

GREY-SCALE

Nearly three years had passed in Jerrym since I first met my friend in the Skeletal Wood; Odezz't. The diamond mining town knew a thing or two about opulence, being the world's premier supplier of diamonds, but never had they seen anything like me; the Diamond of the Diamond in the Rough.

It was Winter 50th of 7531 in Rhyonis and, as we neared my 17th Light Night, I had become a staple of Jerrym entertainment since my coming out as Raspberry. Unsurprising to say the least, Darling!

It hadn't all been standing ovations and accolades, however. Before gracing the stage of the Tavern Jerrym with my presence every night, I had some difficulties finding crowd appeal. That was until I made compensation for the confusion with the elderly schoolteacher I ran from the night my entire life changed . . . for the first time that is. Even if it was over two decades ago from the present retelling of the fairy tale that is my life, I still remember that day as vividly and vibrant as my mother's brightest dyes.

The old hag, Eyleesa Oaten, was an ancient woman almost as old as the mines themselves. She ended up breaking her leg the night she chased me and she could have raised Alaxendaria from the Grey-Lit Path with all the noise she made about the incident. Thankfully, my Rhyonis Leoravich paid the expenses to have the finest healer from the Divine Province come to mend the bone, a skill the local physician would have taken weeks to resolve. It would have been sated in the

following days as Leoravich doled out extra to charter an airship for a cleric of St. Nihaan to arrive not three nights after the event. It was one of the newest Hallicianous Models that made every other air vessel look like a mud caked caravan, and that was all that was needed to smooth over the issues with the school kids who may have still held ill will towards little old me. Their parents- standing over their open mouthed gawkers of spawn- weren't so easily won over. As we gathered, they would look at me, disdain painting their lips as stoic straight lines and frustration glistening in their eyes like crisp morning snow.

As soon as the airship came into view, the whole town bunched together in the square between the Tavern Jerryym and the Mayor's Manor. A raucous buzz of excitement bounced between bodies pining to see the hired holy man; the only welcomed visitor to the cloistered mining city in Malirica knows how long.

My family stood to greet our guest and I couldn't help but feel an air of importance. Despite the fact that this was inevitably to fix my mistake, the collective eyes and murmurs looking from me to the magnificent aircraft felt validating and correct. There were mixed mumblings of accusations followed by vehement agreement, but all I heard were the oohs and ahhs that I imagined were centered on me and my fabulous layers of red and pink coats.

Coming down from the clouds, the airship looked alive. A blue and gold angelfish tail with matching fins on its sides breathed with a magical propulsion that would have it glide forward, parting the freezing breeze like a gentle stream. Unlike every other trader's airship that had come to Jerryym- the typical plain boring planks of brown and grey wood lifted directly from waterways with magical cores- this one

looked organic in its movements; captivating yet freeing. Each piece of the craft appeared to be inlaid with transparent multicolored glass that shone and sparkled with a magical essence from within the interior of the ship. The space around the fin like sails glittered and distorted: an illusory trick of the light from the magical runoff that mesmerized myself with the entirety of the Jerrytown folks that looked on it with held fast wonder and silent, bated breaths.

As it descended, I righted my layered skirts and petticoat beneath the cinched fur jacket, threatened to blow open by the vessel's updraft. I waved my hand over my face to ensure that my own newly discovered magic was still holding the magical appearance I used to create the beautiful face that was Raspberry.

After a long declaration of self identification, I laid out my feelings as Raspberry Rose to both of them- Leoravich and Vermalde, my Rhyonis and Rhyonisa- and to their credit, that was all that needed to be said. I refused to live as Lorenzus ever again and used my magic to ensure that I would always be seen how I wanted to be. That being said, I still learned as much as I could from my mother about the mundane magic of cosmetic makeup, one of the many art forms she had mastered herself. Our conversation only lasted for as long as I spoke and, afterwards, they took on the town's leadership together on behalf of my circumstance and these reconciliations were the proposed solution.

Lorenzus' name would be stricken from the city records so long as I continued to live as Raspberry and took care of Ms. Oaten's injuries. Needless to say, I insisted they jumped at the opportunity and we all took advantage of the first step towards a fresh start and clean slate. Which brings us to the current state of affairs and reparations.

