine continues, doggedly ignoring its comment, “I cannot tell if I am awake or asleep. In these dreams, I hear a...” She's forgotten the word for whisper. “A small voice that is not a voice. I think it is trying to tell me something. In one dream, I used my hands to pull out a tooth.” She doesn't know any of the descriptive words she wants to use, like 'strangely terrifying' or 'pouring' or 'surreally bright', so she settles for, “There was much blood.”

“Huh,” the dead says, tilting its head like its thinking.

“I cannot tell if I am asleep or awake after these dreams happen,” Chine says. “I am not sure if I am awake right now. I close my eyes and the dream keeps happening. I open my eyes and the dream keeps happening.”

The dead is silent.

Chine keeps talking, even though she can feel it turning into babbling the more it goes on. “It could be because of a large change that has just happened in my life,” she tells her listener, as if it cares. “My life, which I had loved, was greatly transformed. Many things that are bad have happened.”

“Even if you love them,” the dead tells her noncommittally, “some things have to be changed.”

“I know,” she says, frustrated with such a non-answer. “But--”

“I got a question for you,” the dead interrupts. “These dreams got a color?”

“Red,” Chine says immediately. “Pink. Red and pink.”

“Do you see, or perhaps feel, any colors besides these two?” it asks.

Chine closes her eyes, briefly, unnecessarily, as if doing so will make her memories of the dreams any clearer. “Blue,” she tells the dead. “Blue green.”

“Exceedingly simple, my dear,” the dead says. It leans back, gives the impression of lounging on something besides the empty air that is the only thing occupying its space. “You--” it points the apple core, as yet unconsumed, at Chine, “are the steps.”

A soft sound from the gods behind her. The quiet sound of Hollow asking a question.

“The steps?” Chine repeats. “What does that mean?”

“You're the steps.”

“What *are* the steps?”

“Mm-mm, not what, *is*.”

“I do not know what that *means*,” Chine tells it, trying to keep the edge out of her voice, but the dead won't say anything else. Instead it finishes the apple core and crunches insouciantly as she asks rephrased question after rephrased question until Hollow, frustrated on behalf of his friend, starts forward as if he means to stand in the square next to Chine. The gods catches his arm lighting-quick.

“Are you crazy?” she asks him in disbelief. “Or just stupid?”

“Yes,” Hollow says brightly. The gods shakes him gently.

“*Don't*,” she says, “interrupt someone in a conversation with the dead unless you know what you're doing.”

To illustrate her words, the gods drops Hollow's arm, and steps into the tile square, and gently thanks the dead. The moment the words leave her mouth the droplets of gold that had been giving it form fall and splatter to the ground, and the faint feeling of *something* disappears from the room.

Chine falls silent, staring at the floor.

“It's time,” the gods says, taking Chine by one hand and Hollow by the other and leading them out of the room, “for a history lesson.”

“You know about the three aspects of the temple,” the gods says. “The gods, the law, the blade.” The pair nod mutely. The gods's hand is soft around Chine's own.

The gods lets out a slow breath, tilting her head like she's considering what to say. “It's a little complicated,” she says at last, then corrects herself. “Well, not complicated exactly. More like interwoven. What do threes mean?”

“Stability,” Chine answers, the reply automatic.

“And there are three aspects,” the gods says. “The gods, the law, the blade: three aspects, three holy figures, three powers keeping the city stable. And each aspect has a function, a center, something it can bring about using a sacrifice as a catalyst. You know all this.”

“Sacrifices to the gods for prosperity,” Chine reels off. “To the law for justice, for the blade for resolution.”

“Well,” the gods says. “Just as important as the number three, for stability, is the number four. Change. Sometimes, something happens to the city. A war, an imbalance, something so big that the temple and the city can't fix themselves. And when that happens, what is needed is a *change*.”

The three walk in silence for a few moments.

“What?” says Hollow.

The gods spares him a mildly irritated glance. “There's a fourth aspect,” she says. “The steps.”

“The steps is an *aspect*?” Chine demands.

“The steps is centered around revolution,” the gods says. “A radical change for the better.”

Chine looks at her free hand as though it may have answers.

“It's not an aspect that initiates learn about,” the gods continues. “Mostly for political reasons – we don't want people to think about the kind of big, city-wide imbalance that would necessitate the awakening of the steps – but also simply because it's rare that it makes an appearance. The fact that the steps have woken up now, and that they've chosen you...” The gods takes a breath. “I've failed at my job,” she says brightly, “although I can take comfort in the fact that the formation of this situation isn't entirely my fault.”

“*I'm* the steps?” Chine says. “I'm... I've been picked by an aspect?”

“Yes,” the gods says equably. Chine catches a glimpse of Hollow peering around the gods at her, and makes a nonplussed face at him.

“What does that mean for me?” Chine asks slowly.

“It means I can help you with your dreams, at least,” the gods says. “The way aspects communicate differs between individuals, but there are certain things that seem to apply to everyone. That should be able to help you tell the difference between dream and reality.”

“But,” Chine says, unsure how to word it. “For *me*.”

At that, seeming to understand, the gods drops Chine's hand and moves to face her. The three have walked all the way to the entrance to the courtyard (empty at this time of day); the gods is silhouetted against the bright sky behind her.

“It means that you're a holy figure,” the gods says, eyes bright, smiling. She bows, easy and graceful and respectful. “It's an honor to meet you, Chine. My name is Au.”

CHAPTER FIVE(?): MAY WE FORGET WHAT WE ONCE HAD

“You're kidding me,” Scoria says flatly.

“Nope!” Au says, cheerful.

“Chine,” Scoria says. “The steps.”

“That's correct.”

“I'm right here,” Chine says, irritated. She and Au and Scoria are in some room that Chine hadn't known existed until just now; it's in one of the upper levels of the temple, a comfortable, well-lit room with wide, evenly-spaced window openings grown around with flowers. The three of them are seated at a low table on a floor three or four carpets deep, and Scoria is staring at Chine as though death will not come fast enough.

“The steps chose you,” Scoria says.

“Yes.”

“And you're not dead.”

“No.”

Scoria looks at her with an expression that on any other face would have been classified as 'helpless' but on Scoria can only be read as 'disappointed'. “Congratulations.”

Chine twists to look at Au, who seems profoundly unconcerned by the conversation. “*Could* I have died from being chosen by the steps?”

“I believe it's happened once or twice in the past,” Au says. “Having no aspect training and being chosen by something intrinsically associated with revolution can be dangerous.”

Scoria gets up and leaves. Chine sticks her tongue out her retreating back.

“I'm sorry about her,” Au says. “She's... changed, somewhat, since she became a holy figure.”

“What was she like before?” Chine asks. She has a million ulterior motives, questions about the law, curiosity about being a holy figure, the need to figure out her own relationship with the steps; but something about the wistful sadness on Au's face makes her set all that aside for a moment and ask this instead.

“She was less angry.”

“She's angry, right now?”

Au laughs, but it's not a laugh that contains any kind of mirth. “Oh, very much so. On some level she's angry about that, too. I think she wants to stop being angry, but she doesn't know how.”

“What's she angry about?” Chine asks.

For a few moments Au simply looks at her, gold eyes contemplative and almost uncertain.

“How much do you know,” she asks at length, “about how we – Scoria, Farfara, and I – became holy figures?”

“You were just named, like normal, right? By the previous holy figures?”

Au nods.

Chine thinks back a little harder. “It was different, though,” she says slowly. “Because you three were still too young to take on the aspects. But they named you anyway, because they were all so old that they knew they wouldn't live to see you turn twenty.”

Au nods again. “That's right. We were named, and then the city waited for a year until we were all officially old enough to take on our aspects.”

Chine can remember the celebrations, now, actually—the new holy figures had only been inaugurated two years ago, but after such a strange, suspended period of waiting the entire city had exploded into festivities.

“Such a thing has happened before, though it's rare,” Au says. “The temple is always prepared for such an interim period between holy figures, so that wasn't the problem. The problem was us.”

Chine tips her head slightly, listening, waiting.

Au shivers slightly. She doesn't look like she realizes it. “You've experienced it yourself,” she says. “What it feels like to become a conduit for an aspect without any training. We didn't *have* any training, Chine, that was the problem.” She takes a breath, in, out. “I, personally, was lucky. The previous gods only retired, and she was still alive when I became the new gods. I could go to her for help if I needed it, so I'm more...” She trails off, gestures. “Balanced, with my aspect. But Scoria, Farfara... The old blade and the old law died before we were instated. They had no guidance, no solid point to base their own experiences off of. The dead, as I'm sure you can imagine, wasn't much help.”

Chine tries to work this out. “Is Scoria angry about that?”

Au shakes her head. “Scoria isn't angry about that. Scoria's angry about Farfara.”

“The law?” Chine repeats, unable to fathom what about the law Scoria could possibly be angry about.

“We were all close friends even before we became the holy figures,” Au says. “We'd spent a good ten years of our life together, living and learning at the temple. Scoria was – Scoria *is* – in love with Farfara. Even before she became the blade Scoria wasn't one to do anything by halves, but she kept it quiet for so long that only I knew, and even then I only guessed. But at some point, after we were named but before we were inaugurated, she told Farfara.”

“Farfara turned her down?” Chine guesses. She thinks she could understand that: having to work with the person you're in love with, who doesn't love you back, seems like a pretty simple way to make someone angry.

“Not exactly,” Au says. “I think that might have been easier, in the long run. Scoria doesn't have the kind of personality that allows for regrets or anything like that, so if she had been turned down she would have let it go. Farfara said, 'maybe'.”

“Maybe?”

“Farfara was... Farfara is very... logical. Objective. She doesn't get lost in emotions like Scoria or I do: she's always removed from them, and can examine them. So she told Scoria, 'I don't know for sure what my answer is, but I think it's yes', and they went from there.”

“That sounds like a good ending,” Chine says cautiously.

“It was,” Au says. “It was for a year, until we officially became the holy figures.”

There's a sudden noise in the doorway; the two whirl around to find Scoria back and standing in the doorway, face twisted into a snarl, eyebrows wringing out heartache over furious eyes.

“That's private,” Scoria says, stalking into the room like a hurricane. “That's not something you tell initiates like her, Au Hallae, those are my secrets and our secrets and not secrets to share.”

Chine has shrunk away from such grief-stricken fury, but Au sits steady and looks up at Scoria, standing above her like a blade herself.

“We can't go back to the way things were,” Au says. “The least we can do is let the past out where the flowers can reach it.”

“Flowers won't grow in graveyard soil,” Scoria retorts, but the fight has gone out of her just as quickly as it seems to have appeared.

“Go away,” she says tiredly to Chine, moving to sit down at the table as Chine stands to obey. “I'd say go to hell, but I never want to see you again.”

“Scoria.” Au scolds softly, but Chine is already slipping through the doorway, head full of new information and spinning with questions and ideas. She can't tell Hollow everything, she reminds herself, not the really personal stuff, but she has a story for him all the same.

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“I've moved your schedule around,” Au says, waylaying Chine (and, by extension, Hollow) after breakfast the next day. “Just temporarily, while I give you a crash course in dealing with your aspect. Are you coming along?” she adds, looking at Hollow. “I didn't rearrange with *your* classes.”

“Moral support,” Chine says, at the same time Hollow says, “I need to be there in case Chine's head explodes or something.” Au purses her lips for a moment but doesn't argue. She leads them to the same room that she had taken Chine to after speaking with the dead yesterday and sits them at the table.

“You said that the basis of how the steps has been interacting with you has been dreams, right?” Au says. “Dreams that you can't tell from reality.”

“Yes,” Chine says.

“Dreams are the most common way that aspects communicate with people,” Au says, voice taking on the particular cadence of a teacher. “Although your particular experience, not being sure if you're awake or asleep, is as far as I know unique, almost every holy figure has a dream that has been flavored by their aspect. We've learned that across all aspect dreams there are certain things that stay the same.” THEY GO TO THE LITTLE ROOM WHERE THE HOLY FIGURES HANG OUT

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Chine opens her eyes.

The room is hot, sunshine pouring in through one wall of window openings and laying in big blocks across the low table and carpeted floor. A few stray tendrils of roses wave in a faint breeze; something about the shadows they make on the floor doesn't match the movement. The fibers of the carpet press into Chine's bare knees, and she knows that if she stands up the texture will be patterned into her skin. The sun is warm on the side of her face. Everything is that familiar white hazy rose color, and again there is the sense of a whisper.

Chine's hands are still held in the shape of the volcano, and this reminds her that this is a dream. For a moment everything around her wavers; she fights against it, holding onto the dream, refusing to wake up. Something wells in her mouth and pushes out through her lips, hot and metallic. She doesn't have to look to see what color it is.

“What do you want to tell me,” she gets out, and then the dream flips inside out and hurls her high into the air and crashing back down towards the ground at a million miles an hour and Chine squeezes her eyes shut--

“Chine!” Hollow says. She's clutching his hand so tight that her knuckles are white and his fingers are bloodless.

“What happened?” Au asks, concerned.

“It spit me out,” Chine mutters, unconsciously wiping the corner of her mouth and then checking the back of her hand for blood without really seeing what she's doing. “I made it mad.”

“What did it do?” Au asks, watching. Chine wipes at her face again, trying to get rid of the residual feeling of the dream, and stares blankly at Hollow's hand as he massages feeling back into it, wincing dramatically as he does so. At least he has the decency to look worried: Au's calm concern is grating across Chine's frayed nerves.

“It... I asked 'what do you want to tell me?', and it... changed, it turned almost inside-out and *threw* me.”

“What else happened?”

Chine shrugs. “Nothing, really.”

Au glances pointedly at Chine's hand, which is still unsuccessfully trying to scrub away the feeling of blood.

“Oh,” Chine says. “I started bleeding from my mouth.”

“When in the dream? After it threw you?”

“It was before that. When I realized that it was a dream.”

“So you asked it a question, and realized that it was a dream, and bled from the mouth, and then the dream threw you?”

“I realized it was a dream first, and then asked the question, but otherwise, yes.”

Au looks thoughtful. “How did it throw you? Forward?”

“Up. Way, way up in the air, and I woke up before I hit the ground.” Chine swipes angrily at her mouth. “At least, I'm pretty sure I woke up.”

Au hums. “It wasn't mad at you. I believe that it was speaking of a power imbalance.”

Chine looks at her without seeing her, puzzling through that. There's obviously a power imbalance – how did Au get that from such a short dream, though? – but why would the steps want to tell Chine about a power imbalance? If the power was tilted the other way, she could understand, if she held more power and the steps held none, but the way the scales are tipped currently? Why would the aspect want to adjust it?

“It's saying that you don't trust it, so it has too much power,” Au continues.

“Isn't that good?” Chine asks. “That it has more control than I do?”

Au shakes her head. “Aspects don't exactly... work like that,” she says. “They need a person, a human influence, someone to temper them.”

“Why?” That's Hollow – Chine had, she realizes guiltily, forgotten momentarily that he was there.

“The way aspects work...” Au tips her head back and forth, thinking. “Each one is the unbridled essence of itself. The gods, the law, the blade, the steps, in pure. By themselves, things are... seen, but not understood. No context for the world is held by the aspect, so while an aspect is powerful, they point in the wrong direction, do the wrong thing. But with a person as a lens through which the view the world, the world can be understood by the aspect. The best course of action can be chosen and acted upon, whereas before it could not even be seen.”

“So when more power is held by the aspect than by the holy figure,” Chine says, “the lens can't be seen through?” She shakes her head. “That doesn't make sense, though, because the power shouldn't matter for the lens...”

“It's the mind that matters,” Au says. “It's not just the eyes, it's the way those eyes see the world. If one side or the other has too much power, then the lens doesn't matter at all. If too much power is had by the aspect, nothing can be seen by it except what it already sees. If too much power is held by the holy figure, the holy figure can't see anything except what she already sees. Both the eye and the lens are necessary.”

“How could you tell what it was telling me?” Chine asks. “Is there any way to make the method of communication less...” She remembers her white knuckles around Hollow's bloodless hands. “...Extreme?”

“The dreams will calm once you get used to interpreting them,” Au assures her. “The steps won't have to use such strong gestures to get its meaning across. If you have enough practice, you can interact with your aspect without dreaming as a medium. As for how I knew what the dream meant, try to figure it out yourself first. What does blood mean? What does falling mean?”

“Blood means power,” Chine says slowly, trying to remember the brief overview that Au had given her like five minutes ago, and should really not be quizzing her about so soon. “If it was me bleeding, that means loss of power for me, I think... and from my mouth, so maybe something about communication... but falling? Falling would be about loss of power as well, wouldn't it?”

“You're not afraid of falling if you have someone to catch you, are you?” Au says.

“So I was falling and I didn't trust the aspect to catch me, which means that I don't trust it enough? I guess that makes sense, kind of, but how did you connect them? The whole *because* I don't trust it, all the power is held by the steps?”

“Keep thinking,” Au prompts. “Talk it out with yourself.”

“Is it the order?” Chine says. “I remembered it wasn't a dream and my mouth started bleeding, which means that it has more power than I do, and I asked what it wanted to tell me, and it threw me, which meant that it wanted me to trust it, so... Okay, I guess that makes sense.” She puts her head in her hands. “This is gonna take some getting used to.”

“Try again,” Au says, insistent. Hollow reaches out his hand, and Chine takes it, and closes her eyes. She's getting better at entering the dream space now. It's like a trick of the vision; how you can look at a tiled floor and focus your eyes until the pattern seems to jump out at you.

She opens her eyes.

She's in the same room again, alone again, the same sensations again. Since she went into the dream holding Hollow's hand, she can't form the shape of the volcano, but she's more aware this time, and knows where she is and where she isn't. A breath of wind reaches out and brushes her cheek like a living thing. She doesn't have to fight to keep the dream steady this time, and she doesn't know if that scares her or not.

Chine takes a deep breath. “Okay,” she says. “You want me to trust you, right? So that we can be balanced?”

She's tense anyway, wary of the dream turning inside out again; she doesn't want to fall, she doesn't want to fall, she doesn't want to fall. But maybe this is recognized by the steps, because there is no flip, she is not thrown into the air; instead a single flower floats from the vine trailing across the window space. It's not a rose, like the rest of the flowers on the vine. It's a hyacinth, the purple looking almost pink in the hot summer light.

Chine has studied the law: she knows about flowers. Apology, asking for forgiveness.

She doesn't know how to manipulate her dreams. “If I had a white tulip, I'd give it to you,” she says, feeling the crisp stem of the flower cool against her skin. The petals are so soft that she wants to cry.

The whisper again, the bird wing opening, brings her back from a daze she hadn't realized she'd entered. It's like a brush against the back of her hand, the faint scent of roses on the breeze, a feeling, a query. A dry sound; a snake eases out of the shadows and looks at her with clear eyes.

“I want to start over,” she whispers. The snake winds around her outstretched hands like an answer. The pattern of the skin down its spine looks like teeth. Outside, the brightness of the sun increases until its nearly blinding, everything hot white light and hot red silhouettes.

Chine opens her eyes.

“That went better,” Hollow says. Chine is disoriented for a moment; all the shadows are in the wrong place. More time has passed than she thinks should have, but at least her hand around Hollow's is loose, if sweaty.

“It... We... I understood it better,” Chine tells Au, experiencing slight difficulty getting her thoughts in order. “What do snakes mean? I think it was sorry that it threw me. I think it wants to know if I'm okay working with it.”

“Snakes typically mean renewal,” Au says. “Or duality. It depends on context.”

“It was offering me...” Chine gestures, trying to compress her scattered thoughts into line. “Revolution, I think, renewal plus change, a snake with a pattern of teeth. I told it, 'I want to start over', but I don't know why.” Hollow squeezes her hand briefly. She realizes that she's shaking, just slightly, as if her body is trying to buzz but is too big to execute it properly.

“I think that's enough for today,” Au says quietly. “You two should go eat.”

Chine doesn't feel hungry. She doesn't think she'll ever eat again. But she takes her buzzing body, still holding Hollow's hand, and she walks it out of the room.

“I'm going to get the hang of this,” she says. She doesn't know who she's talking to.

“Chine, wait,” Au says, appearing in the doorway. “Is this yours? It was on the floor by where you were sitting.” She holds out a flower.

Chine looks at it, and laughs, and takes it.

Then she tucks the hyacinth behind her ear, and she and Hollow go to lunch.

CHAPTER SIX: THE HEART MAY FORGET, BUT THE BODY WILL REMEMBER

Chine meets the law five days into her training with Au. Hollow, missed classes piling up and with the reassurance from Chine that she'll be fine alone and that she'll tell him about her progress every night before bed, no longer joins them. On this day she's just woken up from a dream she has more trouble distinguishing from reality than normal; she's talking with Au about nothing, anything, refusing to close her eyes, when the law walks in.

Chine is so surprised that she blinks, which is probably a good thing. The law gives her a look that Chine can't identify. It's not 'cool', or 'blank'; those have connotations to them that this stare doesn't have. 'Unrecognizing', maybe, but without any of the implied curiosity. A look with nothing in it. An inflectionless gaze.

*She looks piloted*, Chine remembers telling Hollow.

“Farfara!” Au says, tone an odd mix of delighted and sad.

“Hello,” Chine says, after the law gives Au a smile in which the emotion 'fond' could theoretically be found, if searched for. “My name is Chine.”

“Hello,” the law says. Her voice is soft and makes Chine think of old crepe paper. “It's an honor to meet you. My name is Farfara.”

She pauses. Gives Chine a strange look. Curious, maybe. Maybe her aspect recognizes Chine's; Chine herself can feel the sense of something she hadn't noticed before. The idea of flower petals, the tang of a metal more bitter than gold, the impression of a dimly soaring room. These sensations, for some reason, seem centered in her left incisor.

“The steps,” Au says, noticing Farfara's expression as well. The law's face relaxes into understanding.

Chine can't seem to stop looking at her. Something about her just seems *off*, in a strange way that Chine is unable to put her finger on. Farfara is in the room, tall and graceful, but she's not exactly in the room either.

“You're here early,” Au says to Farfara. Farfara nods. She doesn't offer any explanation.

Chine watches as Au has a largely one-sided conversation with the law, gold eyes getting sadder and sadder with each stilted reply, and tries to figure out what's happened between the three holy figures. Au so sad, watching her friends, wanting to know how to balance them; Scoria, angry and volatile, still in love with Farfara--? And Farfara distant, unreal, committing such crimes but so detached from everything. Chine can't read them, can't come up with anything that could be an explanation.