An ethereal gangplank shimmered into existence from the deck of the ship that levitated, completely void of sound, five feet above the ground. Several figures stirred, cocooned in multicolored robes that glistened in the midday light; twinkling like rays refracted through morning mist on a pond of bright faced spectators. I paid them little mind as they shuffled past, bowing to my family and fellow townsfolk; the angel fish airship immaculately treading water midair before me had me entirely enraptured. It was the most elegant and fabulous thing I had ever seen, so compelling in how delicately beautiful it was. I longed to ride it myself beyond the static snowscape that had been my home for nearly fifteen years.

Onlookers clamored to the windows of the Mayor's Manor, prying to catch a glimpse of the divine entourage touring the estate while I stood transfixed and unbothered. Ms. Oaten had been granted a suite with hired servants to see to her every whim. Her pitiful grandstanding found her bedridden and soaking up the sorrowful praise of the city and she, with freshly picked delusions, thought this spectacle was for her, while I knew it was all because of me.

The drapes were quickly drawn to block the view of the healing ritual, but that didn't stop the mining sheep of Jerryym from pushing and shoving to catch visions of what they could. My father had accompanied them all to see the ceremony, but my mother and I stood side by side, watching the beautiful craft dance in place. We always had a mutual fascination for the magical and mysterious, and our unity apart from the mewling Jerrymites made that all much more apparent.

"Its fins remind me of your dyes, Nisa," I said, breaking the icy silence. A spiraling mist accompanied the words that left my lips, but dissipated with their fading echo. For a moment, she didn't say

anything, but smiled down at me and then towards the direction the ship had come from.

“There are many changes on the winds, Raspberry.” She paused after she spoke. With a slight movement, she pulled the thick furred hat further over her ears and rustled the heavy white fluff of the coat over her shoulders to block direct eye contact. I could see her writing the script of what she would say next behind those furs; she was an artist of all sorts. Behind those hypnotic eyes of hers, she'd be writing a line, scribbling it out, and then rephrasing it before speaking it plainly.

“You've reminded me well that we should take it with grace, change. Fluidity is the saving grace of change, after all. If we are too rigid in our ways and try to adapt on a whim, we snap.” Icicles had begun to form on the fins of the ship, the *Azure Aurum*, its name scripted with inlaid gold on its bow. With the word *snap*, a swift breeze rushed through and cracked the forming spear, allowing the fin to flow and tread the freezing air once more.

She had told me she was capable of magic in confidence after I told both my parents of the experience I had with Odezz't the nature spirit. Her magic and knowledge over it was limited, and it was with that tome she had sent me to collect that fateful night, she intended on teaching us both more on magic and its control. Unfortunately, she had to dispose of it once my father found out what it was. They had both decided that it'd be for the best while I was unconscious, having assumed that it was the cause of my condition.

Magicky Foolery had become a sore topic from which I refrained bringing up unless absolutely necessary, especially as my power bloomed well beyond the scope of hers. Despite us both using it

regularly in our day-to-day lives, in secret from my Yonny, I couldn't help but feel responsible for ruining her chance at learning more.

The shambling mound of a crowd whinged and whined against itself, pining for a better glimpse of whatever divine act was occurring inside the manor. We both just scoffed with a glance and roll of our eyes, returning to look at the wondrous vessel before us; a tease at escape waiting at the door of our shared prison in the snow. It was maybe half an hour or so before the mob silenced and parted outside the manor's door. In unison, a craning procession eagerly fidgeting against itself, they clambered back to form a walkway for those exiting the manor.

“Yes, Nisa,” I said, unsure of what I was really saying as I spoke. “I hope everyone is ready for change and embraces it with grace.” There was a moment where I paused and thought about what she was saying a bit deeper and my stomach dropped like the crowd to their knees on the frozen ground. “What Yonny mentioned the other night about me having to go to school because of this . . . that's not true, is it?”

“Oh, of course not, Darling,” she huffed, smiling and looking at me in a far warmer way than she had since she tossed out the book, or grimoire as she called it. “I would never allow such a thing. You're *my* Rhyona and if anyone is going to teach you it will be me, yes?”