It all seems to center around Farfara. Farfara going against her aspect, Farfara who Scoria loves, Farfara who is so completely outside herself that she doesn't seem to exist the way that other people do. The source of Scoria's anger and Au's sadness.

Chine had never considered the position of holy figure to be a lonely one, before this. There's not a lot of people you can talk to about problems with aspects, especially if your mentors are dead. Maybe if the previous holy figures had been alive, things would have been different. Chine doesn't know. There's a lot she doesn't know. She wishes it was night so that she and Hollow could sit on their beds and discuss the day, talk and theorize through the information they have until a puzzle piece falls into place, even just one.

Farfara says goodbye and leaves with no ceremony, and Au sighs long and low.

“We can't go back to the way things were,” she says, mostly to herself. Her eyes are far away.

“I know that Scoria got mad,” Chine says cautiously, “but could you tell me...”

Au shakes her head. “She was right. You're a holy figure, but there are some stories that aren't mine to tell. You should ask her yourself.”

Chine makes a face, startling a laugh out of Au.

“You really don't like her, do you?”

“My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever,” Chine says.

“What did she *do* to you?” Au asks, laughing.

Chine doesn't want to admit that she doesn't have a good reason for being mad at Scoria, so she just shrugs expressively. “She was rude to me for no reason,” she says, aware of how petulant she sounds. “Something about her just rubs me the wrong way.”

“Could be your aspects. Resolution versus revolution.”

Chine tries to remember if she had been chosen by the steps before or after she had first had a conversation with Scoria. Shrugs again. “I just don't like her.”

“Well,” Au says with an air of finality. “If you want some more history lessons, she's the one you'll have to go to. Now, tell me again what the appearance of brocade patterns in dreams mean?”

“I think the steps are getting *too* subtle,” Chine mutters, but complies.

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Scoria is the one to start their next conversation. Chine is on the bench by the fountain, trying to train herself to stop checking to make sure her teeth are all in every time she enters the courtyard, when Scoria appears next to her and sits down.

“How's your training going?” she asks, which immediately puts Chine on guard.

“Swimmingly,” she replies shortly. “I can kind of understand some of my dreams now.”

Scoria hmms. For a few minutes there is nothing but strained, awkward silence, before Scoria lets out a breath and says, “I'm not talked to much by my aspect. I was wondering what it's like for you.”

“You don't remember? At the beginning?” Chine tries to keep her voice cold.

“At the beginning it was...” Scoria's face darkens. “Different.”

Chine hears Au's voice. *If you want some history lessons, she's the one you'll have to go to*.

“What was it like in the beginning?” she asks. It's Scoria's turn to give her a guarded look. “I'll trade you,” Chine offers. “What my experience is like versus yours.”

Scoria can understand a trade more than something freely given, which in some intangible way makes Chine feel sad.

“At the beginning, all three of us – me and Farfara and Au – were... together. I remember, the first few weeks we had sleepovers every night. It was...” Scoria's expression goes soft, almost startling Chine. A small wind ruffles the few stray strands of her close-cut hair. “It didn't feel any different from being initiates, honestly. The aspects are used to new figures, and they way they interacted with us was incrementive [*thats not a word except apparently it is nope theres the red squiggle]*, almost careful, like we were being trained by them. So for the first few weeks it was... okay. Good, even.” The line appears between her brow again. “But the aspects couldn't do anything for us. I assume,” her voice drops into frigidity, “that Au told you that the previous holy figures died before they could mentor us.”

Chine thought that was common knowledge, so she doesn't know why Scoria suddenly sounds so bitter. Possibly she's remembering the rest of that particular conversation. “Yes,” she says.

“The mentors are a vital part of the process. If Au's been teaching you properly, you know that the holy figure is used by the aspect to view the world.”

Chine nods. “Like the holy figure is the lens, and the eye is the aspect.”

“If you continue that metaphor and turn it into a telescope, the new holy figure is like the small lens, and the old one is the bigger one on the other end.” She makes a small noise that could either be a laugh or a scoff. “I'm not good at metaphors, but you get the idea. Mentors are necessary so the tool can serve its purpose.”

Chine shrugs her understanding.

“Well,” says Scoria. “We didn't get that. So at some point, the increments used by the aspects got bigger than the ones we were learning by.”

“What happened after that?” Chine asks. Scoria's back is blade-straight; she looks lost in thought and grief.

Scoria clearly pretends not to hear her. “Your turn. What's your experience been like?”

Irritation bubbles at the edge of Chine's words. “Don't ignore me.”

“I told you my story. Your turn. You don't get any more until I get some collateral.”

“I can't tell dream from reality half the time, and the steps love blood,” Chine says shortly. “How's that for collateral.”

Abruptly, Scoria laughs. The sound is new, completely unfamiliar; Chine is frozen in the clear sound of it. *This is how it could have been*, she thinks, and doesn't know where the thought came from.

“Blood is power, right?” Scoria says. “The steps are a powerful aspect, and you're probably not on par with them yet. It will go away.”

“How do you know all of this?” Chine asks. “If your mentors were dead?”

“Well, mine and Farfara's mentors were. The previous gods retired but didn't *die*, not until a little while after we became the new holy figures, I'm sure Au mentioned that to you. Even though most of the advice was gods-oriented, there are some things that carry across all aspects. And after the old gods died, Au started asking the dead.” As quickly as it had come, Scoria's brief animation slumps out of her, leaving her a hard, bitter statue once more.

“The dead is...” Chine can't think of a word to describe the dead. “An experience.”

Scoria laughs shortly. “You can say that again.”

She stands up without warning and begins to walk away. “Goodbye,” she says over her shoulder, “lowly initiate.”

Her words are teasing but her tone isn't, and Chine remembers suddenly that she really, really dislikes Scoria. “Fuck you,” she whispers under her breath, then remembers she's in the temple, and whispers an apology in the volcano's language. Her left incisor aches.

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Scoria starts their second conversation too. Chine walks into the room the holy figures occupy, the one she's subconsciously started referring to as the rose room, and finds the blade perched in one of the window openings, arms braced against either side, leaning forward.

“Scoria,” Chine says. “Where's Au?”

Scoria doesn't turn around. “Got called away.”

“Are you teaching me instead?”

Scoria snorts. “No.”

Chine falls back onto the carpeted floor and stares at the vaulted ceiling. A stray bar of sunlight from the window lays its hand on her forehead.

“Why do you love Farfara?” she asks at length. In the window, out of the corner of her eye, she sees Scoria stop moving entirely.

“I mean,” Chine continues, determined, “she's weird. That's not the right word,” she amends immediately. “She's empty. She's beautiful but empty. And you don't seem like the kind of person who goes for looks alone.”

Scoria snorts, but it doesn't sound like she does it because anything is very funny. “You're asking some very personal questions, Chine Faste,” she says.

“I'm curious about you. I'm a holy figure as well. I want to know as much as I can about you three.”

“*Barely* a holy figure,” Scoria says.

“Answer my question.”

“And if I won't?”

“I'll keep asking.”

“Go ask Au,” Scoria says dismissively. “She seems eager to betray my trust.”

“She wouldn't tell me,” Chine says.

For several minutes the room is quiet. The sun makes its snail-like path across Chine's forehead; a gentle wind, ever-present in this room, ruffles the flowers hanging down over the window openings. Scoria doesn't move, even though her position doesn't look very easy to maintain.

“Flowers won't grow in graveyard soil,” she mutters at last. “You know, I don't know why I'm telling someone I hate so many personal things.”

“Maybe it's better to tell someone you hate than someone you love,” Chine says.

“I love Farfara because I remember how she was,” Scoria says.

“Au says something happened after you became holy figures, something that had to do with Farfara.”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“That,” Scoria says, “I will not tell you.”

“Why not?”

“I don't think you deserve to know.”

Chine huffs. “What was she like before whatever it was that happened?”

“Wild and clever,” Scoria says. “She could take you apart with her eyes, and her face was always so serious that you felt like you were missing something, but you didn't know what.” Her voice becomes distant, fond. “She was always worried that she was too intimidating or unapproachable. She would forget to make facial expressions, and she knew that threw people off. She was always so concerned that she wouldn't do well as the law because people would be afraid to talk to her. Whenever she told stories her voice would sound like a song, and she was so funny. I don't know how she stayed so far away from her emotions, but she could always turn anything bad that happened to her into a joke, to take the edge off. And she hated being wrong.” Scoria trails off, like she's lost herself in memories and has forgotten to keep talking. “I hate talking about her like she's dead.”

“She sounds like she would have been fun to have as a friend,” Chine says.

“Chine,” Scoria says. “Don't tell anyone that the law is different now, okay? People don't need to know that.”

And, because Scoria's voice is uncharacteristically raw, Chine says, “I promise.”

“A promise always comes with flowers and chains,” Scoria says, voice bitter. She sounds like she's quoting something. “Remember that.”

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“Au,” Chine says, during another lesson. “What happens if you never balance out with your aspect? What if more power is always had by your aspect instead of you?”

“That,” Au says, “is called being consumed by your aspect.”

“Consumed?”

“It's very rare,” Au says, “though not unheard of. The circumstances that lead to it are... somewhat specific.”

“What are they?”

“For one, it has to be... I guess 'mutual' would be the right word. Power cannot be wrested by an aspect. Some provocation or consent is needed from the holy figure. If you were doing something that went against what the aspect stood for, you could be consumed by it. If the law was unjust, if the gods caused ruin, if the blade prolonged. Or if one of the holy figures twisted a sacrifice by using it for a purpose it wasn't given for.”

Chine files away the somewhat vague wording to be followed up on later. “What about consent? You could ask to be taken over by your aspect?”

“Control could... be given to the aspect. If you were uncertain that you could do your job properly, the aspect could be allowed to lead.” She shakes her head. “Normally, being consumed by your aspect doesn't last very long. A few hours, maybe a few days.”

*If the law was unjust...* “The aspect can fight back, is what you're saying,” Chine says, brain trying to hold a conversation while running full-speed along a different train of thought.

“Basically,” Au says. “But if the power imbalance is too large, like yours was when you were first chosen by the steps, it can happen by accident. That's why it was so important to teach you some basics as soon as possible.”

The rest of the lesson is stilted. Chine is distracted and can't seem to focus on what Au is telling her; Au seems uneasy with something that Chine doesn't want to spare the processing power to figure out.

“Au,” Chine says as she leaves, pausing in the doorway to look over her shoulder. “Was Farfara consumed by the law?”

Au doesn't answer. She doesn't need to. The tired, sorrowful look on her face is all that Chine needs.

“Why?” Chine asks. “What did she do?”

But Au just shakes her head.

CHAPTER SEVEN: LEAVE ME LONELY

Scoria looks at the stars and tries to imagine them as a far-flung scatterplot of jewels, but they're so small and distant she can't muster up any kind of thought for them except 'stars'. The night air is warm, bordering on hot, even up here in the rose room where the air has a little more space to get its legs under it. The heat from the rooftops of the temple rises up, and the cool stone of the lower floors does nothing for this little space high up in the building. She's sitting in the wide window opening with her legs swinging free, trying to catch even the smallest breeze.

She doesn't want to go to bed.

She thinks of Chine, stubborn and serious-faced with her green hair in a stupid-looking vestigial ponytail near the top of her head, effortlessly antagonistic and sarcastic and rude. Somehow this is... steadying. Scoria feels as though Au has been walking on eggshells around her for a million years, and the temple and the initiates and the normal people of the city are all so respectful that half the time it makes Scoria want to scream. It wasn't always like this, though; she could handle the respect before. She doesn't know when it changed.

“You're going to catch cold,” comes Au's voice, familiar, gently mocking. Scoria hadn't noticed her enter the room.

“Good,” Scoria says.

“You're all bruised up,” Au says. Scoria doesn't have to turn around to know that Au's eyes are serious, and sharp, and sad. There's a soft *shf* of Au's fabric drape, and she slips into the window opening next to Scoria's. The bangles around Au's ankles clink and jingle softly as she swings her feet in time with Scoria's. “Why are you still doing this?”

They've had this argument so many times that it's stopped being an argument and become a conversation instead. Scoria stares out across the sleeping rooftops and feels the blade curl and shift in the back of her head, keening, angry.

“You can't go back,” she says. “But you can stop going forward.”

“I don't want to see you destroy yourself,” Au says.

“So look the other way,” Scoria says bitterly. “You're good at that.”

The silence is hard with unspoken things. Farfara hangs heavy in both of their minds.

Au finally speaks again. “We can't go back to the way things were.” Scoria hates that Au accepts the accusation, doesn't try to defend herself against it. Scoria hates so much, these days.

“It would hurt less to forget,” Au continues. “Why don't you forget? Why don't you let it go?”

“Why don't *you*?” Scoria asks furiously. “I know you spend all your spare time begging the dead or haunting the city or doing pointless things so you don't have to wallow in your own stupid grief, why don't *you* let it go, why don't *you* forget?” Her voice cracks. She can't seem to hold on to this kind of anger for longer than a handful of seconds anymore. *Just because something burns bright doesn't mean it's going to burn forever*. All Scoria's anger is stoked into burning coals that haunt her feet and the back of her throat.

Scoria sighs. “Let's talk about something else.”

“How do you like Chine?” Au asks, acquiescing. It's a conversational victory, but it's Pyrrhic in the sense that it makes Scoria so frustrated that she can hardly breathe. At least Au's tone is a little mocking around the edges.

“I despise her,” Scoria says, her own voice a little steely around the edges, “most ardently.”

“The poor child has done absolutely nothing to you except for be rude, which I'm sure was partly your fault.”

Scoria mumbles something.

“Say it again?”

“She's filling a niche,” Scoria says, louder, angry at herself for saying it out loud. “She's taking Farfara's place.”

“No she's not.”

Such a hard answer startles Scoria. She leans around the small pillar dividing her section of windowsill from the others to look at her friend. Au is looking ahead, taking in the sight of the resting city without really seeing it.

“You think she's taking the place of Farfara,” Au says, “but you're not listening hard enough to the blade. You're not feeling properly. If you paid attention, you'd see that Chine isn't sliding into the hole that Farfara left, because Farfara is still here. She's sliding into the space that we three have made between ourselves, and while she's doing that she's pushing us closer together. She's the steps. It's what she does.”

“Fours for change,” Scoria mutters.

“Just so.”

Scoria doesn't like being honest with people, but it's Au, and the night is warm, and the stars are far far away, so she admits, “I'm a little jealous of her, too.”

“Chine?”

“Mmhm.”

“You know,” Au says, “I think I am also. She's...”

Scoria doesn't know what words to put into Au's trailed-off silence, but she knows what Au is getting at, so she says “Yeah,” and leaves it at that.

It's kind of like seeing yourself when you were younger, Scoria thinks, except in a timeline where nothing really bad ever happens to you. Where you want to feel loving, or benevolent, or whatever, because it's *you*; but at the same time how dare you have such a bright future how dare you be so bright and boundless like that you don't deserve it like I did, even though I'm you—how do you deal with thoughts like those, how do you put them into neat little packages that don't make you categorize yourself as a bad person when you sort them all out?

One of Scoria's old teachers had once said, *Jealousy is the cousin of grief*, and Scoria hadn't really understood what that had meant. *All emotions are cousins at some point*, Farfara had said afterwards, when they were technically supposed to be discussing the lesson. *It's like*, Au had said, as the nominated best-at-metaphors-and-the-like of the three trying to puzzle it out into more and clearer words for the other two, *those two are related specifically because if you're jealous of someone it's because they have something you don't have so... you're mourning the loss of whatever you don't have...* and then had given up frustrated and saying *But that doesn't get the* nuances *of it right*, and the conversation had moved on to other things. But Scoria thinks she gets it now. And that's another thing about Chine, is how somehow just by being there she is teaching Scoria a million new things that Scoria didn't even think she needed to know and isn't sure she appreciates learning. There's something so steadying about Chine that Scoria finds herself resting her problems against the weight of the thought of her. It's a disconcerting feeling, and one that Scoria doesn't appreciate among the rest of her many and varied issues.

A stray breeze pulls like silk across her legs and then scrapes across her raw knuckles; more injuries she doesn't fully remember acquiring. Memories once removed, a memory of a memory. The blade crinkles in the back of her mind: a flash of a knife, a falling fist, the scribbly pull of pebbled stone. Like rote Scoria recites a lesson that the previous gods had taught Au who had taught the rest of them: *If necessary, the holy figure will ask for a larger sacrifice in order to match a given request; if the sacrifice is not enough, the aspect will simply take the deficit from the holy figure's body.*

People are often undercharged by the blade, when it's ruling. Scoria can't figure out if it's a vindictive streak, or if this is simply the way aspects are.

Scoria starts cataloguing her wounds: minor scrapes along her arms and legs, split knuckles, bruises mottling her ankles and shoulders. *If the sacrifice is not enough, the aspect will simply take the deficit from the holy figure's body.*

Au's hand reaches across, draped with gold bracelets. “If I didn't know better, I'd think you went around getting into fights,” she says. Her skin is cool against Scoria's. Scoria wonders if her own skin is feverish, or if that's just the way Au is.

“But you do know better.”

“I told you don't let yourself vanish,” Au says. “I made you promise. I've been holding you with flowers. Don't make me use chains.”

“The blade can't keep me,” Scoria says. “This is the worst it can do.”

“The worst it can do, yes,” Au agrees, “but this is piling up. It can't keep you forever, maybe. But it can keep you longer.”

Scoria looks away. She's not going to deny anything, but telling Au she's right won't make things any easier. Two more sacrifices muddled in a way that was decidedly *not* just, one stray sandal made carefully out of nothing and laid carefully in place, and one worker's memory carefully erased: at one point, no more than a few minutes would have been taken by the blade. Today – as far as she can tell – it was hours. It could have been more. Scoria suddenly realizes she's not entirely sure what day it is. Everything she's been setting up is starting to catch up with her.

*Come and find me*, she thinks.

CHAPTER EIGHT: I LIVE IN A CITY SORROW BUILT

“You know,” Chine says, “when Au said it was 'time to outsource my training', this wasn't exactly what I had in mind.”

“I'm not happy about this either,” Scoria says shortly. “It should be her teaching you this.”

“She had reasons, probably.”

Scoria snorts. The two of them are standing in the middle of the rose room. The low table and a few cabinets have been pushed to the side of the room near the door. Hollow is perched on one of the cabinets, swinging his feet with an air of mild curiosity. Scoria keeps shooting him looks of mild frustration, which is part of the reason that Chine had invited him in the first place.

“So, are you guys sparring, or what?” Hollow asks. “Although this room seems a little small for fighting purposes.”

“No,” says Scoria. Her voice is clipped. Chine is deriving a disproportionate amount of personal enjoyment from the tight, controlled expression on her face.

“Scoria's going to teach me how to use the steps to accept sacrifices,” Chine says brightly. “It's an important part of being a holy figure.” She can see Hollow smothering a laugh. Honestly, after the last few days of temple duties and classes and more lessons with Au, Chine is ready for something fun and simple, like annoying Scoria.

Scoria takes a deep breath and says in an impressively calm – if rehearsed – voice, “The steps accept sacrifices for revolution. This means that if someone makes a sacrifice to you, you can channel the power of that sacrifice into a change.” Scoria's voice gets a little less rote as she gets into the explanation, which would be endearing if Chine liked her. “Once someone makes a sacrifice, that sacrifice's power is stored by the aspect, and can be used in a couple of different ways. The goal of the process is to help the person in the fewest steps possible. Um...” Scoria casts around for an example, then points at Hollow. “You come to me, and make a sacrifice for a resolution. Say it's something really trivial that people wouldn't normally come to me for, like, I don't know, your neighbor is growing mulberry bushes in his yard and they're poking over into your yard and he won't trim them or anything so you threaten to cut off the parts of the bushes that are in your yard. So you both come to me, and he's like 'this guy threatened my property' and you're like 'this guy's mulberry bushes were invading my space'. Following so far?”

“What's a mulberry bush?” Chine asks, only partially to be annoying. Scoria groans.

“Not important,” she says. “The first and most important thing is that I have a solid request to work on. It can be vague, it just has to be worded the same every time. Bad things happen with shifting requests. Things get muddled.” Scoria points at Hollow, still sitting on the cabinet with a look of interest. “What would your request be? I said it can be vague, but try to give me something a little more definite than 'fix it'.”

Hollow thinks. “How about, 'make it so my neighbor's mulberry bushes aren't growing into my yard'?”

“I can work with that. At this juncture, I have a couple of options. How many options do I have, Chine?”

“A couple,” Chine says monotonously.

“*Very* good. My first option is probably the simplest in terms of steps required, but takes the most power and so requires the biggest sacrifice. I can take the power offered to me and use it to make it so that Hel's neighbor never planted a mulberry bush in the first place.”

“Wait, really?” Chine asks. She had known that a lot of power was available via aspects, but hadn't been aware that this was a viable course of action. She's also noted Scoria's pointed use of Hollow's real name instead of his nickname, but decides to let it slide for now. “You can go back in time?”

“Yeah,” Scoria says. “But the catch is that, like I said, it needs a bigger sacrifice. Like exponentially. Usually some kind of strong life force. Since a mulberry bush is kind of small and if I play it right I can pinpoint a really tiny point at which to stop Hel's theoretical neighbor, it would probably require maybe a quarter cup of blood.”

“Blood?”

“Blood,” Scoria says, drawling out the word until Chine makes a face. In a no more serious but slightly lighter tone, she adds, “cutting off a finger or an ear or something would work too. The gods and the law lean towards more symbolic sacrifices, but the blade is pretty straightforward about this stuff. The main thing is that the sacrifice is equal to the request.”

“What's option two?” Chine asks.

“Option two is use the power of the sacrifice to change something in the present. This one usually uses the power of the sacrifice plus some kind of conflict resolution by the holy figure. In this instance, I'd probably use the sacrifice to move the mulberry bushes a few feet further away from Hel's hypothetical fence, and then make Hel apologize to his hypothetical neighbor or something. That sacrifice would be cheaper: I could probably make it so that Hels apology would be enough to pay for the moving of the mulberry bushes. If not, it would probably only require a few breaths of air, maybe the sudden disappearance of some hair strands or a random item in his pockets.”

“That's a short-term solution, though,” Chine says. “Even if they're further away from the fence, the bushes are still gonna keep growing outward, aren't they?”

Scoria shrugs. “Technically, based on the request I was given, that's not my problem. The mulberry bushes are no longer in Hel's yard. So if I was in a hurry or wanted to be an asshole or whatever, I could leave it at that. However,” she points at Chine, “you *can* be flexible. There's probably a ton of options out there. Give me some other solutions.”

“You could change the mulberry bush so that it *couldn't* grow into Hollow's yard,” Chine says.

Scoria nods. Theoretically the nod is one of approval, but Chine has her doubts about any theoretically positive emotion Scoria aims at her. “That's an acceptable way to do it. Since that one will be longer-term, related to the lifespan of the plant, the sacrifice might be a little bigger, but still acceptable. Maybe...” Scoria twists her face, thinking. “Maybe a minute or so off the end of each person's lifespan? I might be able to do it for a handful of mulberries, but that's tricky, since usually the sacrifice has to come from the person or people making the request and I wouldn't try to do any of the loopholes or work-arounds for such a tiny dispute. No offense to your theoretical mulberry problem, Hel.”

“I'll let it slide,” Hollow says. With a little grin to herself, Chine thinks back to when she had first met Scoria, and how borderline-afraid of Scoria Hollow had been. There's nothing like disrespect for breaking down barriers.

“How can you tell the amount of sacrifice needed to be equal to how you fulfill the request?” Chine asks. “Is there a formula?”

“Sadly, no,” Scoria says, not looking sad about it at all. “Mostly you feel it. It's like your instincts pinging against your aspect and between them you can use your gut to narrow it down to what the solution will require. But it's centered around what,” she gestures vaguely, “*feels* right.”

“Hm” says Chine.

“There's a certain amount of trial and error involved when you start out,” Scoria continues. “It's very possible to 'undercharge' sacrifices.”

“Not overcharge?”

“You can *always* feel if you're overcharging,” Scoria says emphatically. “It's like hitting a wall in your head. I think it's because of the amount of ways you can bring about the request, but the theory is that there's no *lower* limit for how much sacrifice is needed, while there's definitely an upper limit.”

“What happens if you... 'undercharge'?”

“If the sacrifice is not enough, the aspect will simply take the deficit from the holy figure's body,” Scoria says, and there's an ironic ring in her voice, like she's quoting a lesson that she's had personal experience with. Chine wonders how steep Scoria's learning curve was, and tries not to look at Scoria's still-raw knuckles or the hint of a bruise mottling her shoulder.

“Lastly,” Scoria says, clapping her hands together like she's changing the subject, “you can change the future. I admit in this specific circumstance the directions you can go with that are a little limited, but it's an option. You could make it so that Hel's theoretical neighbor decides to get rid of the mulberry bushes when he gets home. What else could you do? Chine, throw some out there.”

“You could make it so that he decides to trim the mulberry bushes,” Chine reels off, counting on her fingers. “You could have someone else complain about them, you could cause them to wither...”

“How random can you get?” Hollow asks. “Could you cause, like, a freak windstorm to come and break off all the branches that are poking into my theoretical yard?”

“You *could*,” Scoria says. “But bringing that about would be expensive. Changing the future is cheaper than changing the past, but not by much. So you want to keep the cost down if you can. Chine, pop quiz. Try tapping into the steps. How much would it cost to change the future into one where Hel's theoretical neighbor gets rid of his mulberry bushes?”

Chine still hasn't reached the point where she can communicate with her aspect without going to a dreamlike state, although she feels like she's getting closer. “Hold on,” she says.

Chine opens her eyes. This part she's gotten good at. She holds on to the heat haze and the white rosy light as dream indicators, hopes that this conversation has been of interest to the steps, and says, “what sacrifice would be needed for this theoretical situation?”

The dreams have become clearer as Chine learns to read them, as well. At her feet, four things appear. A simple, triangle-shaped blade; a twig with a few bright-green leaves and a cluster of berries on it; a sundial, its shadow completely at odds with the angle of light in the dream; a smooth, black, palm-sized stone.

Chine closes her eyes.

“A few minutes of life,” she says, looking at Scoria, aware that her eyes are a little glassy. As she says it there's a comfortable, strong feeling in her stomach, as though something has just slid into place. “But... This situation is kind of centric to the blade.”

“The sacrifice is about right,” Scoria says. She looks unimpressed, but Chine caught the brief, unguarded upward twitch of her eyebrows, and counts that as a victory. It's also about as close as she's going to get to a *well done*. “It's true that this hypothetical situation is mostly for the blade, but the steps and the blade are similar enough that for something like this they kind of overlap. The first time you accept a sacrifice, though, you *will* probably will have to do some thinking on your feet. My actions are based on endings. Yours are based on change.”

“Can we do a practice sacrifice?” Chine says.

“Hel, that's your homework,” Scoria says, looking over to where Hollow is now reclining on the cabinet. “You get to think up requests for revolution for Chine to practice with. Not too big, unless you're okay with offering chunks out of your body and/or lifespan.”

“How little is 'not too big'?” Hollow asks, sitting up. “Like, should I be asking her to change what I ate for breakfast, or—?”

“Do you think,” Chine says, “that if he cut his finger to give me blood for a sacrifice, and then I used the power of that sacrifice to go back and change it so that he hadn't cut his finger, it would work?”

“Stay away from paradoxes,” Scoria warns. “Hel, for now try to stick with things that can be changed in the present or future. Past stuff probably isn't wise for a newbie to mess around with.”

“Okay.”

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Chine still doesn't like Scoria, and Scoria still doesn't like Chine, but it's still become something of a habit to sit together in the rose room after training and watch the sun and the city wind down. Au joins sometimes, and on occasion even Farfara sits with them; but Chine and Scoria are near-constants. It's an aimless, twilight time. Something about the lighting and the view and the room and the way they're seated, not looking at each other, always makes it easy to say things that they wouldn't say otherwise. Chine doesn't know, exactly, how she feels about this arrangement. It's a war between her head and her head and her aspect.

*We hate her,* says her head. *We want to help her*, says her head. *She's rude to us constantly*, argues her head. *This is a nice routine*, her head argues back.

*We want to balance*, says her aspect.

And that's what Chine's head wants, too, at the end of it all, so every evening after aspect training she sits cross-legged in one of the window openings and waits for Scoria to join her. And Scoria always does.

“Hey,” says Chine, after a few minutes of could-pass-for-companionable silence. Scoria makes such a dreadful face that Chine can't contain her laugher.

“What was that!”

“Why are you greeting me like I'm your *friend*?” Scoria shoots back. “Don't you *hate* me? Isn't your good opinion, once lost, lost forever?”

“I said 'hey'! It's polite! You can hate someone and be polite to them,” Chine argues. “You looked like you were *dying*!”

“Makes sense,” Scoria says under her breath. “Hanging out with you and dying are very similar things. But at least,” she adds, with a snort, “death comes with relief.”

“If you hate hanging out with me so much, why do you do it?” Chine demands. The question is equal parts animosity and genuine curiosity. For a while, Scoria doesn't answer.

“Hello?” Chine says.

“You're like a new tooth that's growing in,” Scoria says finally. “The process to make space for you wasn't fun, and the process of you growing in isn't very fun either. But you're easy to get used to. You fill spaces.” She makes a frustrated noise. “I'm not good at metaphors.”

Silence winds in between them again. Chine loses herself in her thoughts. There's something so hopelessly upset about Scoria, and Chine wishes she knew why it was familiar. Back near the beginning of her aspect training, Chine had asked Au, *is Scoria angry?* She hadn't seen it then, but she sees it now. Scoria bears a remarkable semblance to the volcano on which the city is built: simmering, secretive, liable to explode. But unlike the volcano, Chine doesn't think that Scoria can be convinced to rain flower petals instead of ash and lava.

That's another thing Scoria has in common with volcanos, Chine thinks. When she explodes, it's going to hurt her just as much as it hurts everyone else.

Chine decides to go out on a limb. She uses that limb to smash through the twin constructs of silence and tact that are the hallmarks of most of her conversations with Scoria.

“If you're going to kill yourself,” she says, “you should at least make it as inconvenient as possible for other people.”

She doesn't know what she expects, but she's reasonably certain that it's not a hoarse, unfunny laugh.

“Oh, believe me,” Scoria says. “I will.”

“Are you?” Chine asks, twisting forward to try to look at Scoria. “Going to kill yourself.”

Scoria hesitates. “Imagine,” she says after a moment, “if you were so in love with someone that you would die for them without a second thought. Imagine being willing to take a knife for them, even if theirs was the hand holding the blade. Imagine that the person you're in love with would never in a million years allow you to do this. Imagine that the person you're in love with would never, ever, ever, hurt you.”

“Okay,” Chine says. Scoria doesn't look at her.

“Imagine,” she continues, “that one day the person you're in love with changes. Changes a lot. Changes so drastically that you can hardly find the person that they used to be inside of them. Imagine this person becomes obsessed with the idea of justice.” She stops, shakes her head. “Obsessed isn't the right word. Imagine that the person you're in love with *becomes* the idea of justice. Imagine,” Scoria's voice gets harder, “that no matter how much they've changed, the person you're in love with will still never, ever, no matter what, hurt you.”

Chine's heart, unexpectedly, aches.

Scoria keeps talking. Her voice hasn't changed from its low, even volume; she hasn't looked away from the temple and city spread out before them. “Imagine that you can't let go of how the person you're in love with was before they underwent this drastic change. Imagine that though you wish you could save them, you can't. Imagine that you would still die for them. Imagine that, now, you wish you *could* die for them. Imagine that it becomes a dream of yours. What better way to die, you think, then at the hand of the person you're in love with, who is no longer the person they once were.” Scoria tips her head back. “You can't go back,” she says, “but you can stop going forward.”

Something about those words sounds familiar to Chine. Had Au said them? Had Scoria said them before?

“Imagine that you are now faced with a problem,” Scoria continues. “You want the person you're in love with to kill you. But you can't talk to them or ask them politely or anything like that. The person you're in love with is effectively gone. Imagine that there's no hope of a mercy kill. Imagine that you must, in some way, provoke them into killing you. So here's the question that you ask yourself, constantly. Here's the question that gets up with you in the morning, and goes to sleep with you at night: how do you get someone who would never hurt you to hurt you? Imagine that, based on the legal system of the city you live in, you narrow it down to one question, with one answer.”

The scent of flowers wraps around them both briefly as the soft wind shifts directions, and then shifts back. The thin rose vines winding around the window pillars move very gently.

Chine watches the last of the sunset burn into deep blue.

“How,” Scoria says, “do you get someone obsessed with justice to kill you?”

CHAPTER NINE: THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Scoria hadn't given Chine instructions on where to practice her steps homework, if she should be doing it under supervision from another holy figure or not, so in the morning Chine waylays Hollow as the careful setup dance of the temple begins. The days are starting to get longer; the faint glow in the sky through the temple windows is stronger now, shifting the lighting in the large central room from nighttime-dark to twilight-grey.

“Did you think of any requests for the steps?” Chine asks Hollow as they join in with the rest of the initiates. She takes an ornate box full of carefully-stacked knives, with alternating blades of obsidian and gold, and thinks of Scoria.

*How do you get someone obsessed with justice to kill you?*

“I have a couple,” Hollow says, interrupting Chine's thoughts. “Do you want to try them now?”

“Yeah, sure,” Chine says. She and Hollow lay out the blades on a length of soft, shiny cloth, obsidian pointed up, gold pointed down, and Hollow says, “Okay. My request is that you change this candle from lit to not lit.”

Chine looks at the candle in question, the one in the middle of a neat row of three.

“Okay,” she says.

She opens her eyes.

It's hard to tell if it's early-morning tiredness or if she's just getting better at going into this state. The hazy heat and rosy white light are blinding after the dim, cool light of the temple, and Chine squints her eyes nearly closed with dreamlike slowness. Opens them fully again. She isn't sure when she knelt on the ground, but the earth is warm against her knees through her linen robe.

“What sacrifice would be required to change the candle in front of me from lit to unlit?” she whispers.

A soft puff of a breeze, almost dismissive. The heat around her increases, then cools again.

“Too small?” she guesses. The dream pauses, in some strange and intangible way, then flips inside out and leaves her back in the temple with a gasp.

“You okay?” Hollow asks, concerned but no longer frightened by these kinds of things.

“I don't think your request was liked by the aspect,” Chine says. “But unlighting the candle is cheap. It wouldn't cost you more than a breath of air. Any more than it would take for you to blow it out yourself.”

“Should we try it? If it wasn't liked by the steps?”

Chine considers the candle. “I think we should.” She looks back at Hollow, then at the candle again. “Have you ever seen a holy figure accept a sacrifice?”

He shakes his head.

Chine shrugs. Her shoulders feel heavy. “I don't know how to actually do it. I can calculate the cost, but I'm not sure what happens after that.”

Hollow hums, tapping his fingers along the edge of the fabric they'd laid the blades out on. “I think my mom saw a few happen?”

“You know what, let's just try it,” Chine says, coming to a decision. “Ask me your request, and I'll see if I can figure out what to do. It must be pretty straightforward.”

Hollow nods, and Chine once again feels a rush of affection for how implicitly he trusts her. She herself is still a little unnerved by what she had learned of the abilities granted by aspects from Scoria's lesson, uncertain of how best to handle that much power (Scoria's bruises and scrapes flash across her mind's eye), but Hollow seems to have no qualms about letting her practice this power on him.

“My request for you,” he says formally, “is that you change this middle candle from lit to unlit.”

“I accept your request,” Chine says with equal formality. The sense of *something* curls and unfolds in the back of her head, like the flash of a fish underwater. “The cost of your request will be one breath of air. Do you accept this sacrifice?”

“I do,” Hollow says.

The steps settles through Chine like a sheet of clear water, spiraling her vision out into a broad and breathtaking paradox until she is seeing everything, including herself, through her own eyes. The cast of the air is blue-green, smooth and even, and every detail is crisp and important and so filled with potential that Chine finds herself caught on the edge of tears. In the corners of her eyes she sees flashes of things like outcomes and turns in circles, trying to catch them: a flower petal about to fall, a loose tile in the floor, a dust mote in front of a mirror, an eleven-year-old with a match, a bird in the rafters. The options are dizzying.

A solid, smooth weight on her shoulder and down one arm stills Chine's spinning. A snake winds its way to her forearm and rests its head on her wrist, eyes bright, tongue flickering. The pattern of teeth down its spine is as mesmerizing as the details of the room.

“The candle,” she whispers, trying to keep her eyes on the snake's despite the pull of potentials around her, and a slow blur sweeps and curls across her vision like a current through a river. Chine follows it to a spider on a high-up shutter and perches there, caught in its legs and the fineness of the thread it hangs from and the grain of wood, and suddenly her vision jumps and shifts, settles into a new clarity, like the realization of an aspect dream reversed. She touches the spider silk; the spider shifts, the shutter settles, a stone column whispers to itself. A stray eddy of wind from a busily sweeping initiate twirls in a different direction.

Hollow's breathing stutters.

The candle goes out.

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“The way Scoria described it, it sounded as if changes could be effected by the power of the aspect simply through power alone,” Chine says, aware that she's talking a mile a minute and that Hollow doesn't have any real idea what she's talking about. “With the mulberry bush exercise. Maybe for some things it is like that. But with this one, even though it was so simple, it wasn't the candle being put out by the aspect, it was changed allowed to happen by the aspect that then resulted in the candle being extinguished. Like the difference between pinching it out and opening a window for a strong breeze.”

The feeling of accepting the sacrifice was fundamentally different from the feeling of an aspect dream, the difference between hyperreal and unreal, and it's left Chine unsettled in different ways. She feels twitchy and frustrated, like she's lost something but she can't remember what it was. The fifth or sixth time she had spun to try to catch a flicker in the corner of her eye and had found herself seriously considering tracking down Scoria and demanding assistance, Chine had told Hollow, “I want to try again. I want to start over. Do you have any other requests I can use to practice?”

So now here they are, walking to the courtyard during lunch, Hollow armed with a short list of other potential requests for the steps and Chine armed with the determination to get this right and the hope that if she does then the sensation will fade the way the side effects of aspect dreams have. Chine moves automatically to the customary fountain and sits on the bench with its faded cushion. The cloth is warm and smells like sunshine and dust. The sun has risen hot enough in the afternoon sky that the spray from the fountain is pleasant instead of chilling. If Chine breathes in deeply, she can taste the ocean on the breeze.

“Okay,” she says, sitting cross-legged on the bench and turning to face Hollow, who is doing the same. “What's your next request?”

Hollow points across Chine's shoulder and over the courtyard wall at the clouds building on the horizon, incongruous against the hot heavy blue of the sky. “Avert the rain shower coming this way.”

Chine twists to look at the clouds, then back at Hollow. “That's a big one.” She pushes her tongue absently against her left incisor, calculating, wondering if she can guess the price before asking the steps.

Hollow grins. “You said that blowing out a candle wasn't liked by the steps. I figured I'd go bigger.”

Chine grins back. “Let's see how much it costs.”

She closes her eyes.

A whisper hums on the edge of her hearing, words she can almost make out, a rustle with a hint of a question mark at the end. Her shadow stretches vague and uncertain in a colorless circle around her as a tiny breeze like a breath wisps strands of hair across the back of her neck. Chine thinks of the spider silk.

“I need to learn,” she says, unsure what she is being asked. The overcast sky above her is hazy white and blinding, and she shivers. The courtyard is empty of everything except herself and the bench. Even the fountain is gone; the shapes of the entrances into the temple hall are washed out and indistinct. The only things here are herself, and the steps.

“What sacrifice,” Chine asks, “would be required to avert the rain shower that is coming this way?” *To change the weather from rain to sun?*

The whisper again, this time with a feeling of warning: be careful, be careful. The sun overhead pours heavy into the ground and the ground pushes it back up into the soles of Chine's shoes. She feels incredibly, impossibly tired. Next to her on the bench are a small handful of items, and she examines them with slow, dreamlike focus. A shallow bowl carved out of a flat, palm-sized stone; it's so finely crafted that she can see faint light through the sides. She touches a finger to it. It's as soft as silk, and her fingertip comes away touched with a fine dusting of black stone powder. Standing next to the bench, the sundial shows her a sharp, sharp shadow that doesn't match the sun. The strong midday light glints off its gilded surface and makes her squint. She turns back to the bench. Next to the small stone bowl sits a small bundle of twigs, tied with hair that Chine is briefly convinced is her own. The twigs are neatly severed, the neat circles of green flesh at their ends a bright contrast to the faded pink-purple fabric of the bench cushion and their own deep grey-brown bark. Each cluster of berries is like a bright, bright drop of blood. Chine does not lift her fingers to her teeth. Around her the wind sweeps in the last of the twilight and pulls it into night. The shock of the first few raindrops hitting her exposed forearm is enough to remind her where she is, and with effort she moves her pointer fingers and thumbs together to form the stable triangle shape of the volcano.

She closes her eyes.

The raindrops aren't there anymore but Chine can feel their cold afterimages on her skin and she rubs at the spots absently as she shakes her head at Hollow. The shadows are in different places than they were originally, and she shivers again despite the warmth of the day. Looks for a sundial that isn't there.

“How long?” she asks.

“About fifteen minutes,” he says. “What was the cost?”

She shakes her head. “Too much for homework.” She shakes her head again, slower, more wondering. “I could have done it, though,” she says. “If it had been something you really really wanted, I could feel it. I could have done it.”

“How much would it have cost me, though?” Hollow presses, curious.

“It... varied,” Chine says slowly. “It was a wilder dream, like the storm was affecting it. I was given more than one answer. Three days of life, or a full cup of blood, or your right ear, or a plot of salted earth and a promise you can't go back on. Or exchanging an instance of statistical safety for an improbable result.”

“Statistical safety?”

“Like standing in a lightning storm with a blade held to the sky,” Chine says, mind moving faster through images than her explanation can keep up. “Maybe dangerous, but normally all that would happen would be that you got wet. But if you asked to avert this rainstorm, and your sacrifice in exchange was that the next time there was a thunderstorm, you had to stand on a high point and offer the sky a conduit...”

“The lightning would strike you,” Hollow says, eyes widening like a breath indrawn as understanding comes to him.

“So we won't do that one,” Chine says decisively. “Do you have any others?”

“Yeah,” Hollow says, visibly shaking off the brief flicker of fear that had crossed his face. “My request is that you stop the person I got in a fight with earlier from coming to beat me up.”

Chine looks at him. “Did you get in a fight specifically for this homework?”

“I take your education very seriously.”

“Who did you get in a fight with?” Chine asks, incredulous, half-laughing at the smug look on Hollow's face. “Did you *really*?”

“I did!” he says brightly. “With that blade-aligned guide who's a few years above us. Lex!”

“What did you even say to him to start a fight?”

“It wasn't hard,” Hollow says. “I said, 'do you want to fight?' and he said 'yes' and I said 'okay' and now here we are.”

Chine is laughing in earnest now. “You're my best friend,” she tells Hollow. “Thank you for being so dedicated to my education as a holy figure that you're willing to get beat up for it.”

“I believe in your ability,” Hollow says, then repeats, “My request is that you stop the person I got in a fight with earlier from coming to beat me up.”

“Okay,” says Chine. “I'm going to try something new.”

“What are you going to try?” Hollow asks. Chine forgives him for looking very slightly nervous.

“Au and Scoria and probably Farfara can talk to their aspects without closing their eyes, or going into a dream,” Chine says. “I think I'm getting better at talking to the steps. I want to see if I can do that too.”

“Cool,” says Hollow.

Chine isn't entirely sure how to do this, is the problem. She's not sure where to start. It takes an effort not to close her eyes automatically; she's not sure if she should even blink. Instead of thinking about that, she focuses on the fabric of the bench beneath her. It's worn, no longer vibrant, but still soft, probably softer; faint texture in the weave catches bits of sunlight within the shadows she and Hollow are casting on it. The spray of the fountain tickles the back of Chine's neck the way her hair had in the dream. She lets her eyes unfocus. Hollow is humming very quietly, the sound soothing instead of grating; it blends with the faint noise and chatter of the temple at noon.

“What sacrifice would be required to stop the person Hollow got in a fight with earlier from beating him up?” Chine asks, trying to keep her voice slow and even. She can't tell whether she has spoken aloud or not.

This is the part she is least confident about, unsure how she will be spoken to by the steps if she is not in the dream. Her eyes war with her: she's torn between letting them slide closed or casting them out of their unfocused state to look around herself for signs.

A flicker in the corner of her vision, colorless blue-green wings spreading. The sensation is so familiar that Chine twitches towards it automatically, seeking the feeling of the sacrifice, keeping her eyes still through sheer force of will alone.

She knows.