I beamed at that and reached for her hand which I found already outstretched to mine. “Right, thanks Nisa.” Our gloved hands slid into place between each other's fingers and, be it mine or hers, there was a faint pulse of energy from the touch I could only explain as true and pure magic. It made me feel calm and content; secure, safe so

long as I had my Nisa. That was even as the manor doors burst open once more and the theatrics began again.

“St. Nihaan, be praised!” Eyleesa Oaten screamed to the sky, walking with a pep in her step she hadn't had before even our fateful crossing of paths. She didn't even use a cane as she jumped into the air, smacking her heels together and cackling with what one might call glee. I just thought it was annoying.

The entirety of the town laughed, clapped, and cried as they rejoiced in the return of their most cantankerous of hunchbacked educators. I rolled my eyes and looked away from the scene, but not before meeting the disapproving gaze of my father as he stood, arms crossed, withdrawn from the revelers. The saliva hit my throat like glass as I gulped and quickly turned to look towards the Skeletal Wood, squeezing my mother's grip within my own and wishing nothing more than to just be sitting with Odezz't again.

The gang plank ethereally shimmered into existence, extending to cover the rise from the snow laden ground to the elevated deck, currently being serviced by what looked to be a team of eight elvan folk. They were clearly related, in some capacity, as they had the signature pale icy blue skin and black hair of most of the elves from Ish-Gahn's capital of Crystallus, but their features were even more angular and striking than those of the beautiful Veera from the general store.

It was like a dance, yet more natural like the organs of a body effortlessly performing their intended functions, the way they moved around the ship. A perfectly practiced routine, the crew lightly stepped from the balls of their feet to leap through the air with their flowing strides. Fluidly, yet mechanically and succinctly- a perfectly practiced

routine- they moved with the ship, operating each of the moving parts as they pulsed magic energy into the multitude of receptors and panels out of my view.

It was so mesmerizing, the priest and his entourage had already boarded and the ship was beginning to lift off, before I could take my gaze from the magical company of elvan sky sailors. It was my mother's voice that shook me and brought my attention to the crowd that was looking at me expectantly, as if waiting for a response to a question I didn't hear.

“Oh, I'm sorry folks,” Nisa said, turning me on my heels in the snow to address the Jerrym collective. “Raspberry was a little awestruck there for a moment. Those Hallicianous folk sure can craft a beautiful vessel, can't they?”

With that, thankfully, the crowd started murmuring amongst themselves with shared fascination, as though they were noticing the ship for the first time with its departure. Several remarked at how it couldn't even compare to the beauty of St. Nihaan's love that healed Ms. Oaten and, with an explosion of commotion, all focus was removed from me and the crowd gushed over the miraculous procedure I had no desire to be privy to.

We took that as our chance to return home, my mother and I, as she gestured to my father who still looked perturbed and exhausted. He exhaled one of his famous weighty sighs that diminished his stature by almost a foot, and he resigned himself to skirt the bunched mob moving towards the Tavern Jerrym to join us himself.

From there we walked, a chain of clasped hands with my Nisa in the middle while my Yonny and I avoided glancing in each other's

direction. She squeezed me tighter and I felt the anxiety slip away, but this wasn't an arcane magic, simply that of a motherly comfort.

Just as we came to our doorstep, I happily skipped through the heavy iron threshold past the thick oaken door held ajar by my father. I chanced a look up and saw him smiling down at me. The sudden realization that he was just faking the sourpuss for the masses washed over me like the warming sensation of wine down your tongue, and I met his grin with my own.

“Welcome home, Raspberry.”

I hugged his waist and giggled as I twirled inside. “Thanks, Yonnny.” He allowed my mother to step in after me and pulled her in for a kiss.

After one last look directed at the boisterous town that was the only home he had ever known, he closed the door between him and it with one last worldly sigh that would move ships across the Continental Sea. Securing the lock, he take his place with my mother and I to settle into the cozy red leather of his chair before the fire. My mother began to hum as she painted auburn flames across a beige canvas and I danced for them both, singing of elvan sky sailors whisking me away to distant cities of endless light and countless stories.

My Yonnny didn't say anything, but the smile I caught creasing his cheeks as he dozed off spoke volumes louder than he had before.

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“Thank you so much for coming to see me tonight, Tavern Jerry! You have all been absolutely lovely my Darlings but, as I

always say, 'life is better with a little R and R', and since you've all just had a healthy dose of Raspberry Rose, it's time I get my Rest and Relaxation!"

I was turning seventeen and was *Queen of the Realm* every time I stepped on that stage that did its best to contain the immense personality I threw on it! The night had gone as all nights had for the last three years since I made nice with that Eyleesa Oaten; fabulously. I came, sang, and danced and the crowd ate it up like they always had, to no one's surprise, least of all my own. In all that time that had passed- everything I had experienced over my almost two decades of life- nothing could have prepared me for the night my life would completely change, for the second, and certainly not the last, time.

"You know, that should be your tag-line, it's good. *Life is always better with a healthy dose of R and R!*" The voice dripped like running dye from a freshly hung garment as it crept over my shoulder. I couldn't see the speaker, and it sent chills down my spine as his steely baritone licked across my ear; a sourceless *hiss* amid the raucous crowd. "Go to the meeting room on the top floor of this heap of a dive bar. My master would like a word."

I could feel a sharp point in my back and knew that there was someone magically invisible holding what I presumed to be a dagger holding my corset strings taut against its blade. Immediate tension pulsed through my body, priming it for fight or flight. There were only a handful of ways this could turn out, and I'm not one to go down without a smart remark first. "Neat spell, wanna teach me in that room upstairs, or is that knife bigger than your . . . ego?"

He quietly chuckled- a snide breathy retort- as he prodded a bit harder in the direction of the stairs. I played it off coolly enough,

blowing kisses and addressing the fanfare of admirers, plucking a few coins and tucking them into my brasier. I smiled and reached the first step, all too aware of the blade held still at my spine. It would have been simple enough to step through the air and appear at the doorway immediately, but I dare not risk whoever this was endangering any of the patrons in retaliation. They could have been- and most likely were- completely mad and, at a moment's notice, could strike out against any of the fans that I've grown to love. Ever the stoic starlit, I steeled my nerves and swallowed hard; once my face was out of view from any onlookers, I sullenly acquiesced.

“So long, Tavern Jerry, and recall my memory fondly! For you will always be mine!” I bowed at the top of the stairs, beaming bright eyed and free of tears as magical light was fed through a paper cone to produce a spotlight on my form. I waved wide and threw conjured roses off into the crowd as coins were lobbed back upon the balcony; my would-be kidnapper a safe distance from any innocence.

“Ugh, always the performer, you're so dramatic. Just get in the damn room!” The assailant pushed me and I began to stumble and slip on the coins, about to fall off the railing before the office door slammed open and I was snatched from around my waist and pulled into a tight embrace by the most stunning man I had ever seen.

He was truly massive, boasting shoulders broad as the horizon and taller than myself in my platform heels. Clear amber eyes crested over a curved opalescent smile. Like quartz peaking through geode, the sparkling teeth parted the reptilian face of a grey scaled Drakin man. He spoke with a voice similar to that of the one who ushered me into this position, except cooler, calmer, and wiser.

“Careful there, Rose, we wouldn't want you wilting on us now, would we? Not after that performance.”

With a sweeping twirl, he pulled me against his rock solid chest that rumbled and vibrated against me with his dazzling speech. I stammered and attempted to pull away, but was utterly transfixed by him. Upon tearing my eyes from his, I assumed him to be a Virtihorn Drakin man- an inhabitant from the Quilted Coast of Ish-Gahn- but his scales were a paling ashen grey and he seemed to carry himself with a grace and confidence unlike anything I had seen in my wildest dreams, least of all in the sleepy city of Jerrym. His clothes were strikingly pleated, angular, and cast strange dimensions off of his body. Everything was deep black, almost lightless and breathing like living shadows, but beautifully offset by the diamonds lining the trim of his attire and adorning his thick and capable claws.

In persona and appearance, he was entirely foreign to me. Larger than life, without another word, he held me there in his arms, leaving me with no fight against him. It felt right. It felt *good*.