It's knowledge the way objects appear in dreams, going from “not there” to “were always there” without preamble or ceremony. It's at once surer and more vague than the symbols given by the steps when she slips into a dream state, equal parts reassuring and []. *It will not cost more than he can give*, Chine knows. *But we will not know what it will cost him until we know how we wish to use it.*

Chine closes her eyes.

“Chine?” Hollow asks, and she looks at him, looks around the courtyard, absently scrubs at her hands.

“How long?” she asks. The shadows don't look any different. She can smell food from inside the temple; her stomach growls.

“Maybe a couple of minutes. Way faster than before.”

“You can afford it,” she tells him. “I know that much. But I have to do it in a different order. I don't know what the price is, only that you can afford it. I have to figure out the cheapest option myself before I can offer it to you.”

“But you're sure it won't be a huge sacrifice?” Hollow asks.

“Positive,” Chine says. A strong sure feeling tugs at her stomach, a stone settling into place. “Do you want me to do it?”

“Yeah,” Hollow says. Chine can't catch even a hint of hesitation in his voice.

“Okay,” she says.

She opens her eyes.

Chine had prepared herself for the sensation based on her experience in the temple hall: the endless spiral of possibilities and potential, the breathtaking clarity of detail, the visual paradox of looking through her own eyes and seeing herself. But this is *bigger*.

The courtyard is hot and warm from the sun; a few initiates here and there move across it, alone or in groups. Chine can see a million million ways that the conversation could be redirected in the way the grey linen of one initiate's robe shifts and pulls across his shoulders. A movement in the corner of her eye: among the greenery at the ocean side of the courtyard, a leaf shifts. Looking over the worn stone of the wall, Chine watches the rainstorm bubble closer, and knows that if she used the power of the steps, she could use that single leaf to flood the courtyard when the rain reaches it. The prospect is terrifying. Another flash in the corner of her eye: she turns again, and again. A puff of dust from a sandal. A pebble tossed aimlessly down the wide, shallow steps lining the courtyard. The call of a bird. An itch scratched a second earlier.

“Hollow,” Chine says, with some effort, refusing to let herself get lost. She repeats his request out loud, searching for that liquid blur in her vision that had guided her last time. “Stop the person Hollow got in a fight with earlier from beating him up. Stop the person Hollow got in a fight with earlier from beating him up.”

As Chine repeats the request her sense of scale shifts reference points, expanding and twisting until she is no longer looking at just the courtyard. Instead, the entire temple complex is laid out beneath her, countless new points of movement and opportunity humming in the corners of her eyes, potential changes upon potential changes up to infinity. An butterfly lands on her cheek, wings transparent and colorless. She sees it in the lower edge of her vision. She watches it on her cheek as if she's standing in front of herself. It closes its wings, opens them again, reveals an intricate pattern of cool blue-green.

“I need to be shown,” Chine says, moving her mouth carefully, trying not to disturb her visitor. “Will you help me?”

She sees Lex.

It's not exactly as if her range of vision has narrowed back in again. Chine can still look at the entire temple, can still watch the individual ants trek across a banister; but having found the focus of the request, the rest of the options fade to the periphery. Lex is wending his way from the dining hall out through a route that takes him through the circular room of the temple center in a route that isn't the most straightforward but that feels right in Chine's feet, watching him. There's something a little more than three dimensional about him, as if Chine is seeing him several times over.

*Doorway doorway doorway doorway*, chants the butterfly beneath Chine's eye.

Chine follows Lex backwards through the temple hall to his table at lunch to the classroom doorway where Hollow had stopped him and said, “Do you want to fight?” Around her the building is grey and ghostly, overlaid with bright washed-out neons and overlaps of people and people and places and things, a hundred thousand transparent pictures placed on top of each other off-center. She looks through the classroom door a little farther and there the blur is, floating across her eyes. The scrape of a chair, the flicker of a light, the round pebbly roll of a writing utensil. Hollow's words float in front of her eyes like petals in water, and she knows that if she asked a large enough price, she could reach out and rearrange them. Something sharp threads through her little finger, brief, there and then gone, and she knows without looking that making that change, so that Hollow never asked at all, would cost him more than she's willing to ask for homework. She turns back to the two of them at the doorway. Lex's words are there as well, and now that she knows what she's looking for she can see his thoughts in the strands of his hair and realizes with the guiding gloss of the steps that if she rearranged them she could change his very thoughts. No longer, “I want to fight” but “I'm not interested.” This costs more, and more twice over.

“Too much,” she says out loud, grounding herself again, and turns to trace back to Lex as she found him. Here are potentials she is familiar with. She is guided by the steps to the top of the ceiling, the way Lex's steps reverb very, very softly against the polished stone. If she turns one of the pieces of a wind chime a little to the side, someone looking for an assistant will hear the footsteps and waylay Lex for help. Not a permanent solution, but a technically acceptable one. Chine thinks of Scoria's lesson with the theoretical mulberry bush. *If I was in a hurry or wanted to be an asshole or whatever, I could leave it at that*. Not an option Chine wants to take. Or she could add the price of one candle flame and use it to let a stray piece of dialogue float to Lex that will change their mind. That one is much cheaper than the sacrifice required for changing the past. Chine does quick calculations in her head, the candle flame plus the sudden eye-catch of a piece of brocade plus the angle of the sun, and comes up with her answer. Lex will take three, maybe four minutes to walk through the hall. She has that long, and then the cost will change as the change does.

The blur is still moving, though, and Chine follows it as it traces Lex's path out to the courtyard and to the bench where she and Hollow are still sitting. Lex's hand comes up, the light catches on his knuckles, Hollow laughs – she rewinds.

“I could just tell him not to beat up Hollow,” Chine mutters to herself, but that's not the point of the exercise. She spins her stereoscopic vision around to view the scene from a new angle, and the leaf on the greenery against the wall catches her eye again. Like lightning she follows the path of processes and sees the end result: pluck it from its branch. Lex will stop and walk away.

The future is cheaper than the past, but Chine will let Hollow make his own decisions.

For a moment she forgets that her eyes are already open, that she isn't a dream, and panic wraps its fingers around her wrist as she thinks of Farfara, hear's Au's solemn voice saying *“That is called being consumed by your aspect”*, imagines herself as blank and personless as the law has become. Then her eyes slide back into binocular vision and she takes in a deep, deep breath, pressing her hands into the soft fabric of the cushion of the bench, moving them up to clutch at Hollow's sleeves, bringing them back to rub at her own forearms.

“How long?” she asks Hollow, who is looking at her with concern.

“Maybe thirty seconds,” he says. “Not even a full minute. Are you okay?”

Chine remembers her first aspect dreams. She's gotten used to those now, and she'll get used to this too. “I will be,” she promises. “Do you wanna hear what you can sacrifice, and what I can do with those sacrifices?”

“Yes,” he says, leaning forward with anticipation.

“I can go into the past,” Chine says, excitement growing over her as the initial fear passes. “I won't for your request, because,” she makes a face at admitting it, “Scoria was right about it being expensive. But if you really wanted, you could give me three days off your life, and I could change the past so that you had never spoken to Lex in the first place. For more than that, almost double, I could have made it so that Lex never agreed to the fight.”

“Double, just for that?” Hollow asks. “How much is double?”

“Five teeth and three minutes of blood,” Chine says. “I don't know why it's doubled. I'd have to ask Au. Maybe it's because it does something to someone other than you. A whole other person.”

“Three minutes of blood?”

Chine finds herself fitting her thumb against her left canine tooth again, and pulls her hand away. “You'd need to bleed for three minutes, and give that blood to the steps.”

“That's too expensive,” Hollow agrees, and shudders. “What else could you do?”

“I could stop him from coming here at all,” Chine lists off. “One method was a little cheaper, but it was a stopgap, nothing that would stop him from beating you up later. Another method was a little more expensive, but it would have made him stop wanting to fight you altogether.”

“Don't tell me if it's cheap or expensive,” Hollow says, sticking his tongue out at her. “Tell me the actual cost!”

Chine sticks her tongue out back. “I could narrow it down to two breaths for the stopgap, and two breaths, a hair on your head, and a small burn from a candle for the long-term fix,” she says.

By the other fountain, a handful of older initiates and guides (law-biased, Chine thinks, trying to place them) are laughing and chattering over something, some kind of lesson or demonstration they had just watched. Chine wonders what they think of the stories of the law, that she's making false rulings and twisting justice for her own ends. She wonders what they would do if – a sting of grief, a sting of anger – they knew that the law had imprisoned Chine's parents.

She wonders suddenly if it truly had been the law who had taken her parents. She pictures Farfara, floating, disconnected from herself, present but not there. Is it possible that instead of the law stealing Chine's parents, Chine's parents had been stolen by the law? The aspect, instead of the holy figure? She wonders, again, what information they had possibly gotten ahold of that had driven the law to such drastic measures.

The thought of Farfara an outsider in her own body, watching as the law makes its own choices, twists its own path, frightens her. She shakes herself back into the present. “And then I could change the future.” She grins a little, shoving the thoughts aside, caught again in the excitement of it. “He'll get all the way out here, raise his hand to punch you, and then stop and walk away.”

Hollow looks delighted at that. “How much?”

“A minute of blood. Or the quality of vision in your right eye. Or a day off the end of your life.”

Hollow tips his head back, looking at the sky, and goes *hmm*. “What's the logic behind these prices?”

In the back of her head and the backs of her hands and the pit of Chine's stomach, the steps is singing quietly. She will never be able to convey this feeling to Hollow.

“That's just what it costs,” she tells him, then snorts. “I could also let Lex get all the way out here, then explain the situation and stop him from beating you up that way. No sacrifice required.”

“That's not your homework.”

“Technically I've already completed my homework. And technically it *is* a solution. The holy figures don't do *everything* using the power of the aspects.”

“I think you would have been a law guide,” Hollow mutters.

Chine makes a face at him. “Your request is for me to stop the person you got in a fight with earlier from beating you up. The cost of your request will be two breaths, one hair from your head, and the burn from a candle flame. Do you accept this sacrifice?”

“You gave me so many more options than that!” Hollow argues.

“The cost of your request will be two breaths, one hair from your head, and the burn from a candle flame,” Chine repeats. “Do you accept this sacrifice?”

Hollow takes a breath. “I do.”

This time Chine is lifted by the steps into her aspect vision without having to do anything, and she wheels and spins the world on its axis until she finds Lex, a handful of yards away from the entrance into the courtyard, face half-lit and ethereal from the reflected glow of outside sunlight on the polished stone of the temple floor. Chine examines him and takes in the new spirograph of potentials that have sprung from his motion forward. At the same time she follows her previous trail around the candle flame, and reaches out a hand (she can see herself, sitting on the bench, reaching out into space), and pinches out the flame.

A drip of wax fails to melt down the candle and onto the floor. Chine watches a cascade of differences and not-happenings spread out from where the wax would have landed.

The steps thrum.

It had gone fast when Chine had taken the sacrifice to extinguish the candle, too fast for her to really know what happened, but this time it's bigger, different, slower. Chine can see the cost and the outcome laid out like another universe side by side with this one, and for a brief second she catches glimpses of other universes laid out side by side with those, like mirrors that reflect back at each other forever. Chine takes knowledge from them like waking up from a dream, urgently, knowing that if she doesn't get it down in time then she will forget forever.

The knowledge is a sensation. Chine sees a way to take the strong straight-line feeling of a sacrifice equal to a request and turn it, a little bit, divert the cost paid to a different end. It gives her a sense of vertigo and impossibility, like watching someone stand on nothing and move the moon with a lever. There is no way this is something a holy figure could do, or even an aspect by itself could do, or even the volcano with all its silent strength, or the dead with its millions of memories to draw on.

Simpler to do, possible, somehow even probable, is the stop-short option of undercharging. Chine can see easily how she could ask Hollow for one breath instead of two, or two breaths and a hair but not the candle flame, or something else entirely, and still work with the steps to bring about his request. It's tempting, almost: the assuring hum of the steps doesn't falter when Chine lists towards the option. She can't tell whether it cares. She reaches out towards the cheaper price.

Scoria's bruise-mottled skin and scraped knuckles press against the back of Chine's mind's eye, and she pulls her hands back.

The option of taking more than would be required for a sacrifice is not an option at all. It's like hitting a glass wall, and as Chine glances her mind against it, it pushes her away.

A breeze swirls across the courtyard, ruffling Chine's hair as she is reduced back into herself. Hollow's breath catches, as if something is caught in his throat, then evens out again.

Chine doesn't look, but she knows that Lex is no longer headed their way.

CHAPTER TEN: SHALLOW DREAMS

It is...

*a keening balance, heavy scales bright in a dark hall, an endless unfurling of solutions and patterns that guide her in straight lines and clean angles, and arms that don't look like her own and hands that don't look like her own and a million whispers given voice behind her eyes...*

... beautiful.

Farfara exists in her head like a dream underwater, soft sand on a shore washed in gentle arcs, bubbles floating up past old coral but never quite reaching the surface. The sense of the law fills her with flower petals and she hides inside the heady scent and keeps only her barest senses preserved from its influence, a little sphere of personality like a neutral ground inside herself. She and her aspect have an agreement that was established nearly the day that she became the law, a sacrifice offered and and outcome offered in return, and Farfara gives and the things she gives are taken by the law, and Farfara is content. Somewhere she thinks that perhaps the imbalance should bother her. Threes for stability. Fours for change. What does two make? Two makes only a line, inflectionless and dispassionate, the shortest distance between two points.

Farfara's days are out laid out in front of her like airy smoothstone paths, her steps clicking softly agains the tile as she follows the paths set up for her through locations like waypoints to a destination she is unsure of. The temple is circular and comfortable, a home for herself and the law alike, pink and gold and grey and comforting. The city is at once intimate and unfamiliar, streets laid out in ways she vaguely thinks they shouldn't be, a wrong turn taking her through a shortcut that shouldn't come out where it does. Above the city, the oldest god of all – the volcano – watches over them. When she thinks of it, or when it is thought of by the law, or maybe when they both come to the same conclusion, Farfara whispers greetings to it in the language of the dead. Sometimes she follows an old muscle memory and lifts her hands up to it, forefingers and thumbs touching to mimic its shape. A feeling or a memory she cannot understand sweeps through her when she does: she buries herself in flowers again.

The courts are high-ceilinged and airy-dark. Their high pews and dark benches and deep grey columns mirror the architecture of how Farfara views her own being, these days, the people and outcomes fading to ghosts and shadows and revealing the scales and lines and angles and their weights and merits. Here she floats most often and most freely, watching her hands and arms move without being told, losing herself in the folds and shifts of the sheer transparent veil over her body's head (*a funeral shroud*, whispers a voice in Farfara's head. She doesn't know if it's in Scoria's caustic, mocking tone, or Au's sad and resigned one, or her own). As she watches her own body she is high, high above the earth, staring at the spinning myriad of potentials and outcomes as things are noticed by and thought of by and sacrificed to the law. The world like this is impossible in its beauty, both its minute details and its boundless abstractions: Farfara spends hours looking at pieces of gravel and seeing how each one could bring about an act of justice. She looks at the wide patterns of the waves outside the city and watches as each long ripple changes everything in the world around it forever. She dreams she is awake and that she is asleep and that she is awake again. Among the flower petals, voices and voices and voices whisper.

Far below her, Farfara's body can no longer weep. Far above her, Farfara can no longer remember why she wants it to.

In other places refuge is harder to find. Farfara goes sometimes to the little room at the top of the temple that is draped with flowers and layered with rugs, lets the soft breeze from the wide window archways run its hands down her arms, sits at the low dark table made of warm dark wood. Here, something about her agreement with the law loses its hold, or shifts on conditions neither party was aware of; the underwater feeling is less. Farfara tries to convince herself she is still dreaming, but when she runs her hands across the carpets they are soft beneath her fingertips. When she converses with Au, throned in soft small pillows, the words almost have meaning. Sometimes Farfara can see and understand the corners of Au's eyes, can ache over the tight, angry fire in the set of Scoria's shoulders where she sits in the window.

Farfara hides, she hides, she hides.

Things are shared with Farfara by the law the way a parent shares with a child: sensations, explanations, nothing to overwhelm her but enough to help make sense of things. Farfara is grateful for this. Sometimes, when her sense of the law brushes against the sense of the other aspects, fear washes over her again, as paralyzing and impossible as it had been two years ago when she had been named the law and realized that, for the first time, she was truly out of her depth. So Farfara lets herself be protected by her aspect. The way things are viewed by the law are so cleanly laid out that it makes her feel safe. Even the most convoluted twists of logic and morality and mystery are untangled and traced in neat lines from beginning to end, and it soothes Farfara to trace them with her eyes.

And on top of the protection granted to her by the law, there is a new sensation, one that smooths against the frayed edges of her mind as she struggles on the edge of sleep to cocoon herself once more in the scent of flower petals and the whispers behind her eyes, as she strays a little too close to herself in the small holy room at the top of the temple, as she hangs caught between bodies in the vaulted ceilings in the courts. A gentle feeling, cool and blue-green amidst the pinks that Farfara floats in, swimming around a small girl with green hair and intelligent eyes. Nothing is said of the steps by the law; Farfara must draw her own conclusions. Conclusions are hard to draw, these days.

But still: it is beautiful.

Farfara walks in a dream underwater to the holy room at the top of the temple with her skin singing softly to itself. Her vision is unfocused and crystal clear; her eyes have landed in a point of middle distance and they feel too comfortable there to move them. It doesn't matter. Farfara isn't really the one doing the walking, anyway.

Au and Scoria aren't here today – maybe it's too early, Farfara thinks vaguely, and feels the faint pit of disappointment in her stomach reach its fingers out to her heart, a pale imitation of the real thing. The room is empty of everything except sunlight. She thinks she smiles. *What goes in and around the temple without touching it*? Her favorite riddle when she was younger. She places her fingers on the cool warm wood and traces fate lines in the grain with her eyes.

She knows something is wrong.

By nature of their agreement, things are not shared in fearful detail with her by the law, but Farfara would have to be head underwater not to feel the ebb and ripple of things twisted and chains snapped and flowers wilted and outcomes skewed. The confusion for her is the detail, the separation: in her bird's eye view, she can see the sacrifices accepted by the law, and the outcomes provided, and they line up cleanly. An even overlap. No one is undercharged, no sacrifice is skewed from its purpose.

And yet, the outcomes the law provides are not the outcomes that are happening.

The wave begins to pull Farfara under again, back to the safe soft haven in her head, but before she can retreat fully the door is pushed open, and the initiate girl slips in. The steps. Chine. Farfara feels the other aspect curl against her own.

“Hello,” Chine says, cool and cautious. Farfara can feel the way the air in the room shifts around her and watches from the outside as the flowers draped in the windows move in response.

“Hello,” Farfara says. Speaking to the steps always gives her an unpleasant nagging feeling that she doesn't know how to shake, a sensation of a sensation, a memory once removed. It used to be simple to speak with people. Farfara could see the threads of conversation like a loom behind her eyes, and weave them together into discussions or small talk or business to get the effect she wanted, the outcome she wanted, the laugh she wanted. Now all Farfara can do is see the threads. She doesn't know what to do with them anymore; that's not her job, not her priority. Her priority is safety. Her priority is fear. Her priority is justice.

Farfara thinks briefly of Scoria's lopsided grin, one tooth showing sharper than the other one, head thrown back. Somewhere far away, her heart hurts.

“Farfara,” says Chine. She has sat down on the other side of the table and is looking at Farfara so seriously that she feels like she's being read. Maybe if someone flips through all of her pages and sees the neat rows and columns of questions and answers, they'll understand, and let her be. Maybe if they read those neat rows and columns of questions and answers, they'll know where to reach down a hand to help.

“Yes,” says the law.

“Can I ask you a question?”

The law nods.

Chine's question is simple, and startling.

“Why?”

Farfara can feel the impact of the question so deeply that her body responds: a very slight tip of the head, the faintest furrowing of brows. The steps winds through Chine's question and gives it weight.

“What did you do?” Chine continues. “To be...” She gestures across the table. Farfara knows with perfect, absent, clarity exactly how much it would cost to make Chine leave the room. “This. I know you have to be in there somewhere, behind the law. Why did it consume you?”

A whisper comes to Farfara from the law, parting the scent of flowers with the taste of a metal more bitter than gold. A courier service inside her head, a chance to send a gilded notecard with an answer written on it from her head to her mouth. There is one answer that she can give. She doesn't know any other one.

Something shifts in her vision, the sense of a sacrifice without a sacrifice. Farfara thinks she smells cinnamon, smells soap, smells dry dry earth.

“It was,” Farfara says, “just.”

Chine snorts, clearly dissatisfied, and says, “That's not an answer. This isn't just. What's been happening isn't,” Farfara hears the hairline fracture in Chine's voice, “*just*. You shouldn't be doing this.”

For a second, in the sanctuary the law has given her, Farfara feels the water recede and is left dry and gasping. For a second she and the law are left spinning in the neutral sphere that spans their agreement, reaching out for each other, a vision face to face for perhaps the first time.

“Even if you love them,” Farfara says to the law, as it is said back to her by the law, “some things have to be changed.”

Outside of this paradigm shift, unaware of this brief and perfect eye at the center of something like a hurricane, Chine stands up and says, “I'm going to change this. One way or another, I'm going to change this.”

Chine walks out of the room.

Farfara's eyes close.

In the back of her head the law whispers and keens over this development, picking it apart carefully, laying out the pieces in bright bright lines to make sense of them. Farfara searches for the ease this should bring her and finds only fear, only possibilities, only fear. She retreats again, back into red-maroon safety, moored underwater, watching a dream.

“We can't go back to the way things were,” says Au's voice, a soft pink-and-gold whisper in the back of Farfara's mind.

Farfara knows.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: PRESENT UNCERTAIN

Au makes a noise that's a neat split between a laugh and a sigh. “Did Scoria really give you homework on accepting sacrifices without teaching you how to accept them?”

Chine is sitting in a window today – Scoria's usual one, just in case Scoria comes in and wants to sit in a window – and she shrugs and swings her feet a little. “She showed me how to calculate the price, and told me how it basically works. Then she told Hollow to give me some practice sacrifices and that was it.”

Au takes in a very deep breath. “I knew it was probably a bad idea to have her teach you,” she says. Then, to Chine, “But you did alright, even with Scoria teaching you. Walk me through what sacrifices you did and what happened when you did, and I'll see if I can offer you advice on the process.”

The rose room is almost stiflingly hot at this time of the day, alleviated only by the open window spaces in the walls and the air motion they let in, and Chine moves with a languid slowness as she pulls her legs up to sit cross-legged in one. She's grateful for this meeting today, more than usual. It's too hot to eat in the dining hall with all those other people, cool tile and welcome shade notwithstanding, but the courtyard shimmers under a rosy heat haze that reminds Chine a bit too strongly of her aspect dreams. It's easier to come up here and speak with and learn from Au. She longs for the cool blue-green of the steps, as if that will cool her off. Her left canine tooth aches.

“Hollow had,” Chine ticks off on her fingers, “three requests. He wanted me to change a candle from lit to unlit. And he wanted me to avert a rain shower that was coming this way.” She points out the back wall's windows to the heavy clouds piling in the sky, and prays to the volcano that it gets here soon to break the fever on the city. “That one.”

Au nods, expression neutral in a way that Chine recognizes as deliberate.

“And then he asked me to stop a person that he got in a fight with from beating him up.”

Au's mouth quirks into a smile. Her lips are plain, but for a moment Chine thinks she can see on them the flash of liquid gold used to speak to the dead. “Did he get in a fight just for your homework?”

“He said he takes my education very seriously.”

Au shakes her head. “Tell me about the first choice. The unlit candle.”

“That one was... disliked by the steps,” Chine says. The inside-out flip of the dream shivers through her stomach; the steps hums in the back of her mind. “I think it was too simple. The candle was one of three, the middle one, and it was right in front of us. The cost was the same breath of air it would have taken to just blow the candle out.”

Au *hm*s. “It was an easy one to start with,” she says noncommittally. “What did you do to fulfill his choice?”

Chine thinks back. “First... First I went into an aspect dream,” she says. “To ask how much it would cost.”

“What were you told in that dream?” Au prompts.

“It said it was too small, I think, first” Chine says. “There was a little puff of air, and then it got a little bit hotter and then a little bit cooler, and then it flipped me out of the dream.”

Au raises her eyebrows. “The same way you were flipped out of that first dream?”

Chine remembers the sick feeling of falling from that long-ago aspect dream, and shudders. “No. This one was faster, and less violent. It was like being pushed into a,” she gropes for a description that will fit correctly, “a sheet of fabric that's hanging taut on a rack, but instead of bouncing off, I just went through, and was out of the dream.”

“You've gotten much better at interpreting dreams,” Au says approvingly. Pride stirs warm in Chine's heart.

“It's because I've had a good teacher,” she says.

“What did you do next?”

“I told Hollow the price, and asked him if he was okay with it, and he said yes.”

“No, no,” Au shakes her head. Even her heavy gold earrings seem to swing slower. “What were your exact words?”

“Oh.” Chine thinks back. “He said, 'my request for you is that you change this middle candle from lit to unlit', and I said, 'I accept your request. The cost of your request will be one breath of air. Do you accept this sacrifice?', and he said 'I do.”

“How did you know what words to say?” Au asks. “Was it instinct? Were you guessing? Were you told?”

“I was... told, I think,” Chine says, trying to remember exactly why she had used that phrasing. “I wasn't spoken to by the steps, exactly, but I was left a feeling of how to say it, and said it as close to the feeling as I could.”

Au nods. She looks pleased; her eyes squint up with a smile and make her eyelashes look even longer. “You were very close. The traditional wording is a little different, but you got the sweep of it.”

“What's the traditional wording?”

“'Your choice is accepted',” Au says, tone settled in a ritual cadence. “'To fulfill this request, something,” she makes parentheses around the word 'something' with her hands, “must be sacrificed. Will you sacrifice this?'”

“So it would have been, 'Your choice is accepted',” repeats Chine. She wants to commit it to memory as fast as possible. “'To fulfill this request, one breath of air must be sacrificed. Will you sacrifice this?'”

“Exactly,” Au says, settling back. Chine doesn't know how she can stand to be among those carpets and pillows in this heat. “Tell me what happened next.”

“It was...” Chine makes an expansive gesture with her arms and hands, the infinite detail of the temple playing behind her eyes. “...beautiful.”

Au nods.

“I could see everything,” Chine continues. “I was looking out of my own eyes, but I could see everything, I could see myself, I could see the whole room. I could see *everything*,” she tries again. She knows that Au must know what it's like, but Chine wants to put it into words. “A million possibilities in a speck of dust. The steps showed me a shutter and a spider and the spider's web, and I touched the spider's web. And the steps used one of Hollow's breaths. And the candle went out.”

Au nods, and turns her head to look out the window. The rainstorm is boiling closer now, a deep heavy grey against the pale hot blue of the sky. “And the next request? The rain?”

“That one I didn't do,” Chine says. “It was too expensive for just homework. I didn't want to ask Hollow for the prices. And it was... wilder. It was harder to get a grasp on the costs, and there was more than one cost for the same request.”

“What were the prices?”

“Three days off the end of his life. Or a full cup of blood. Or his right ear, or a plot of salted earth and a promise he couldn't go back on. Or a moment of statistical safety.”

Au nods. “Choices involving weather are usually expensive, and the cost is often high and dangerous. Aspects are largely people-oriented, and working with other things is... not disliked, exactly, by an aspect, but is not ideal. If the request and the situation had been different, though, it's likely the price would have been calmer as well. For example, if the request to avert the rainstorm had been a side effect of a different request.”

Chine tips her head slowly to the side in a silent question.

“Say that a friend of Hollow's was out in a small boat, and that, if they got caught in this storm, they would sink. If Hollow's choice was to ask you to save his friend, that would give you an angle from which to work. 'Avert the rainstorm' for its own sake is a selfish request and not one that is found easy to work with by an aspect.. 'Avert the rainstorm in order to keep my friend safe' is much more understandable by the aspect, and can be done for a price that is much less steep.”

Chine files away this information for later. Things like this have to be written down somewhere, right? Are the rules of aspects passed down through oral tradition only? Chine makes a mental note to ask Au later, after the lesson. She makes a mental note to change that, if it's so.

“And the last one? To stop Hollow from getting beaten up?” Au asks wryly. “Who did he get in a fight with?”

“A blade-aligned guide named Lex,” Chine offers, then waves her hand at Au's blank look. “I'm not sure you'd know him, but he's known for always being willing to get into a fight. I think he likes the feeling.”

“Blade-aligned indeed,” mutters Au. “Walk me through what you did for this one.”

“It was the same as the other two to start with,” Chine begins, then pauses. “Actually, no. I tried something new with the dream to ask the price. I didn't go into the dream. I wanted to try to do what you and Scoria do, where you can just communicate with your aspects.”

“How did you do that?”

“I didn't close my eyes,” Chine says slowly. “It was hard, because I'm so used to it, but I didn't close my eyes, and did the same thing I did in the beginning when I was still learning how to do the dreams, where I focused on things around me until I was sort of... outside of myself.” Au is nodding, which is encouraging. “It was different from the other aspect dreams. It didn't show me anything, exactly. I just *knew*. But I didn't get the price exactly. I just knew that Hollow would be able to afford it, whatever the price was, but we couldn't ask the price from him until we knew how we wanted to bring about the change he was asking for. So I told him that, and then I went into that state again, where I could see everything. But it was different with this one than it was with the candle.”

“How so?”

Chine brushes her fingers unconsciously under her left eye, where the butterfly had been. “It told me, 'doorway'. I could follow Lex back into the past and forward into the future, and I could have changed things there as well. There were so many more options than for the candle, and there were *so many* options for the candle. I could have made it so that Hollow had never asked Lex to fight him in the first place, or I could have changed Lex's mind so that he said no instead of yes, or I could have even made it so that Lex beat Hollow up right then, which would have technically fit within the restraints of his request... his choice.”

“And the options in the future?” Au asks, interested but calm, flat, the ultimate teacher voice, careful to hold no drawable conclusions in her tone. Chine wishes the storm would get here faster, faster, faster.

“I could have changed Lex's mind at the last minute, I saw it, so that he got all the way out to the courtyard to the bench we were sitting at and raised his hand and then changed his mind and walked away. I didn't like the future options,” she admits. “Even though they were a little cheaper than the past. They felt slippery, somehow. The ones in the present were easiest, and cheapest. There was one where I could have had someone call Lex away and fulfilled the rest that way, on a technicality, but I didn't want to do that one. So the option I took was one to make him realize he didn't want to fight Hollow, by overhearing what someone said.”

“And how did you do that?”

“I stopped a drop of wax from falling,” Chine says, and then laughs. “I stopped a drop of wax from falling, can you believe that? Just that, and everything changed.”

Au laughs. It has a sound to it like grief. Her earrings flash gold in the hot pre-storm light. “Thanks to that request, it looks like you've learned a little about different methods of accepting sacrifices as well.”

“There's more than one way to accept a sacrifice?” Chine repeats, thinking back through Hollow's request and comparing it to the candle one. They don't seem that different, aside from scope, and target. She fights back a yawn. Moves her fingers unconsciously into the shape of the volcano.

“Yes,” says Au. “The standard procedure is to know the price, ask it of the person you are helping, and then offer that sacrifice to your aspect in exchange for their choice being granted. One, two, three. But you can also ask the person for their sacrifice, and then learn the price, and then apply it. Two, one, three. The order can vary, but it doesn't always have to be linear. It just always has to be fair. Also, and you didn't do this one but you may have reason to someday, you can accept a blank sacrifice after it's been made and turn it to a purpose related to your sacrifice.”

The flowers in the window opening wave and weave shadows on the carpets in the rose room. If she breathes deeply enough, Chine thinks she can smell the ocean. “Blank sacrifices?” she asks.

“Sometimes people make sacrifices that don't have a direction,” Au says. “Well, people make them all the time. But sometimes that sacrifice can be seen and used by an aspect. By you.”

“What do you mean by 'don't have a direction'?” Chine asks. “Don't all sacrifices have a direction? By definition?”

“Yes,” amends Au. “I think the most accurate description would be... internal sacrifices. Or maybe an unbalanced personal sacrifice. Where, as viewed by an aspect, there's a difference between the price the person is charging and the price that's being paid.”

Chine looks at her blankly.

Au puffs out a breath and tips her head, thinking. “Let me give you an example. Let's say that someone wants to... I don't know, get someone's attention. The sacrifice they make to themself in order to gain this person's attention is their personal well-being. But from the point of view of the aspect, this sacrifice is much greater than it needs to be. If you subtract the outcome from the method, there's a difference. The aspect can use that.”

“A blank sacrifice,” Chine says. It makes her think of Scoria, and she turns the conversation away from that. “Could you actively make one of those? Could I go to you and give you, I don't know, a minute of blood, and then you could accept that, and store it, and then use it later?”

“I don't think so,” Au says. “I don't know if the aspects are capable of storing sacrifices like that; they have to be made and then used.”

Chine swings her feet down from their cross-legged position and swings them against the wall again, a soft *thunk-thunk*, toes brushing softly against the carpet. The heat is fading, the shadows are getting shallower; the midday storm is nearly upon the city, nearly ready to break. She can taste it on the air, feel it spread across her skin like the smoke from dry ice. She smells greenery and salt water and hears Hollow's little river people chant in the back of her head. *We'd be all right if the wind was in our sails, and we'll all hang on behind...*

“I have a question about being consumed by your aspect,” Chine says, eyes still on the approaching clouds, and from the corner of her eye sees Au go still, or stiller, or smaller somehow. The stilted conversation with Farfara has left Chine feeling angry and restless, like she's missing something, like there's something that she should be doing. The looped audio memory of the law telling her, “it was just” wraps itself around Chine's heart and squeezes.

“Ask away,” Au says.

“When I need help,” Chine says, “the steps gives it. And you said that holy figures are needed by the aspects.”

“Yes.”

“Why haven't I been consumed by the steps?” Chine asks. “Why doesn't *everyone* get consumed by their aspects? Scoria said that new holy figures are taught in increments by their aspects and that the increments slowly get larger and that's why they need mentors, but what about holy figures in situations like yours, where they don't have access to mentors? What about the very first holy figures, the ones who didn't have mentors at all?” Chine thinks of Farfara, blank-eyed and skewing or skewed by her aspect, presiding cooly over the courts, and can't stay seated in the window anymore. She stands up and strides the handful of steps to the windows on the back wall. Puts her hands on the inside sill and leans all the way out, eyes closed, breathing in the scent of the storm. She misses her home. She misses her parents. The thought of her shared room with Hollow suddenly feels too small, wrong.

“Don't let yourself vanish,” Au says softly, behind her.

“Like Farfara did?” Chine shoots back, frustrated, and hears the shadow of Scoria in her own voice.

The room is silent.

“Sorry,” Chine says softly, ashamed.

Au exhales long and low, releasing the tension. “It all comes down to Farfara,” she says, staring past Chine out the window. “In a way I think most of this does.”

Chine comes back and sits across from Au at the low table, and puts her elbows on the table, and looks at Au. “Flowers won't grow in graveyard soil,” she offers, and Au huffs out a laugh.

“Mentors are... useful for new holy figures,” she says. “Important. Instrumental, even. But not necessary. Many holy figures have done fine without them. The things that are needed are taught by the aspects, and the rest can be learned. You said that Scoria told you that the holy figures need mentors because of the increments that the aspects teach in? To help them keep up as the spacing gets larger?”

Chine nods.

“I think she knows that's not right,” Au says. “But I can see where she drew that conclusion. When Farfara...” she takes a deep breath, turns her head away. Chine wishes she would just say it. “She changed after she was taught something new by the law. It didn't happen to either of us. It still hasn't.”

“So you don't know?” Chine presses. “You don't know why she was being consumed by the law?”

Au still won't meet her eyes. “Do you know what the job of the gods is?” she asks.

“To accept sacrifices for prosperity,” Chine says automatically. “To offer advice.”

“And,” says Au, “to balance the law and the blade. To be the top of the volcano, the fulcrum of the scales. And I...” Au shakes her head. Shakes it more vehemently, looks down at her hands. The gold bangles on her wrists look like iron in the strange light.

“Okay,” Chine says cautiously, not sure where Au is going with this. “Are you saying that you didn't balance them well enough?”

Au doesn't answer, but Chine isn't willing to take that as an answer right now. “That's not-- that's stupid,” she says, forgetting briefly that she's not talking to Hollow. “I mean... sorry. That doesn't make sense, though. If it was, I don't know, if Scoria and Farfara got into a fight or something, that might have been your fault, but Farfara getting consumed? It couldn't possibly be your fault.”

“It *could*!” says Au, as if Chine's own frustration has gone into her. “To get consumed by your aspect, you have to be misusing your aspect, and if you're misusing your aspect you are unbalanced! Instead of an equal balance between Farfara and the law, the scales had to have been tipped towards Farfara, and the fact that I didn't know that until it was too late means that I failed at my job. It means that I didn't offer advice. It means that this is my fault. It's not mentors. It's Farfara. It's me.” Au scrubs at her face, leaves it in her hands. “I wish I could forget that,” she says, very very softly, then softer still. “It would hurt less to forget.”

Chine can't say anything. *You're wrong* won't help, even though she knows it's true. Chine wants to take a shovel and knife and dig down deep deep to the heart of the problem and cut it out and fix it. In the back of her head the steps shifts and smooths and whispers, settling with a sound like running a fingernail down a line of tiles. Chine reaches out with a mental hand to soothe it without really knowing what she's doing. *I'm going to change this*, she promises furiously. *One way or another, I'm going to change this*.

When she looks up Au is watching her, face unreadable, eyes serious. “Remember, Chine,” she says, as though she knows what Chine is thinking. “A promise always comes with flowers and chains.”

“Scoria said the same thing,” Chine tells her, drumming her fingers on the table, scrubbing her hands like they might be covered in blood. The storm is nearly to the city, nearly upon the temple. Chine can taste the smell of roses on her tongue.

“Have a good afternoon,” Au says softly, and stands up. The long drape of fabric seems to flow more like water than like fabric under the shadowed lightning. Chine is so mesmerized by it that she forgets to wish Au farewell until Au is gone.

“I'm going to redeem you,” she says to the empty room. The steps whispers (doorway circle change offer question doorway doorway) inside her head.

Outside, the grey vertical sound of rain fills the air and insulates the room in a cool, safe bubble.

Chine opens her eyes.

CHAPTER TWELVE: MALICIOUS COMPLIANCE

Scoria drifts.

In her dreams she is one with the smooth obsidian given to them by the volcano, she is porous rock, she is slick grey stone. She's the minutiae that make up a palmful of sand. She's the textured malleability of a slice of clay. Outside the dream, where the sun shines differently and the rain still falls, someone's mouth splits and spills blood in a smooth deep-red river down a chin. Vessels break beneath the skin. A body stands still in a small empty garden off the side of the temple.

Scoria drifts, but she clings to a goal so clear it ties her like a rope to the surface of the dream. The aspect will simply take the deficit from the holy figure's own body. She reaches out to the outcome promised from the sacrifice that was just accepted and wraps her fingers around it, focuses her awareness on each digit of her hand, each segment, the short fingernails, the bony knuckles, the lines and creases, the scrapes and bruises. The blade does not like this. Scoria doesn't care. Scoria doesn't care. Scoria doesn't care. The aspect will simply take the deficit from the holy figure's own body. She drags the sacrifice away from the channel it should be laid in. She twists her whole body out of shape, twists the dream around, warps the stone and sand and clay, cracks her bones, yanks out her teeth. Moves the moon with a lever and a monumental will. She pulls the sacrifice towards herself and holds onto it there. What are you doing what are you doing what are you doing, Scoria screams at herself. The goal wraps around her waist and reminds her where the surface is. She molds the sacrifice in her own image and forms it into a loose flagstone and writes *SCORIA KILLED ME* on the underside with her thumb and her own spilt blood. Heavy-handed in every sense of the word. What are you doing. Scoria doesn't care. She doesn't care. What are you doing. What are you doing. Her fingernails are chips of obsidian and they glitter blackly against the flagstone. Scoria takes the last of the sacrifice and sticks it like a pin through a butterfly into her creation. Hold it there. Hold it there. “Until I am dead”. “Until I am dead” the blade cannot use this. Nothing is set into motion yet. The most important condition. One she can't forget. She can't forget. She can't forget. The sacrifice is expended. The flagstone gone. Where is the surface where is the surface where is the surface.

Scoria drifts.

When she comes to it is in the aspect room once more, sitting in the window with her legs dangling over the edge and nothing but a long, long drop below her. Scoria gazes outward blankly and runs her tongue over her teeth. The loss of memory she's left with after she trades places with the blade is the worst part of her plan. Chine's face swims in front of Scoria's mind's eye. *If you're going to kill yourself, you should at least make it as inconvenient as possible for everybody else*.

*Oh, believe me, I will.* Herself included.

The hardest part is making sure that everything will work. Scoria's checked and checked and double-checked her plans, tried to lay them out in the cleanest lines, but the part of her that is intimately in touch with cosmic irony wishes that she could show her strategy to Farfara and get some feedback.

The blade shifts in the back of her head at the thought of Farfara, the way it always does, and this time Scoria lets it do as it wills instead of stomping it to silence.

“I'm going to destroy this whole system,” she tells it conversationally. Every time she's in the aspect room it seems to be twilight. Chine isn't here yet, and Scoria hopes she won't be here later, either. “I'm going to set Farfara free from the law, and then I'm going to make sure no one will ever get consumed by their aspect again.”

All that is sent to her by the blade is reproach.

The blank sacrifice was the hardest part. The crux of her plan, of course (*you can't go back but you can stop going forward*), but the hardest to arrange, hardest to hold onto. But the easiest to bend to her will. She laughs a little bit to herself. “One and two, and then I'll be the third,” she whispers to the cooling air outside. “Threes for stability, but not for long.”

Scoria's fingers hurt. She looks at them and wishes she knew why she expects their nails to be black and glassy. Her whole body aches: new bruises and scrapes sit on and under her skin like unwelcome passengers. Her lower lip stings where it split, but at least it's no longer bleeding. Au would despair if she could see Scoria now, and Scoria is glad that she's probably already gone from the aspect room for the night. Gone to sleep, or speak to the dead, or wander the dusky city streets, and that she won't see Scoria's state when Scoria comes in to sleep on the couch that she's mostly claimed as her own.

Scoria knows that she's being selfish.

The knowledge lives under her skin next to her injuries and spreads sickness into them while she sleeps. She wants to destroy the system that made Farfara the law in the first place, sure. She wants that, she wants that, she wants it so badly she's ruining the lives of her two closest friends on the off chance that her plan will work. But really, if she's honest with herself – something Scoria is all too rarely, these days – she's doing it because at the end of everything she just can't quite figure out how to *accept it*. How to let go of how Farfara was before. How to let go of how she and Farfara were before. This way, Scoria gets everything she wants. She ticks them off on her fingers like a shopping list. She gets to free Farfara. She doesn't have to deal with the changes that will come with that. She can get someone else to let go for her.

*You can't go back, but you can stop going forward.*

When Scoria learned how to twist the sacrifices given to the law it was a wild joy, the fierce excitement of learning something new, and even now at the price it comes at it is her favorite thing to do, reliving the echo of that accomplishment. It had been the beginning of the rest of her plan, too, the discovery that she could place timers and conditions on sacrifices, delay them, stop them from happening unless something else happens first. Scoria grins thinking about it. The blade chants anger anger anger in the back of her head.

Scoria still doesn't know whether it's out of vindictiveness that people are undercharged by the blade when it's ruling. If Au was here Scoria could get into a debate with her about whether aspects are capable of vindictiveness or retaliation against their holy figures, and they could talk and talk late into the night the way they used to when they were initiates. Scoria misses those debates, light and easy with nothing heavy underlying them; these days, every conversation they have about aspects or each other has another conversation running under it, a darker one, that neither of them really wants to acknowledge. Sometimes Scoria wishes that one of them would just broach it, would just have an honest talk with each other, instead of dancing like the capricious dead around the subject. Both Au's cowardice and her own make her want to scream.

Au's voice in her head says “I told you don't let yourself vanish!” and Scoria growls to herself. It's possible that Scoria could stop people from being undercharged by the law while it's ruling, but she's never tried it. How could she? Why would she?

The door to the aspect room eases open, and Scoria knows without even having to look that it's Chine; she relaxes and tenses in equal measures.

“Lowly initiate,” Scoria says, by way of greeting. The clouds on the edges of the sky look like waves.

“Hello,” Chine says, polite in a way that turns Scoria into living coal and sets her on useless, smoldering fire. She wants to fight with something, and if not even Chine will fight back, then what is she supposed to do?

“Argue with me,” Scoria says, tired, defeated. “I could use the distraction.”

Chine doesn't say anything. Scoria can hear the slight sigh and *whumpf* of a body flopping backwards onto the floor.