“It's Raspberry,” I cleared my throat and placed my palm against the sparkling lapel at my eye level, which in my heels was about 6'5”. “Thank you for catching me, I was pushed by-” I looked around frantically, suddenly recalling the attacker, but there was nothing, just the crowd looking at both of us caught in the spotlight. We were moths drawn to a beguiling flame. As for who was which, I *still* can't say.

“Fate, I'd say,” he continued where I had paused, gently tucking my chin between his thumb and index finger, pulling my attention back to him, though it left for but a moment. “There's no other place I'd have you anyway.” I could feel my heart beating out of my chest and into his.

He was so *charming*. I felt my knees giving way beneath the cloud of red and pink tulle surrounding them, crashing against his legs like bloody waves. I was sure that with the proximity and touch he would see through the disguise spell I used to create the look for the performance, but he made no mention of it. In fact, he just looked me in the eye: silently commanding I gaze into his daunting, jet black, snake-slit pupils that cut through pools of crystalline honey. It was a moment of magic unlike anything that I was capable of on my own. I was lost in that instant and felt everything melt away. I forgot how I found myself there; the memory of the assailant gone completely, like it had never happened.

“Ahem,” there was a gruff cough from within the room the newcomer had come out of. I knew it to be that of the Mayor of Jerry, Bartonimous Lockstead. He was a bloated, pale, and plain human man who always had a grizzly hack in his throat from years of smoking sweed, an herb from the southern coast of Arhan-Zoul. It only grows in the ash laden desert of Arhan-Ikar: a desolate region with a lone city built around an oasis that overlooks the infamous Soundless Canyon. It's said that the god of Cleansing Fire, Frey-Uum, burnt the city to the ground thousands of years ago to cleanse a plague that was ravaging the land and the oasis was the only thing that survived. Since then, this herb has grown along the coast of the water in the center of the city built around it; Ashasis. It's a necessity to treat lingering cases of the disease, known as Sand Lung, that still occasionally strike the inhabitants of Arhan-Ikar.

Sweed had become the favored vice of our dear Mayor Lockstead when he visited Arhan-Ikar on a sales trip years ago. He developed an addiction for it while battling a sickness of another sort:

the overindulgence of this smoked plant is used to burn out Sand Lung's occupation within the body, but also deteriorate the organs without the presence of the disease. He more so struggles with the addiction himself, but the illness ravages his voice and has been treated by healers countless times. It is just as persistent as his obsession with the herb.

Flushed red as the silk outer layers of my gown, I flourished a hand and donned a fake smile of confidence as I stood between the mayor of my town and who could very well have been the man of my dreams. "Oh, uh, Excuse me, sir I was just-,"

"Seeing me out," the stranger said, spinning me slightly to stand with his arm over my shoulder. His other palm outstretched to shake the hand of the mayor who looked from the man, to me, to the hand. Lockstead uncomfortably pulled a soiled handkerchief from his beige coat pocket, dabbed his forehead, coughed into it, and returned it from whence it came before feebly gripping his associate's palm that completely eclipsed his own. "Mayor Lockstead, it's been an absolutely delightful pleasure doing business with you and I can assure you the Grey-Scale Corporation will return within the week to complete the exchange. But if you'll excuse me, my attendants will collect the uncut diamonds from the warehouse tonight and I'll be taking my leave. If you'd be so kind, however, I'd like a word with this enchantress."

Were I not so heavily painted, dripping in red fabrics, and magically disguised, I would have blushed redder than Balasar as it set in the night sky. The way his arm gripped tighter around my shoulder- it felt protective, maybe a little possessive- but so alluring all the same. Lockstead matched the hue I imagined myself to be and coughed awkwardly again. He gave a slight bow, adjusting a sack of what I

presumed to be gold, sealed with a long black strand and tied fast by a metallic logo tag I didn't recognize.

“Yes, Mr. Grey-Scale, Jerry thanks you for your business and we're ecstatic to be aiding you in your endeavors. Now if you'll-,” Lockstead couldn't muster another word before being taken over by an intense coughing fit, spewing blood and bile into the now completely marred piece of fabric.