“Why do you need the distraction?” Chine asks finally.

“I don't have to tell you.”

A snort. “The volcano festival is four days long this year, right?”

Fours for change. “Yes.”

“What should I be doing during that?”

Scoria doesn't even want to think of the festival aspect of the volcano festival; it seems trivial, compared to everything else that's going to happen. “Hanging flowers with the rest of the initiates.”

Chine's tone has an edge and Scoria accepts it willingly. “You know that's not what I meant.”

“I'm not a mind reader,” Scoria shoots back. She can't seem to hold onto her anger anymore: all she has left is exhaustion. She wants to tear something's throat out. She wants to rest. She wants to start over.

“Graveyard soil,” she mutters.

“I meant, should I do anything as a holy figure,” Chine says. “Are you listening?”

“No.”

“To which?”

“Both.”

The room is silent for a few minutes. Scoria can feel Chine's presence like a physical hand on her shoulder, this close: in her head, the blade settles against the steps and reaches out. Maybe for help. Maybe it's just telling the steps all of her transgressions, so that when all of Scoria's plans come to fruition, more than one person will know exactly how “just” the outcome will be.

“The steps is a hidden aspect,” Scoria offers to break the silence, irritated at having to explain this at all. She tries to make her voice as condescending as possible. “There's no roles for its holy figure. We can give you a robe and some ornaments and present you as a new addition to the festival, if you like. Call you a stand-in for the ocean, or something.”

“I don't need your pity,” Chine says, but her voice lacks venom. “I just wanted to know.”

Scoria laughs. “You don't need my pity, but you've got it.”

“As you have mine,” Chine says, quiet and thoughtful and needlessly formal. “Though I doubt you need it either.”

“Would you like a walkthrough of the volcano festival?” Scoria asks, ignoring her.

“No.”

“Aren't you curious how the four-day festival differs from the three-day festival?”

“I've been to a four-day festival before.”

Scoria snorts. The city has had a decade of prosperous years, maybe more. “When? When you were five?”

Chine is silent. “Maybe,” she mutters at last. Scoria abruptly realizes that this will probably be the first volcano festival that Chine will be attending without her parents.

“For three-day festivals,” Scoria says, “each day is dedicated to an aspect. The blade, then the gods, then the law. On four-day festivals, it goes the blade, then the gods, then the law, then all three. For three-day festivals, each holy figure makes a chain of flowers on their day and gives it to the volcano. For four-day festivals, the blade starts the chain of flowers, then the gods picks it up on her day, then the law picks it up on her day, and on the fourth day they finish it together and give it to the volcano. That's the main difference. The speech given on the fourth day is different too, I guess,” Scoria amends. “Instead of the whole 'I am the aspect and the aspect is with me' thing, it's kind of like a group prayer to the volcano for the next year to be better. Instead of the group prayer on the law day for the next year to be as good as this one. Still both in our language and then in the language of the dead, afterwards.”

“Teach me the prayer,” Chine orders from the floor.

“You won't be saying it.”

“That doesn't matter.”

“What's the point of learning it if you won't be saying it?”

Chine makes a frustrated noise. “Just teach it to me.”

Scoria looks out onto the darkening city. ~~There had been a handful of leaner seasons when she was still an initiate, enough that she had known both prayers by heart by the time she was chosen as the blade. That it's been over a decade since the last four-day volcano festival is a rare blessing~~ *this is inaccurate to the timeline but i refuse to delete the words.* The previous gods had taught the prayers to them before she had joined the dead, but Scoria feels like she had known the words to the four-day festival prayer long before she became a holy figure.

“With all of the respect from the depth of our spirits and our aspects,” Scoria begins quietly, “we ask that the volcano hears us.” The rush of some complicated feeling, deference or significance or awe, fills her as she speaks the words. For a moment she thinks she hears Au and Farfara, speaking in harmony with her, but the sensation fades like the taste of cinnamon from her tongue and leaves her small and human again. The blade, always sharp in Scoria's mind, gentles. “So that you understand our intent, we raise and join our voices to pray. Together with the blade, and the gods, and the law, that you will take our wants, and give back to us fulfillments. That you may take the badnesses, the disasters and the the sins, and purify them all.”

Chine is quiet for so long that Scoria wonders if she's fallen asleep. The new-evening air soothes the new and varied hurts in her skin, cooling the angry flesh from hot to warm, chilling the body around it from warm to cool. She wonders if Au will paint her lips gold and try to talk to her through the dead, after.

“When I was little,” Chine says, “I learned that ghost apples only grow on the northern slopes of the volcano, and that the river people transport them to the city. The method of handling the apples without letting any of them get marks on them is a closely guarded secret among the river people. If you or me tried it, the baskets would be full of bruised pulp by the time we got five minutes down the river from the orchards. And when we try to plant them in the city, their trees produce normal apples, or none at all. My mother told me the apples are a gift the volcano gives us, a way for us to speak to the dead so that we never truly lose any of the knowledge we've accumulated or the people we love.”

“I know all of this,” Scoria says. The cadence of Chine's voice is more steadying than she'd like to admit. All that's left of Scoria is scaffolding, and Chine is the building she rests against.

“All I'm saying is that there's other options,” Chine says finally.

Scoria groans softly to herself. She doesn't think she could stand it if Chine became nothing but another Au, ghost-apple-soft and tiptoeing around subjects she doesn't want to broach directly. “Did you memorize the prayer?”

Chine sighs, long and low. “Yes.”

“Let's hear it.”

“With all of the respect from the depth of our spirits and our aspects, we ask that the volcano hears us.” Chine's voice is uncharacteristically quiet, thoughtful. “So that you understand our intent, we raise and join our voices to pray. Together with the blade, the gods, and the law, that you will take our wants, and give back to us our fulfillments. That you may take the badnesses, the disasters and the sins, and purify them all.”

There are many things about this city that Scoria loves. She loves the stone and the clay architecture, the spires and domes, the low walls and the ocean breezes, the flowers, the obsidian, the temple.

She loves the aspects, or she did, once, in a past that seems farther away than it truly is.

But the thing that captured Scoria's awe and imagination and reverence first was the volcano.

The thing about growing up with a volcano is that you're always aware of it. You orient yourself by it when you walk, you speak to it when you are happy or sad or afraid, you dance along with the shudders it sends through the earth. You carve it into your buildings and your artworks and your life, because it protects you and provides for you, and you love it in return. The volcano festival is Scoria's favorite time: a chance to celebrate all that the volcano provides, a chance for a good change, a promise of a better time in the future. There's music in the streets; people set aside three or four days from their lives to revel and enjoy themselves without guilt. There are art exhibitions, plays, performances, stalls of food, and flowers and flowers and flowers and flowers, enough to bury you: hanging from rafters in houses, beams in the temples, from every ledge and overhang that the people can get their hands up to. Scoria's hands tingle with the memory of cramps from her initiate days, when most non-classroom activities are suspended and the new free spaces are filled with stringing flowers together. She wonders absently what flowers Chine will spend the most time with, in her own upcoming garland-making days. Peonies, like Au? Roses, like Farfara? Maybe carnations, hydrangeas, delphiniums; maybe even lilies, like Scoria herself.

And at the end of the festival, the volcano erupts.

Scoria remembers her first few volcano festivals, the slithering uncertainty, the firebrand nerves that lined her stomach like burning paper as she waited with dread for the final day of the festival, for the last prayer to be spoken, for the earth to gently gently shake, convinced that this year would be the year that the volcano broke its promise. But greater even than that sensation, even then, was the pure wonder of seeing millions and millions of flower petals erupt from the far-up mouth of the volcano to blanket the sky and the slopes and the city in a sweet-smelling miracle for the next week.

Scoria had seen that happen every year since she was born, but the first time she had *registered* it, truly understood what was happening, she had cried.

Because it's twilight and the sun has just gone down and she hasn't thought about that feeling in a long time, Scoria lets the memory soften her and confesses, “I love the feeling of watching the volcano erupt.”

Even saying this out loud feels like a weakness.

“Me too,” Chine says. She laughs; it hangs in Scoria's ears like the hum of a mosquito, just slightly too far away for Scoria to swat. “Hollow was always so scared of it when he was little. He loved the fireworks but hated the final day of the festival, and I was the opposite.”

Chine can't possibly know that Scoria felt the same as Hel about the volcano erupting when she was little, but Scoria still feels like she's being mocked. “You were scared of the fireworks?”

“Everyone was scared of something when they were little.”

Scoria is willing to admit that, but not out loud. She thinks of Au, the way she'll sit in the aspect room windows with Scoria sometimes, and remembers the little initiate who was so scared of heights she wouldn't go to the third floor of the temple. Her heart aches unexpectedly. *Aside from falling*, Au had said. *It makes you realize how insignificant you really are. That's what really scares me.*

*I'm just scared of being wrong*, Farfara had told them with a laugh. Scoria misses the wild black curls Farfara had had before they became holy figures. *The look on that new history teacher's face when he yelled 'incorrect' at me is enough to keep me studying for the rest of my life.*

It had been a joke, but the air of truth under it had been genuine. Au, never one to push, even then, had laughed along and changed the subject; Scoria, wanting to push but vulnerable in disguising her own fear, hadn't.

“Hope you're not wrong about anything now,” Scoria mutters, bitterly tugging a blossom off of the flowers surrounding the window and peeling off its petals one by one. They flutter down (and down, and down) like tiny ghosts. “You won't be about me.”

“Were you talking to me?” Chine asks, sounding disinterested.

Scoria snorts. Sends another petal over the side of the windowsill she's sitting on. “Never unless I have to.”

“Well, you have to now. If you weren't talking to me, who were you talking to?”

“I will not tell you,” Scoria tells her. The petals are almost gone. She picks the last one, throws the stem away, holds the final petal in her hand.

“Why not?”

Scoria lets the petal fall. It slips like velvet and silk between her fingers, across her knee, along her bare foot, before spiraling into the abyss. “Because I don't think you deserve to know.”

“Humor me,” Chine says. She sounds tired, but not just like she's tired of Scoria. Like she's tired of everything. Like she's tired of being awake. “Let's make it a trade. An honest answer for an honest answer.”

The blade whispers against Scoria's barriers. She can't tell if they're being shorn up or worried away at. She imagines she feels the cool brush of the flower petal along the inside of her fevered skull.

“Okay,” she says. “But I get to go first.”

Chine hums irritably but doesn't protest. Silence winds around the room as Scoria tries to figure out how to word her question, how to ask, what she's asking anyway.

“Just *ask* it,” Chine says finally. “I'm not going to judge you.”

“As if I could take your word on that.”

“Ask anyway,” Chine orders. Scoria looks over her shoulder to see Chine lying on her back on the carpets, one arm gesturing angrily into the air. “You can't just say 'I get to go first' and then not--”

“What's it like, having an aspect that you can talk with?” Scoria cuts across her, uninterested in the rest of whatever Chine is going to say.

“You can talk with your aspect too,” Chine shoots back. “I know you can.”

Scoria bites back *what makes you so sure* and strangles the growl in the back of her throat. She hates this bright, intelligent, arrogant child, the new tooth, the tiles at the bottom of the pool that Scoria is trying to drown herself in. She is never going to speak with Chine again if she can help it.

“I can speak *to* the blade,” Scoria says. “And can be spoken to by it. But speak *with*...” She shakes her head. Huffs out half of a laugh. “Like the difference between when I talk to Au and when I talk to you.”

“Which situation is which?”

“Talking to you is like talking to the blade. Neither of us likes it and nobody really has a good time.”

“Thanks,” Chine says, equal parts heartfelt and sarcastic.

“You're welcome. Talking to Au is how I imagine it's like with you and the steps. A back and forth. A conversation.” Scoria makes a noise of disgust. Most of her recent conversations with Au have been frustratingly similar to how Scoria interacts with the blade. “This isn't a good metaphor.”

“I think it's your clearest one yet.”

“Just answer my question. What is the steps like?”

Silence slips into the room again, obscuring the edges of the conversation like a vignette.

“Like...” Chine says finally. “Someone holding my hand.”

Scoria is quiet.

Chine sounds frustrated, but at herself, unsure how to describe it. Scoria knows the feeling. “It's a teacher and a sibling and my best friend and me at the same time. It's like looking into a mirror. But at the same time, it's an *aspect*. It's powerful, incomprehensible, fundamentally different from me. Different on a pure, basic level. It's impossible to forget that. But...” There's a tiny little *thump*. Scoria doesn't turn around, but she still knows that the arm Chine was gesturing with has just fallen to the floor. “Still, it holds my hand.”

If Scoria reached out her hand to the blade, all she would get is a knife through her palm. If Scoria got a knife through her palm, she knows she would deserve it.

Chine waits until it's clear that Scoria won't respond. “It's my turn.”

“That wasn't an answer.”

“It's as clear as either of us is going to get. Who were you talking to?”

Scoria groans. “Are you still on that?”

“Yes. You said, 'hope you're not wrong about anything now'. And then something that ended with 'me'. Who were you talking to? What did it mean?”

“One question.”

“What did it mean, then.”

A few stars are starting to come out. Au will be angry if Scoria pulls another flower off its vine. She wishes she remembered how to keep her hands still. “Farfara. I was talking to Farfara. That's all. Are you happy?”

“You didn't think I deserved to know *that?*”

“I don't think you deserve to know anything.”

“What did it mean?”

“One question.”

“You answered the one I didn't say.”

“It was the first one you asked. So it was the first one I answered. And the only one.”

The silence stretches long between them again, hot with combative words and unspilled arguments.

“Do you ever think that I – that the steps – could fix this?” Chine asks, finally. Her voice is so quiet that Scoria finally swings her legs up out of the cool outside air and turns in the window so that she's facing the interior of the room.

“Fix what?” asks Scoria, as if she doesn't already know.

Chine gestures, expansive, exhaustive, vague. “Everything.”

Something about the way she says it fills Scoria with doubt; something about the way she says it makes Scoria want to tell the truth.

“Hey,” she says. Waits until Chine tips her head slightly to look at her. “I have two surprises for you.”

“What are they?”

Doubt isn't something that Scoria can afford to have; not anymore, not this late in the game, not after everything everything everything she's set up. She stands up and walks to the door, pauses in the doorway.

“I'll tell you,” she says, giving Chine a mocking smile, “on the last day of the volcano festival.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: JUST LET ME HEAR YOUR VOICE, JUST LET ME LISTEN

Chine sets aside her awl and stretches her fingers in and out with relish, arcing her back from its hunched position, raising her arms above her head. The chain of flowers in her lap is almost done; she has only a few more to string on before she can add it to the impossible numbers of similar chains hanging from clotheslines crisscrossed across the courtyard. Doing this every year since she'd become an initiate has left the process largely as muscle memory, combined with the mantra of their instructors (*use your awl not your fingernails, leave about six inches between blossoms, be gentle*), and allows Chine and a small cluster of other initiates in her age group to sit cross-legged in the sun and chat and chatter aimlessly as their hands work on autopilot. Similar groups are peppered throughout the courtyard and the rest of the temple, initiates setting up with armfuls of flowers wherever there's an available corner; in a neat semicircle on one of the deep verandas that line either side of the courtyard, one of the teachers watches over a group of six and seven year olds constructing the shorter chains that will hang from the eaves of shops. Chine, already about forty flowers into her own construction, envies them.

In her head she counts the things she will celebrate tomorrow, the first day of the volcano festival, the day of the blade. The blade is about endings. The first day of the volcano festival is about accepting those endings so you can move unburdened into the next two days, and into the new season. *The ending of a home*, Chine lists, sightlessly piercing the stem of a thistle with her awl, threading the stem of a rose through it. *The ending of an era of my life. The ending of being just an initiate at the temple. Parents taken by the law.* That's something she can celebrate on the day of the gods as well, a blessing: *my parents taken by the law but not killed by it.* She loses track of where she was going with her list as Hollow nudges her and says, “Almost done?”

Chine threads the last stem through the previous flower and holds up a section of it to inspect.

“Yeah, this is good.” She rests the flowers in her lap again and tips her head back to look at the pale, pale blue sky.

“What day do you think you'll have the most to celebrate on, this year?” asks Esther, a blade-biased initiate who Chine always likes hearing speak in class. “For me it's definitely the day of the law. I settled a lot of things this season.”

Chine usually has mostly blessings, burned on the day of the gods, or statements, burned on the day of the law. This season, she thinks ruefully, it will be mostly prayers. There's an irony in that somewhere. Scoria, so intrinsically tied up with the blade, certainly hasn't given her much reason to celebrate.

Chine stands up as the others swap causes for their celebrations and makes her way across the dusty space and groups of initiates to an empty spot on one of the clotheslines to hang her flower chain. She's barefoot today, a deliberately carefree gesture; the ground warms the soles of her feet. “I am the steps,” she says softly to herself, and for a second feels her aspect thrum in her fingernails and the backs of her hands, “and the steps is with me. Together we offer you ideas, and together, we accept your sacrifices for revolution. By the will of the volcano, I am your teeth.”

The template is a familiar mantra, a speech made every volcano festival by the holy figures, and Chine knows it by heart and head and body. Her fill-ins for the steps are guesswork, guided by the same strong solid feeling she gets in her stomach when she charges the right price for a choice; they will probably remain guesswork. She wonders what would happen if she said them on the final day of the festival, what the volcano would do.

Chine drapes the flower garland over one of the clotheslines and stands back to look at it. This volcano festival is going to be different from every other one she can remember. She wonders if the difference will be good.

She wonders if she will be able to get her parents back.

A tap on her shoulder makes her jump.

“What are you thinking about?” Hollow asks.

Chine looks at her hands. Au's gold eyes look out at her from memory, warm voice sad.

“We can't go back to the way things were,” Chine says.

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It's a favorite ritual of Chine's, the celebrations. There's a fire always burning in front of the flower slab in the hollowed out aspect place against the furthest cliff-wall; on each holy figure day, you can write the things you've celebrated on a piece of paper and burn them, a way to finalize them, a way to send them to the heart of the volcano and strengthen it with the thoughts of the people.

“Lots of prayers this year, huh?” laughs the bright temple curate, watching Chine write her prayers for celebration in gold ink. “I hope you'll be able to write down most of them as blessings as well, tomorrow.”

Chine smiles at the curate and writes down another prayer. *Being a law-biased guide*.

The temple hierarchy is simple, divided into four broad categories: initiates, curates and guides, and then holy figures. Initiates are generally the most numerous, children up to eighteen years of age sent to the temple for schooling or drawn by the aspects; Chine and Hollow and several of their friends will be graduating from being initiates at the end of their next season at the temple. Initiate graduates can leave the temple and pursue different paths, or they can become curates or guides. A curate is a graduate who never developed a particular lean towards an aspect, the people who keep the temple running with various everyday duties, some teachers and most organizers and many overseers. She and Hollow had always had a plan for after they graduated: Chine would be a guide with a leaning towards the law, and Hollow would be a curate teacher, and they would train initiates and swap stories and lobby for a two-bed apartment in the temple to live in so they wouldn't have to walk all the way there when they got old. Maybe Hollow will become a guide with a bias for the gods, and she will become a curate teacher of history, and they can still live out their plans but with swapped positions.

Guides are graduates that showed a leaning towards an aspect while they were initiates; they're taught more about their respective aspect biases by older guides and in some cases the holy figures themselves, going on to be teachers or overseers or candidates for the next holy figure, when the current ones retire or join the dead.

Whatever comes, Chine doesn't think that being a guide with a lean towards the law is much of an option for her anymore.

She finishes writing out the last of her prayers (even her cramped handwriting, made small so that she can fit everything onto the front and back of one card, looks elegant in gold), and she offers a thankful smile to the curate as she gives them back the pen.

“May you have a good season,” the curate bids her, and Chine moves away from the simple wooden stall to wait for Hollow and a few other friends to write down their prayers and head to the fire. The sky is a high, pale blue today, wisped with clouds that Chine wants to reach up and run her hands through. It's early enough in the day that Scoria must still be seated cross-legged in front of the flower stone, stringing and weaving together stems and blossoms for her part of the chain. In the public eye, it's possible that Scoria will treat Chine with a modicum of politeness.

The celebration stall used to be directly next to the flower stone, Chine remembers. Something had happened that had moved it a few streets away, a fire or too much crowding or some similar incident. It's good that it's moved. Chine suddenly can't stand the thought of any of the holy figures being able to watch her writing down her prayers or blessings or statements, eyes boring into her, combative or melancholy or blank. Something moves in the corner of her eye and she twitches towards it instinctively; feels like she's sinking into a dream. The light is too hot, shadows too stark. The steps twists along her arms, agitated by Chine's agitation. She moves her hands into the shape of the volcano. Her little card, briefly forgotten, twists and flutters down to the street, and for a moment she watches it uncomprehendingly, as if in slow motion, seeing overlaid on it the memory of a fallen tooth. The gold ink catches the light in bright waves as the surface it's written on turns this way and that in the sun. Blood should be dripping from the hole in her mouth.

“Chine.”

A familiar blur of warm brown skin and pale pink fabric enters her field of vision, picks the still-falling card out of the air, offers it forward. Chine clutches onto the proffered hand entirely, card deemed temporarily unimportant, grounding herself in Au's dusty smell, her, voice, the chatter in the streets that had temporarily fallen from her ears.

“Au,” she says. “Hello.”

“Are you alright?” Au asks, peering at her closely. Chine knows that Au saw her hands in the protective triangle and hopes that she won't have to explain. She doesn't want to blink. Behind Au she can see Hollow and the other initiates she came with hanging back, watching, unsure if they should come over and interrupt.

“Didn't happen,” Chine says. Her mouth feels numb, like she's been chewing on ice. “I dreamt it.”

“Are you going to the fire?” Au asks. Chine nods, releases Au's hands. Au waves over Chine's friends. “Walk with us,” she says, and chats easily with them about their preparations for this day, what prayers they have, what blessings and statements they think they will burn, their favorite flowers, their time in the temple. Chine falls close into Au's shadow, unwilling to leave the gods's even presence just yet, and grounds herself in their chatter. The third or fourth time she hooks a thumbnail around her canine tooth, Hollow grabs her wrist and gently squeezes it and says, “Aspect dream?”

“Something like that,” Chine tells him. “It was like an aspect dream and a sacrifice vision at the same time. I don't know why it happened.”

“You're awake,” Hollow assures her. “Promise.”

She grins at him. “You could just be a dream construct telling me that.” She falls into Au's cadence of voice. “What does your best friend pretending that you're not dreaming mean?”

Hollow snorts, and they giggle their way into the larger conversation as they go down the last few blocks to the fire and the flower stone.

There's a vignette play going on in a small park nearby as there always is during a festival, old tales of previous holy figures or stories of the volcano or parables passed on from the river people; this one is being done by what looks like more professional actors, but Chine remembers participating in a few in the language class in the temple. To honor the past that they tell about, vignette plays are always done in the tongue of the dead.

“Why does tragedy exist?” one actor asks. Chine remembers this one. The speaker is an initiate, and the other actor plays the part of each holy figure.

“Because you are full of rage,” the other actor replies, and throws a handful of rose petals into the air to fall onto the person playing the initiate. Then Chine is around the last corner and at the cliff face that lines one side of the city.

The low stone slab on which the holy figure place their strings of flowers sits in front of the high rock wall, with a space in front of that for the holy figure, and then in front of that, a smooth metal bowl set slightly into the ground that holds the fire in which to burn prayers and blessings and statements. Behind the flower stone, a long shallow recess has been carved into the cliffside, maybe five feet deep and nine or ten feet tall, and hung with garlands of peonies that range in length to above Chine's head to down past her knees.

Between the flower stone and the fire sits Scoria, cross-legged, surrounded by piles of flowers, awl laid to one side as she decides to braid a section of the chain instead of just stringing the stems together. She looks up with a distant but friendly expression when she sees the group approach, which changes to genuine when she sees Au, which changes to pointedly neutral when she sees Chine.

Scoria's outfit for the volcano festival is sharper and full of more straight lines than her day-to-day one and edged everywhere with little dangling chips of obsidian, a hundred bright black triangles hanging from the cutout in her bodysuit that shows off her abdomen and catching the light and shadows to cast them in unexpected ways across the ground in front of her. Her arms are lined all the way up with delicate bands carved entirely out of stone, so fine that Chine knows that if she held them up to the sky she could see light through them.

Chine drops her prayer into the fire and watches it curl and burn in her peripheral vision as she holds eye contact with Scoria. The gold lettering stays gold as the paper around it blackens, until finally it runs red and then black and then vanishes into the flames.

“What were the two surprises you had for me?” Chine asks as the last of her prayers ash away. She feels like she's asking something different than what her words are saying.

Scoria threads a lily through the other flowers and shows Chine her teeth in what might be the facsimile of a grin.

“Like I said,” she says. The heat from the fire makes her face waver. “I'll tell you on the last day of the volcano festival.”

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“What prosperity are you going to celebrate the most today?” Chine asks, leaning back on her elbows on the wide stairway that leads up to the main entrance of the temple and tipping her head up to look at the sky. It's deep blue today, the sun warm but not overbearing, but in the shadow of the temple it feels like it's one step removed from where she and Hollow are lounging.

“A beginning of a bias,” Hollow says thoughtfully. He's laid out horizontally along a step, one arm dangling onto the next one down, bits of his hair brushing against Chine's elbow.

“A leaning towards the gods, right?” Chine asks, nudging the top of his head with her arm. “Congratulations.”

He laughs softly. “And here we thought I would be a curate. How the times change. Maybe I should celebrate a revolution, too, and burn something for the steps.”

“There's no day for the steps,” Chine informs him. “I'll just have to take your job as a curate, and you can take mine as a guide. Or maybe I can become a guide for the steps. Do you think you're allowed to be a guide if you're already a holy figure?”

“Maybe if there's only one of you,” Hollow says. “What prosperity are you going to celebrate the most?”

“The steps,” Chine says. “That's a beginning if ever there was one.”

Hollow hums.

“Is there anything you want to do today?” Chine asks him. “I want to go burn my blessings for the volcano, and say hello to Au, but other than that I don't have any plans. I'm open to any suggestions.”

“I wanted to get my nails painted gold,” Hollow says and Chine suddenly remembers the tables that were her favorite when she was younger, where you could cover your nails with a layer of clear varnish and press gold leaf into them and cover them with a clear coating again, have shiny and metallic nails for the rest of the day or week or month, look down at your hands and remember that the gods is with you.

When had she stopped doing that?

“Let's do that,” she says, and Hollow pumps a fist in the air. Chine checks the angle of the sun and hazards a guess at the time.

“I think that there'll probably be less crowding around the booth now,” she says, and stands up into a stretch, the full-body kind that pull her arms towards the sky like they never want to come back down. “Let's go.”

“Right now?” Hollow whines, and then laughs as Chine nudges him in the ribs with her foot and makes him jump so violently he almost rolls off the step.

The walk to the stall to write down their blessings is a quick one, and the walk from the stall again to the fire is even quicker. The vignette actors are not in the park today, but Chine still hears the next line of their short play in her head. *Why are you full of rage?*

They burn their gold-written cards and wave to Au, whose addition to the chain is much more elegant than Scoria's haphazard beginning. She's decorated with gold leaf in spiraling designs, and her pink shoulder drape of cloth is lined with tiny bells. Gold bangles ring softly against each other, piled on her wrists and ankles, as she waves back.

Greetings and blessings dispensed with, they wander off again.

“It's definitely at a plaza near the fire,” Chine says, trying to bring the route she used to take into the forefront of her mind. “Do you think it was this way?”

Hollow peers down the small side street Chine is indicating, and shrugs. “Let's try it.”

The street they're wandering down is cobblestoned, walls with stairways leading up to second stories cut in with windows to reveal different parts of streets or squares or plazas, twined with flower vines and dipped into by slender low branches of trees; Chine doesn't know if the vague recognition she feels is because this actually is the correct direction, or if it's just because she's lived here her whole life.

“Is that it?” Hollow asks, and Chine ducks through a thick white archway and into a circular plaza. Flowers are strung across it in wavelike curves, casting shadows with coins of glowing sunshine in between onto the stones; small tables are clustered in the circle, sunlit, expectant. Chine sits down in a chair in front of one like she's wrapped in memory.

“I'll do yours first,” she tells Hollow, gesturing for him to lay his fingers out on the table. “My hands are steadier than yours.”

He makes a face at her but puts his palms flat on the table anyway. There's a quiet murmur of other people doing the same thing around them, and Chine lets herself be absorbed in the familiar motions.

“Stop twitching,” she orders Hollow. “You're going to smudge it.”

“It's *cold*, and it feels weird,” he says. “Don't miss any spots.”

“I won't miss any spots if you stop moving your fingers,” Chine says darkly.

The easy part is the gold leaf, used to as she is to handling it thanks to her years as an initiate. It's already been sectioned into roughly nail-sized segments for application, and she picks up pieces one by one on the tip of a brush and applies them Hollow's fingernails, careful, until the whole surface is smooth and uniform.

Before she can begin on his other hand, someone else comes in and starts on it; this is a community activity, technically, so she and Hollow exchange amused and resigned eye contact and he starts up a conversation with the newcomer. Chine is inspecting her own nails and wondering if she should attempt to gold leaf them herself when someone sits in front of her and a slim hand, already painted with gold, reaches out to pull forward one of her own.

Chine looks up and through a sheer veil into the cool, dark eyes of the law.

Her first instinct, startled and caught off guard, is to yank her hand away, but she quashes it and lets the law hold it with both her own hands, skin oddly cool against Chine's own. The steps whispers in the back of her head (loss loss loss). Farfara's grip is loose.

“Farfara,” Chine says, trying not to let her voice sound like a question.

“Chine,” the law says, inclining her head in greeting and gently laying Chine's hand flat on the table. Chine wishes she could look over at Hollow and make a face that indicates *what the fuck* or possibly *would you care to join in on this conversation*, but she doesn't want to turn her eyes away from Farfara's.

“May I paint your nails?” Farfara asks. Something in her voice sounds different than it had the last time Chine had spoken with her, a hint more animated, a slight shade warmer: the effects of the volcano festival? Something else entirely? Chine isn't even sure that she's not imagining it. The wood under her palms is only slightly cooler than Farfara's hands. Maybe the law's body temperature runs cold. Chine suppresses a shudder, waves away a thought: *maybe the body is already dead*.

“Of course,” Chine says, and lays her other hand down next to the one Farfara had taken. It doesn't feel like an acquiescence, the way it might have with Au; it doesn't feel like a challenge, the way it would have with Scoria. It feels like a truce, an agreement on both sides.

“It's been a long time since I did this,” Chine offers quietly, watching the law's expressionless fingers carefully paint on the clear varnish. “When I painted my friend's nails, I was worried that I wouldn't remember the technique anymore. But I painted them as if I had been practicing every day for the past year.”

Chine doesn't expect the law to reply, isn't even really sure why she had volunteered that information. The nail polish is as cold as Hollow had complained about; she fights the urge to twitch her fingers.

“The heart may forget,” the law says, soft and distant. “But the body will remember.”

The voice of the dead whispers in the back of her head. *Even if you love them, I think some things have to be changed.*

“What justice are you going to celebrate the most tomorrow?” Chine asks. The law's movements are quick, practiced: already she is applying the gold leaf to Chine's second hand, much faster than Chine could have hoped for even on Hollow's one hand. At Chine's question she pauses for a second, looks up from her work, meets Chine's eyes again through the veil.

There is no “most” in those eyes. There is no “celebration”, there is no “tomorrow”. There is only justice, forwards and backwards, forever and even and absolute. Even in the sunlight, Chine suddenly feels cold. *Loss loss loss*, chants the steps.

“All of them,” the law says.

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“I can't believe *the law* painted your nails,” Hollow says for the fifth time over breakfast. Chine holds up her hands and turns them so that the nails catch the light; the application of gold leaf is perfect. Beautiful.

“Do you have many justices to celebrate this year?” Chine asks him just to get him talking about something else, resting the side of her face on the cool table. She's picked at her food at best, lingering over it long after most of the rest of the initiates have left the table and headed out into the city for the day.

“I'm sure they'll come to me,” he says cheerfully, stealing a slice of bread off of her plate. “How about you.”

“I feel like I've gotten more unfair outcomes than fair ones this time around,” Chine mutters into the table. Holds her hand up in front of her face and angles it into the light again. “But I'm sure I'll think of something.”

“There was that big argument you had with one of your cousins at the beginning of the season, right?” says Hollow. “That you finally settled after like two weeks?”

“Yeah, there was that,” Chine agrees amicably. Her mind feels a hundred miles away.

They drift into the city, not quite listless but tired from days in a row of staying up late and waking up early. At midnight of each day, the holy figure returns once again to the flower stone and stands before the fire and recites their short verse. Scoria's had felt almost bitter, an irony Chine can't finger out in her words as she had said, “I am the blade, and the blade is with me.” *Together we offer you outcomes, and together we accept your sacrifices for resolution. By the will of the volcano, I am your body.* The shadows of the firelight and the glint of the obsidian chips she had been decorated with had almost hidden the bruises still staining her skin.

Au's had been more cheerful, more honest-sounding somehow, gold and drapery making her a light and abstract figure in the orange uncertain light. “Together we offer you advice, and together we accept your sacrifices for prosperity.” She makes eye contact with Chine in the crowd and smiles wide and sweet. “By the will of the volcano, I am your heart.”

One more late night, and then one more early morning, and then the routine can turn back to normal. Everything can go back to normal.

Chine keeps saying it to herself, but she doesn't believe that it's true.

Her stop at the stall to write down the statements she's celebrating is brief, and she walks the familiar route to the fire with a feeling in her feet like she's about to miss something. Hollow trails behind her as Chine breaks into a sprint, certain that she needs to get to the spot as fast as possible, but when she reaches the cliffside with the fire and the flower stone nothing is amiss. The law is there, adorned in chains and crowns of flowers, sheer veil still draped over her body. From her ears hang two earrings like fabric flowers, little brass beads hanging from the insides. Her posture is perfect, calm; she continues the long garland of flowers with neat little ladder-woven rows of roses and thistles and anemones as people watch her or burn their statements or walk through the shallow flower-filled recess in the cliff face behind her.

Chine drops her short list of justices she is celebrating into the fire, and then stands there watching Farfara, arms limp at her sides, all urgency gone. She doesn't know if she was too early or too late.

“Chine?” says Hollow, hesitant at her side. “I'm going to go watch a vignette with...” Chine hears the way he very tactfully doesn't say *my parents* and feels that flare of angry determination rise up inside her stomach again. “Will you be okay?”

“I'll be fine,” she says, not taking her eyes off the law, and feels more than sees Hollow leave.

She doesn't know how long she stands there, crowd moving around her, unsure what she's watching for but watching for it anyway. The law – Farfara – doesn't change; she sits up straight, weaves flowers together, offers a few words to anyone who happens to approach her. Blank, unsettlingly so. Fewer people come up to speak with her than they even did with Scoria.

Like Chine's thoughts summoned her, the sense of the steps slides against the sense of the blade as Scoria stops next to Chine. The trajectory of her approach could have been described as “wandering” if Scoria was at all the type to move without purpose. Whatever uneasy feeling in Chine's stomach settles slightly as the familiar aggravating weight of Scoria's presence joins her.

For minutes more they say nothing, both watching Farfara, thinking in different directions with the same focus.

“What was her hair like before she became the law?” Chine asks. Holy figures keeping their hair short has been more habit than tradition for the last hundred or so years, but it's a habit that few of the holy figures has particularly cared enough to break. Farfara's head is shaved down to the barest of stubble, dark against her skin beneath her transparent veil.

For once, Scoria doesn't fight against giving her information, even something as trivial as this, and that more than anything else drives home that something is different.

*It's happening*, she whispers in the part of herself that houses the steps.

*Soon*, breathes the steps.

“It was curly,” Scoria says. She sounds distant and sad and resigned, like Au is talking through her. “It was black and curly and she always kept it soft. We could never figure out how she did it. And she hated having it past her shoulders. She didn't even like having it *to* her shoulders. It always looked perfect, but we could never catch her brushing it. She knew we didn't *have* to cut our hair short once we became holy figures,” Scoria adds. “I think she was relieved. I think she had been looking for an excuse to do it for a long time. She never believed that 'I wanted to' was a good enough reason.”

“What were the two surprises you had for me?” Chine asks. Scoria's voice is so quiet; Chine reaches for the edge, the reassurance of vitriol.

“Not yet,” Scoria tells her. “It's not the last day yet.”

If Chine unfocuses her eyes enough she can pretend that the figure of Farfara through the heat-warping in the air is just an extension of the flowers hanging in the behind her. A sculpture of peonies and roses and lilies.

“Why does tragedy exist?” she says, the language of the dead feeling clumsy on her tongue after hearing it spoken so smoothly by all the vignette actors the last few days.

“Because you are full of rage,” Scoria says, her accent and diction much lovelier, better enunciated. Chine wonders how much Scoria speaks to the dead. She wonders how much the dead says back.

“Why are you full of rage?” Chine asks.

“Because,” Scoria says, “you are full of grief.”

She steps forward, and drops a card into the fire, and walks away without watching it burn.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: SEEK HEAVEN THROUGH VIOLENCE

Scoria wakes heavy on Au's couch on the last day of the volcano festival and feels the finality of the blade run through her like a knife through the center of her sternum.

This, at least, they can agree on.

Au has already left; Scoria can tell from the sunlight on the wall that she's slept later than she's used to. If she wants to reach the flower stone in time, she'll probably have to hurry. Au and Farfara are probably already there.

Moving from the couch that functions as her bed awakens sleeping nerves and Scoria stretches uncomfortably as various obsidian triangles unpress themselves from her skin and fall to hang once more from the edges of the festival outfit she had slept in. Au has left out the liquid gold for her on a table against the wall, the kind of gold used to speak to the dead; Scoria applies it to her lips with the ease lent to her by practice and thinks she can feel the flavorless cotton of the ghost apples on her tongue.

The costumes for the fourth day of the volcano festival are less fully different costumes and more a matched set of additions to what the holy figure is already wearing; Scoria grates against the unfamiliar feeling of the wreath of flowers on her head, relaxes against the feeling of the stone knife looped in cloth at her side. The additions are symbolic, a triangle instead of three separate lines, but Scoria knows that Au will look most comfortable with the gold on her lips the way Farfara will look most comfortable with the flowers on her head, and the way that Scoria feels most comfortable with the stone blade against her thigh.

Part of Scoria wants to linger, even on this final day: she finds herself looking around Au's room, memorizing the details, running her hands over the fabric of the couch. It's a strong idea, wandering through the temple and celebrating each place in it; but the idea makes the blade whisper in approval, and besides Scoria still has one final errand to do.

It would be easier, maybe better, to leave Chine alone with the mystery, to never tell her one last bitter confidence. But at the end of the day, despite everything, Scoria wants the resolution. To leave a thread like that uncut on a day like this is unthinkable, unappealing.

So she pulls herself away from the familiar space and out the door, clothes chiming and whispering softly against the high smooth stone of the temple hallways. The flowers in her wreath tickle against the upper limits of her peripheral vision and make her jumpy. Everything about this morning is subtly unfamiliar, from the costume to the angle of the sunlight to the empty temple to the solid, inevitable feeling of the blade. It feels like, after however long and long and long this has been going on, a decision has been made by the aspect, and Scoria doesn't know what it is. She doesn't care much what it is, either. One way or another, this dance will reach a conclusion today.

Scoria walks down the front steps of the temple, into the city, and bares her teeth at the big blue sky.

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The crowd around the fire and the flower stone is thick; not everyone in the city is here, but it certainly feels like it to Chine as she threads and elbows her way towards the front of the gathering to get the clearest view she can. She can see people crushed together on some outdoor stairways, hanging halfway out of windows, clustered on roofs. The air is full of chatter and laughter and excitement: today is the day!

Chine wishes she could share their enthusiasm. This is her favorite part of the whole festival, the day the volcano will rain flowers on them in blessing, and she can't enjoy it at all for the baseless fear and anticipation boiling in her stomach. She feels like she hasn't slept properly in days. The steps roil in tune with the crowd, singing a harmony that holds a less positive current than the melody.

Finally she finds a spot, not particularly close to the front, sitting so close to the edge of a fountain that she's nearly in it, but it's a surprisingly secluded place with a good view of the place where the holy figures will be standing. Au and Farfara are already up there, chatting pleasantly – well, Au is, at least – with people closest to the edges of the unofficial boundaries of the space. They must be waiting for Scoria, who (Chine checks the sun) isn't technically late, yet, but is getting close.

A touch on her shoulder makes her turn to look into Scoria's face, an apparition as if summoned.

“Scoria,” Chine says, hearing the question in her voice. “You'll be late.”

“The crowd will part for me,” she says, dismissive but hurried.

“You're here to tell me something,” Chine prompts. That can be the only reason Scoria is here, lost in the midst of the crowd, hand still on Chine's shoulder.

“I said I had two surprises for you,” Scoria says. Leans forward just slightly. Something about her is different today, steadier somehow; the sense of the blade that Chine has through the steps feels freshly sharpened, gleaming under the light. Scoria's lips, chapped beneath the gold, look unearthly and unreal.

Chine doesn't know how to speak, suddenly, so she arcs an eyebrow and tips her head, prompting Scoria. It feels suddenly like a golden hush sweeps across the streets, the sun and sky and wind all holding their breaths. Around them Chine is still aware of the crowd, speaking to itself without noticing her and Scoria, but the two of them are in a different bubble than the one insulating the gathered city. The distance to the volcano suddenly means nothing; Chine can feel it rumble. If she turns, it would be a short walk away, easily visible across a plain open field.

“It was me,” Scoria says, fingers so tight in the fabric of Chine's robes that her knuckles are white, “who killed your parents.”

Then she is gone, walking quickly through a mass of people who part before her and close behind her, before Chine can say anything, before Chine can think anything, before Chine can breathe.

In her heart, the steps chant.

Chine feels encased in stone, layers of shock like strata up to a surface that she doesn't want to reach, her understanding of the world flipped irrevocably and mercilessly upside-down.

*It was me who killed your parents*.

A lie. Another antagonization. A joke taken a little too far, a little too cruel.

No. Chine had felt the truth in the blade. Seen it in Scoria's eyes.

She puts a hand to her shoulder where Scoria's hand had been.

*It was me who killed your parents*.

Chine isn't sure her heart is still beating.

Her parents are dead. Not taken by the law, not hidden somewhere. Bones in the aftermath of a fire. Ash in smoke.

Scoria had killed them. Anguished, angry Scoria, bruised and bloody and full of fire (*why are you full of rage?*) had killed Chine's parents.

Her parents are dead. Chine can't quite wrap her head around it.

Had Au known? *She can't have known*, Chine argues to herself, but doubt gnaws at her stomach as she thinks of all of Au's silences at Scoria's injuries and Scoria's words, her subtle uncertainty.

Chine can't stand the doubt, so she dismisses it. She shoves everything to the side, feeling like she's moving in slow motion, and begins shuffling her way very slowly through the press of people. She doesn't know what she will do once she gets to the front, but that isn't important. *Fix it, fix it, fix it*, the steps whispers, and she whispers it with it.

Far in front of her, voices carrying over the hushed crowd, the three holy figures say, “take the badnesses, the disasters and the sins, and purify them all.”

Chine accidentally steps on someone's toes, whispers an apology, tries to move around a row of people standing holding onto each other's arms.

“If there is any resolution the city wishes for,” says Au's voice, alone now as the other two fall silent, “allow us to offer you outcomes. If there is any prosperity the city wishes for, allow us to offer advice. If there any justice the city wishes for, allow us to offer solutions.”

Chine, walking along the top of a low wall to avoid a particularly large knot of people, is afforded a clear view of Scoria stepping forward to break the neat line she had been standing in with Farfara and Au.

“People of the city,” Scoria says. Her voice is so clear and sure and calm. Chine has never heard it like this before. “I have a confession to make before you, my fellow holy figures, and the volcano.”

Chine knows what Scoria is going to say before she says it. Jumps down from the end of the low wall and starts pushing through the crowd with renewed fervor. She has to get there first. She doesn't know what she has to get there first before, but the knowledge is like a hot coal in the back of her throat.

“I murdered,” Scoria says, “the parents of temple initiate Chine Faste.”

A shockwave of silence sweeps through the crowd like a wave. It tingles through Chine's skin, an electricity burn without the pain.

“This is did of my own volition,” Scoria continues. Her voice, though loud to project among the huge gathering, sounds almost conversational. Chine feels sick. “They had done nothing wrong. They did not deserve to die. Nevertheless, I murdered them.”

Chine is still too many people away. She can't seem to move fast enough.

“Let the volcano hear my confession,” Scoria says finally, “and show it to be true.”

“Scoria,” Au says, and all of Chine's brief doubts catch fire and turn to dust at the catch in her voice, the horror and confusion. “What are you doing?”