“Of course, take care now.” Grey-Scale, what I now knew him as, wiped the back of his hand off on the gem studded lining of his pocket and shooed the mayor back into the office room like a child before turning to lead me towards the stairs. I was ushered down the steps I had dramatically traversed during countless performances and through the yapping crowd of onlookers, but no one moved to stop us. We walked arm in arm out the Tavern Jerry and into the frosty air of a cold Spring night in the city that had been home my entire life.

It wasn't until I felt the snow soaking into the bottom of my skirts that the haze left my mind and I stood face to face with Grey-Scale; alone in the dark courtyard, with only the light of Maxiluna providing immediate illumination. All at once, the awestruck adoration left and I was terrified for my life once again.

“Who in the Gods-Damned Realms Adjacent are you!? All of those people just saw you leave with me and if you try anything there will be a bounty on your head that I'm sure even *you'd* be sick at the thought of!” He simply laughed a steely cool bellow and clapped his hands twice before several men, similar in features to himself- but not nearly as captivating- appeared out of thin air.

Invisibility spells, I thought to myself. Whoever this man was, he had power in several forms.

“Excuse me for the theatrics, but I knew *you’d* appreciate the drama.” His companions stepped to his flank and kneeled in the snow, looking directly forward and not moving a muscle, as if waiting for a command. “As I’m sure you’re aware by now, my name is Grey-Scale. I’m, we’ll say an entrepreneur, from Areezah. I just signed the largest sales contract Jerry has ever had since I’ve recently come into an exorbitant amount of wealth. This has afforded me the ability to purchase seventy percent of the diamonds mined from this crystalline wasteland for the next year.” Clearly he could tell I needed a moment to pick my jaw out of the snowdrift beneath me because he stopped speaking and smiled as he clasped his hands, waiting expectantly.

“Seventy percent of all of Jerry’s diamond collections for a whole year! That must be well over-,”

“Ten million gold, yes dear, I’m aware. Like I said, an exorbitant amount of wealth. But that’s not even a fraction of what I plan on making with my own merchandise. There is one other thing in Jerry that has caught my eye beyond glistening gemstones, however.” Snow flurries danced around him and he waited for a moment, intimidatingly sizing me up before the door to the tavern slammed open and a couple of drunkards stumbled out and into the city streets.

“Oh my god, is that Raspberry? Jeb look, look it’s Raspberry! I can’t believe she’s still here! Raspberry! Hey, Raspberry! I love you! Can I get an autograph, or a kiss or something!”

With an unearthly and unsettling speed, all three of the goons, crouched like gargoyles behind Grey-Scale, deftly lurched to their feet and stood to intercept the man who was running towards me with his arms ready for an embrace. I couldn't tell exactly what it was from behind as they faced away from me, but some sort of oozing brackish-green liquid sizzled from their heads and dripped into the snow, causing the man to stumble onto his rear and scuttle back towards his friend.

Grey-Scale scolded each of them individually with a sharp and chiding tongue click. "Now, that's no way to approach a lady, boys. I'd suggest not insulting her in my presence again or my compatriots may not be so passive. Off with you, worms!" There was a popping sizzle on each syllable that sent a chill sliding down my spine. And with urine yellowing the snow in his wake, the fan, who simply wanted a moment of my time, scrambled away in fear, colliding with his buddy as they fell and scrambled off the ground several times before disappearing entirely from view.

"Oh, that was a little much don't you think! He just wanted a moment of my time!" I thought about it for a split second, remarking at the trail of waste he left behind and the lingering scent of stale alcohol he wore like a jacket. My new companion dabbed a clean handkerchief- conjured from the seamless pocket flush against his chest- at the tip of his lengthy snout he looked down at the freezing puddle. Maybe it was best to play the part to see myself out safely.

"On second thought, I hate it when people try to touch me, so thank you for that, I suppose, Mr. Grey-Scale."

"Of course, Love," he purred and sauntered up to stand before me. Leering down his scaled snout and dragon-like whiskers, he

extended an open palm for me to take as he leaned to kiss the back of my hand. The jewelry lacing his reptilian tines chimed together as the ringed metal clattered with his movement. I couldn't help but look him over, examining every aspect of his person. Everything was sharp and angular, elongated and dynamically proportioned to his body in a way I had never seen a man wear clothing. The suit was made of a material unlike any I was familiar with, moving and swirling against itself, almost like stitched smoke. I paused and stared, allowing my slight fingers to trace the lines it showcased like works of fine art.