Before Scoria says anything – Chine doesn't know if she was going to – the volcano rumbles. This is no soft grumble, no shifting of its legs in its sleep, no inquisitive check-up on its people. This is a statement. This is an accusation. This is a confirmation.

Chine thinks the whole city forgets to breathe.

She pushes through the crowd faster, uncaring of who she knocks into a stumble along her way. She's so close, only a few yards. The handful of feet feel like miles. Out of reach, Scoria is turning to Farfara. Behind her, Chine catches a clear, perfect glimpse of the completed flower chain on the low rock slab behind the holy figures, arranged neatly in a circle. Au is grabbing at Scoria's arm, saying something that's getting lost in the growing swell of the crowd's voices, as the first well of shock wears off. Farfara, face blank and unchanged, is slowly drawing her stone knife from the loops of fabric hanging at her side. Everything seems to be happening in the impossibly detailed slow motion of a sacrifice vision.

Among the impending chaos, there is a brief moment of calm insulating the three holy figures as Scoria stands in front of Farfara, arms a little outstretched. Chine can't see her face, but she knows with a sick-stomach kind of feeling that Scoria is wearing the most genuine expression on her face that Chine has seen yet. Scoria doesn't resist at all as the law pushes her stone blade, with inevitable slowness, directly into Scoria's heart.

Barely audible even in the hush, Scoria says, “We can't go back to the way things were.”

Au screams.

Chine shoves aside the hands and arms and people trying to stop her and finally reaches the stage to fling herself to her knees next to Scoria's bubbling body as if there is anything she can do. There is some kind of madness happening around her or behind her or both, set off by Au's scream (a horrible, honest, heartrending sound that Chine had never wanted to hear and hopes to never hear again), but here in this small protected area everything seems to be frozen. Scoria, collapsed on the ground with a soaking hole in her chest, spilling out onto the old stone of the small plaza; Farfara, standing above them both, bloody blade in bloody hand hanging loosely at her side; Chine, the robes around her knees staining from grey to red.

*Doorway*, whispers the steps, and for a moment Chine doesn't understand.

*Look*, it says, more insistently, and Chine does. An impossible familiarity. An impossibly narrow window of chance. A blank sacrifice.

*Has to be now. Have to take it.*

Chine feels like she's moving through molasses, like she's trapped in the rapids of a river, like she's frozen in ice. This is the most clear the steps has ever been. *I don't know how,* she says. *What do I say?*

*What you were taught. Enough.*

The lessons in the rose room are a hundred million years away. Chine scrapes her knuckles on the bottom of her memory and drags the words up to the surface.

“Your choice,” Chine says, gripping one of Scoria's hands to keep her there, “is accepted. To fulfill this request, your--” her voice cracks a little, “--your life must be sacrificed.” She thinks of Hollow asking her to extinguish a candle, and chokes back a hysterical giggle. “Will you sacrifice this?”

Scoria doesn't answer. Chine is gripped with fear, with anger, with loss. She's too weak to answer; she's too stubborn to answer; she is already dead. Scoria's breath rattles. Chine leans closer, and closer still, trying not to be sick.

“I,” breathes Scoria, “will.”

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Somehow the aspect dream and the sacrifice vision have combined, and for a millisecond, a million years, Chine floats in it, watching the stars turn and the universe grow old. Whatever she took from Scoria, whatever Scoria gave her, is much more powerful than any of the sacrifices Chine had practiced with Hollow. Out here, she doesn't remember how to be afraid.

*Here. Come here.* The ceramic whisper of the steps. Chine falls towards it, closes her eyes, opens them again.

She is still in the small plaza, still on her knees next to Scoria. Time has frozen. Everything is painted the cool blue-green that Chine has come to associate with her aspect.

She listens for the steps, but it says nothing.

There are no flickers in the corners of her eyes, no riot of potentials vying for her attention, but despite this Chine feels like everything *is* an option, her surroundings so saturated that they no longer register as individual changes. Chine feels so much stronger than she had doing practices. Everything feels *deeper*, somehow, too, a well too deep to see the bottom instead of a puddle reflecting the sun. Chine has gotten a sense for prices in relation to choices.

“This is too much,” she says into the tableau laid out around her. “One life shouldn't do this much.”

She thinks she hears something from the steps, but whatever power had been used by it to speak to her seems to have been spent: a notion equal parts logical and absurd, considering the amount of power Chine is surrounded with right now.

It would make the most sense to go backwards, but Chine can see the path (*doorway, doorway*) through the future flowing from Scoria's body, and she wants to know how far she can walk it, wants to know what the world could look like after something like this.

Moving forward is like missing a step in the stairs, falling too fast and then slamming into the ground as she misjudges her speed and skips over everything. Some kind of internal sense tells Chine this has to be a century forward from where she started, maybe a fraction less; she reels. The images around her are indistinct and irrelevant, faces and places she doesn't recognize. Chine shakes her head like she's underwater. Rewinds herself back with just enough presence of mind to stop herself from hitting the present again at terminal velocity. Tips forward, just a bit, slowly. Now she moves at a more familiar pace, like walking if she had any idea how to do that anymore. She sees herself as if from high up: pale, light playing over her like sun through moving water, eyes and mouth determined. The aftermath of Scoria's death, the immediate one, Chine does not want to see, but she catches glimpses of it anyway as she washes forward: Au fierce, furious, shipwrecked, the crowd in an uproar, everything gone from Scoria's half-open eyes, Farfara staring at the body at her feet with no expression. Chine's heart clutches in grief or fear. She moves onward.

Following the threads of Scoria's future is a scattered, uncertain process. No longer tied to a life, they are gossamer-thin, almost invisible, faint lines of golden gloss among Chine's hands; they go in more different directions than Chine knows how to understand. She picks a thread at random and pulls herself along it to a meeting in the courts – Farfara absent – as the people who run the city shout and argue over something. Their words float like scraps of paper in the air.

*“--Wild card--”*

*“-Maybe this is too much power--”*

*“--Look at how the blade--”*

*“--Innocent--”*

*“--Cold blood--”*

*“--Whole system--”*

Chine pulls her way back to the remains of Scoria's future, chooses a different line, strikes out again, and again, watching events unfold like a paper flower before her eyes.

Like a key in a lock, Scoria's death causes chain reactions, sacrifices that – Chine has to follow the lines down and back, across, over, to make sense of it – had been delayed, set with conditions that wouldn't allow them to happen until Scoria was no longer living. Chine watches a government worker die. She watches someone find a letter at an opportune time. She watches an innocent bystander with an idea that isn't their own dig up a flagstone that is written on with blood.

The breadth and depth of the idea takes Chine's breath away.

*If you're going to kill yourself, you should at least make it as inconvenient as possible for everybody else,* Chine had told Scoria, however many days or weeks ago, sitting in the rose room and honest with irritation.

Chine watches as every little thing, every seemingly unrelated happenstance that Scoria had engineered, brings about the end of the temple and of the holy figures.

*Oh believe me,* Scoria had said. *I will.*

Chine can't figure it out, she can hardly bear to watch: the city destroys the temple, the city burns the flowers, liquid gold is poured into the ocean in a hideous swirl. Chine can't understand it at all, moving back and forth between the hundreds of tiny machinations and the terrifying destruction of the place she holds dear to her heart, until finally she follows one piece of Scoria's future all the way down to where it stops at Farfara. Farfara. Farfara full, not the law, not Farfara-through-the-law or the-law-through-Farfara. Just her, eyes present at last, holding herself differently, scrubbing at her hands, ferocious as she tries to catch up with everything and staring at the destruction in front of her.

Chine can't pinpoint what made the aspect vanish from Farfara (and from Au, too, next to her, clutching her heart as if bereaved). She doesn't look closer. She doesn't want to know.

Instead she winds all the way back to the present, steps around her own self, and wends onward back again, into the past, following Scoria's trail. Scoria knotting her fingers in the shoulder of Chine's robes, Scoria waking up on Au's couch; Chine increases her speed, searching, not knowing what she's looking for, trusting that she'll know it when she finds it.

*What do you look for?* the steps breathes. It's intangible, far away, all around her. Chine thinks she feels butterfly wings on her cheek.

“I want to start over,” she says, and moves faster still.

She catches glimpses here and there of the same golden threads of Scoria's future, unspooled back through time and pinned at certain places like a map with trail markers, and here Chine briefly stops and hovers and tries to understand; it's like tying a knot backwards without the benefit of her eyes, but eventually she grasps some kind of meaning in the deficits, the injuries, the blood, the hours upon hours that Scoria is subsumed by the blade.

“She was using sacrifices for different purposes,” she whispers, and feels her horror echoed in the steps. “She was twisting them.”

Knowing this, she can let herself become distracted, follow the sacrifices their resting points. Some of them travel far forward into the future, most of them, many of them, but the shorter lines move in zigzags through to the courts and strangle the sacrifices the law accepts, to twist *their* purposes as well, into something else, something wrong.

She sees Scoria kill her parents, and jerks back as if she's been burned, so forceful that she feels the sacrifice dream waver around her before she catches hold of herself again. It's so quick, brief, impersonal. An alley, a knife, two random people going about their business. Ensconced as she is in the brief omnipotence of the steps, she knows that Scoria's choice truly was random. It could have been anyone, any two people. It just happened to be Chine's parents.

She tells herself that she won't watch what happens next, that she'll just follow the sacrifice and see what two full lives could have possibly been used for, but the two deaths simply coat Scoria's skin and seep under it like oil. Going nowhere, doing nothing.

Something about the power of the sacrifice dream makes sense, suddenly, an uneasy paradigm shift that rotates Chine a full three hundred and sixty degrees and leaves her gasping. One life could have given a part of this power; three lives easily give it more. But underneath even that, there is something like “deservingness” that multiplies the sacrifice into something this strong, the cry for revenge from every misdirected sacrifice Scoria has ever taken.

And underneath all that, so far down it's nearly at the seabed, the meaning behind Scoria's willing death adds a little bit more.

Chine keeps going, on and on, trying not to look too closely at all the personal moments, skipping uncomfortably over every part of Scoria's life that seems too vulnerable, until finally she reaches the first sleepover that Scoria and Farfara and Au had had as newly named holy figures. It truly is a sleepover, all three on the floor surrounded by blankets and pillows, laughing and giddy and far too tired to sleep. It's not Scoria that snags Chine here, though: it's Farfara. The newly named law has a shroud over her, a sickly green counterpart to the sheer rosy veil that is already draped over her head, and Chine switches tracks from Scoria and follows Farfara through her sleep, through her day, presses herself into the law's thoughts, trying to figure out why Farfara will be consumed, what she did.

When it happens, it's like the snuffing out of a candle, there and then not; a simple, easy decision, just before a court case, and Farfara's eyes go blank, her limbs are suspended on strings.

The blank law looks around, suddenly so much less young, so much more sure. Chine takes in a breath.

“She was afraid,” Chine marvels. Talking grounds her. “She was afraid, and she was overwhelmed. She didn't do something wrong. This was a deal she made with the law.”

*Hope you're not wrong about anything now,* Scoria had said, talking to Farfara.

She had just been scared of being wrong. Chine wants to laugh and wants to cry and wants to wash her hands until they no longer remember the feeling of blood. Everything, all of this, because Farfara had been scared.

*Were you sad?* The steps says. *How could you tell?*

Chine doesn't know what it's asking. She answer the question she hears underneath those words instead.

“I want to start over,” she whispers, and her feet touch the floor outside of Farfara's room.

She opens the door.

The room is decorated in the rich maroon of the law but is still new, unlived in. Farfara sits uncomfortably on the bed, cross-legged, staring into space. She looks up when Chine slips through the door and that motion startles Chine, makes her glance briefly at her hands and press them against the cool wood of the doorjamb. Real, somehow? Or is all of this just in Farfara's head? Chine has no idea how deep into the sacrifice dream she is. Briefly, the ground below her spins.

“Hello,” Farfara says, polite but puzzled. Chine can't figure out what's strange about her face for a moment, before she realizes that she can *read* it. It's not mask-smooth, completely personless, one step removed from an emotion: it's a person, beneath the skin, and that person can't keep her face perfectly still.

“I'm...” Chine trails off, searches for what words she could possibly say. “I'm a dream.” She supposes it's true. “I'm a warning, sent to you by the fourth aspect. The steps. Will you hear what I have to tell you?”

The formality in Chine's tone pulls formality from Farfara as well, who sits up straighter and says, “I will.”

Chine tries not to hear the rattling overlap of Scoria saying the same thing, two years ago, five seconds ago.

“You are scared,” Chine says. She holds Farfara's eyes until Farfara drops her gaze.

“Yes,” the newly-named law says.

“Everything is different from the way it was,” continues Chine. “You have new powers, and new responsibilities, and no one to guide you. You are moving from a period of your life that you loved to one that you are less certain about. Is that correct?”

Farfara nods mutely.

Chine takes a deep breath.

“Even if you love them,” she says, “I think some things have to be changed.”

Farfara looks at her.

“In the future... Sometime soon,” Chine tells her, “you are going to be offered a choice. You are going to speak to your aspect, and you will be spoken back to by your aspect, and you will be offered a choice. You will have the option to let the law consume you. You, yourself, the person you are, will be lost. But it will be safe. You will not have to be afraid of being wrong. The law will do the right thing.”

The room feels stiflingly hot; Chine is freezing.

“But that is *the wrong choice*,” she says fiercely. “You will want to make it. But it will be the *wrong choice*.”

“The wrong choice,” Farfara repeats, like she's reassuring Chine. Chine does not feel reassured.

“I need you to promise me,” Chine say to Farfara, moving closer towards her and holding out her hands for Farfara to take. “I need you to promise on the volcano. On the law. On the pasts and futures of your friends Au and Scoria.”

Farfara takes her hands without hesitation, surprising Chine. Her grip is strong even though her eyes are uncertain. “On the pasts and futures of Au Hallae and Scoria Fane. On the aspect of the law that now works alongside me. On the volcano itself. I promise to you, messenger of the steps, that I will not choose to let the law consume me when I am afraid.”

She drops back, eyes a little brighter somehow. “Is that enough?”

“That was perfect,” Chine tells her, and feels her hands slip from Farfara's as the sacrifice dream suddenly swirls, pulling Chine away from Farfara and on, on, on, into the future that is Chine's present. From her omniscient view, Chine can see two timelines, side by side, shimmering.

The steps mean revolution. Sudden, extreme or complete change. But watching from above, she remembers there is another type of revolution. One full circle. A completed rotation. A chain of flowers laid in a ring.

Then she is spit, coughing, back into the real world, pulled from the eerie blue clarity of the sacrifice vision into her own tiny, tiny body, and Scoria is on her knees in front of Chine, hands on her shoulders. Chine searches Scoria's chest for any hint of the hole a knife would have left, finds the skin smooth and clean, looks up into Scoria's eyes and finds more in them than she knows how to read. The crowd is chanting behind all of them, the earth is rumbling, the volcano is about to erupt, but all Chine is aware of for these few seconds is Scoria in front of her, Au's hand on one shoulder and Farfara's – Farfara's! – hand on the other.

“You fixed it,” Au is saying, and Farfara is laughing or crying or maybe both as she tells Chine, “You saved me!”

Chine drags her eyes from the place in Scoria's sternum where the knife was, and back again to Scoria's face. Tears are waiting in the deep furrow of the blade's brow, the tightness of her jaw.

“I knew you wouldn't be able to see it through,” Chine tells her softly, one last victory. Tears break the waterline and start to fall, and the part of Chine still wrapped in the sacrifice vision doesn't know whose tears they are. Maybe nobody's. Maybe everybody's.

The volcano grumbles beneath their feet, a storm about to break.

“We can't...” Scoria's voice breaks into a whisper. She tries again. “We can't go back to the way things were.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: HELLO MY OLD HEART or YOU'RE NEVER FULLY DRESSED WITHOUT A SMILE!!!

When the volcano erupts it is a shock despite all its warning, despite the city chanting and singing, despite the day, and Chine lets the moment take her breath away with the old childlike awe. Scoria is still knelt in front of her, hands tight but not pinching on Chine's shoulders, an echo and a change (*revolution*) from the one hand on her shoulder as Scoria had delivered her confession. Behind Scoria, one hand each on each of her shoulders, Au and Farfara are still standing there; but everyone's face is turned towards the sky as the flower petals begin to fall. Red, pink, yellow, purple, white, blue, orange, even green here and there. In less than a few hours the city will be blanketed. Chine breathes in the smell of the air like she's trying to ground herself against an aspect dream.

“Scoria,” she says, and knows that this will not be even the half of it, knows that there is still a lot to work through, but she needs to get the words out. The steps hums its approval, words now spent. Chine gets the feeling that she will not be spoken to by it again.

*Were you sad? How could you tell?*

“Scoria,” Chine tries again, and Scoria looks back down at her. Chine can hardly bear the depth in her eyes, after all these weeks of flinty grief.

“Yes, lowly initiate?” Scoria says, eyebrows mocking, and Chine groans out a laugh that she can't find any true antagonism in.

“This isn't over,” Chine tells her. “But. I have... one surprise for you.”

A shadow passes over Scoria's face, shutters closed and then opened again.

“I forgive you,” Chine says. “I forgive you for everything that you did.”

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“Do you know why we still remember?” Farfara will ask later. Chine is still getting used to this new law, thorn-sharp, rose-soft, with eyes that burn no matter what emotion they hold.

“It must be because of our ties to the aspects, right?” Au will say. “And because of how intrinsically tied up with all of them... everything... was. The aspects are powerful enough to remember. And for whatever reason, we were given those same memories by them.”

“Maybe a lesson,” Chine will muse, and Scoria will snort.

“If this is a lesson, I hope you do better at it than you have all your other ones,” she will mutter, and Chine will glare.

“I did well enough at my lessons to save *you*,” she will say, looking at Scoria but gesturing across the entirety of the rose room, and for a moment there will be quiet.

Scoria's *thank you* will be almost too soft to hear.

–-

But for now Chine is gripped with a bright, unfettered joy as the first petal lands on her upturned face. She wants to laugh and so she does, so happy and triumphant and victorious that she is on the edge of tears. Music is starting in the streets, a mad cacophony that settes into some kind of harmony as the small clusters of people scattered throughout the streets align their songs and instruments to each other. Scoria stands up with a leap, a weight gone from her shoulders that Chine had believed was built into the bone, and reaches up wildly with her hands, shouting gleefully as she grabs fistfuls of petals from the air to throw them at Chine, at Au, at Farfara. Farfara bats them away, almost unsteady on her feet but still grinning, and grabs Scoria's hands and pulls her close, close, closer still.

Au tugs Chine up to standing and twirls her into a dance. The gods looks so much younger with flower petals in her hair, layers of sorrow fallen from her face to leave only shadows in the corners of her eyes; it truly hits Chine with a start that the other three holy figures are only a handful of years older than herself. The crowd is cheering around them, the unspoken line around the area of the holy figures dissolved in the celebrating, and the faces blur together as Chine and Au spin each other around, moving through steps long-practiced and quick-forgotten in the relief of everything being *over*.

Well, not over. There is a reckoning of some kind coming, a lecture, a fight, some expression of anger and disappointment and disbelief. But under the miracle of the volcano, among the celebrating crowd, rich with victory, all of that can be set aside. The glowing arc of Scoria's smile as she looks at Farfara, soft instead of hard, genuine instead of ironic, hangs in the back of Chine's mind like a slice of the sun.

Abruptly, Chine feels faint; she staggers, clutches Au's hands so she doesn't fall over, moves to sit on the flower stone. Something whispers, deep in the back of her head; she thinks she sees a butterfly through the petals, blue-green, there and then not.

(*Were you sad?*)

“Are you alright?” Au asks, peering down at her with concern, and Chine smiles up at her.

“I'm fine,” she says. Her thumbnail moves automatically to her left incisor, but when it hooks around the smooth curve of the tooth there is no kind of feeling. Just a canine tooth.

(*How could you tell?*)

“I think,” she continues to Au, who still looks concerned, “I think that my job is finished.”

“Finished?” Au repeats, but Chine just stands up and laughs, overcome again with giddiness, and says, “Let's dance!”

Chine doesn't know if it's possible to say goodbye to an aspect, something that will always (don't think about the other future don't think about it don't) be around, or if one can only be said goodbye to by an aspect. She doesn't know if aspects have a concept of goodbye. If the brief glimpse of the butterfly was the closest it could get. The ceramic tile feeling is gone from the back of her mind, and with it the senses of the gods, the law, the blade.

Chine should feel bereft, she thinks. Instead she just feels satisfied.

*I balanced*, she thinks. Reaches up to grab a handful of petals from the air and fling them uselessly at Scoria as they move past each other, mouth open in a laugh before she is lost in the crowd again. A to-do list ticks in her head: find her parents, find Hollow, record this all somehow, speak to the dead.

Farfara appears in front of her. Behind her, Chine can see Au and Scoria having some kind of competition that both of them are laughing too hard during to execute properly. Chine looks up at the law, the pair of them the only point of stillness in the crowd; she remembers that face angled blandly down at her hands, thinks of the smooth metallic gold on her fingernails, hears Farfara's voice in her head. *It was just.*

“Thank you,” Chine says, and holds out her hands, palms down, fingers out. “For doing my nails.”

Farfara throws back her head and laughs.

“You have done us all a great service, Chine Faste,” she says, and takes Chine's outstretched hands in her own. “I wanted to thank you.”

Chine can't find the words, *it was nothing* or *you're welcome* or *no problem* or *it was just.* She feels dizzy and absolutely clear at the same time.

“I wanted to start over,” she tells Farfara, and Farfara nods. Chine doesn't know how Farfara understands that, how she can catch ever interwoven layer of meaning in those five words, but she does. Chine knows she does, even without the assisting hand of the steps.

“Even if you love them,” Farfara says, looking around at the crowd, eyes seeking out Scoria, seeking out Au, returning again to Chine to share the words like a secret, “I think some things have to be changed.”

Chine smiles at that, an impossible and ironic inside joke, and Farfara smiles back until Au bursts into the moment to pull the two of them back into the whirlwind of dancing and singing and shouting.

“Slow down,” Farfara laughs, and Au says “I will not,” as primly as she can before snorting into the most undignified giggle Chine has ever heard from her, and behind them both Scoria rolls her eyes at Chine, and behind her the volcano stands tall and proud, a symbol of stability, scattering great handfuls of flowers on them like a blessing.

Around them, the city celebrates, and Chine celebrates with it.

*I balanced*, she thinks again. *I changed.*

She opens her eyes.