“Do you like the suit?” He pulled my hand and placed it on the lapel which curved on either side of his chest and poked over his collarbones like crescent mountains. The peaking seams were studded with black and white diamonds that almost seemed to give his torso eyes just beneath his long and deadly looking draconic jaw.

“What is this fabric?” I pondered aloud, enraptured by the mystery of all he was. The curiosity and amusement robbed me of my faculties, and I was truly mesmerized.

“Have you heard of *Living Shadow*?” I shook my head, afraid to even dare look at him, too entranced by the swirling black beneath my fingertips and unsure of how far I would lose myself in his gaze. The suit itself was soft like water, but the harder I pressed into it, the more I felt it resist and swirl against the pressure; a stream of solid liquid rebuffing my caress. “Deep beneath the land, in the most secluded parts of the Gravel Way, there are shadows so vast and solid that they draw in the Life Essence of all things within it, becoming sentient entities of their own.

These Living Shadows split and spread to inhabit all of the Gravel Way, occasionally being discovered by those wary enough to

spot the dark within the shadow, or devouring those who don't. Master craftspeople, however, can stitch the Living Shadows into Shadow Silk. Quite mesmerizing, wouldn't you say?"

I hadn't noticed I slipped my hand onto his neck where the fabric made way for his scales until he reached for it, holding it for a moment in the air and then placing it on his cheek. "I don't particularly like being touched either, but *you're* different, Rose."

"It's Raspberry, actually," I stammered, blushing as I pulled my hand away and took a step back.

"That's what that *swine* called you. Rose will be my name for you, if you'll allow it. I find you a sweet flower more so than a tart berry." He bowed then, taking a deep pose with an arm beneath his chest and another held aloft for my hand. The moment I took it, he stood and pulled me against his chest with a tight embrace. It felt encompassing like a thick coat and at once I lost myself within it.

"Come with me, Rose. Areezah is a city of zardons, countless brilliant stars that put to shame those of the night sky. You are a once in a lifetime star, far grander than the likes of this city can contain. Your life deserves to shine across more than the drunken faces of the Tavern Jerryym."

In just those few words the entire world shook around me. The world, to me, was once this city. Living openly as Raspberry and performing at the Tavern Jerryym was all I had ever wanted for and, suddenly, it would never be enough. I was seen as the woman I wanted to be, I was happy, and that's all I thought the world would be, but what was that worth in the face of *more*?

In just those few words, the *world* suddenly became a life, a reason, a purpose to which had I dared not dream for myself before. It was something beyond being seen; recognition. I teared up in his arms but before my knees would give out under the overwhelming weight of the moment, he supported my body and adjusted his height to look at my face. The projected illusion I donned was now broken from the emotion bearing down upon me and, with it, a new dream became a waking nightmare.

I sobbed and let my body go completely, sure he would let me fall seeing the rose wilt before him. However, he held me aloft and walked me further down the street, into an alley before kneeling down to hold my head against his chest. It was awkward and strange, even in my emotional state, but something- something I can't quite fathom or truly place to this day- changed in that moment. The persona I had cultivated, the illusion of identity I presented for years, was cracked like an egg. I was once again that ugly reflection in my bedroom mirror in my eyes, but not his.

"You're beautiful, Rose, and sadness is unbecoming of such a woman as yourself."

"It's all a facade!" My voice cracked. It was a poignant emphasis on the cruelty of the statement I felt in my bones. Particularly under his gaze, I lost all composure and let myself slip through the cracks I desperately attempted to keep sealed. "I'm playing at womanhood beneath magical deception, and you still see me as such?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't care what you think you are. *I* KNOW you to be a star, and that's all that matters. I can paint a stage across the sky for you to shine brighter than any other zardon." His words rumbled in his chest to dance through my ears like ballrooms.

The warmth. The words. The presence. The moment. It was all I had never known yearned for.

“I understand if you don't want to leave your life behind, but think on it. I won't twist your hand. The choice is entirely yours, I simply wish to offer you all the freedom the night above can afford a glistening star.”

I adjusted my hair and wiped the tears from the corners of my mascara smeared eyes, small specks of gold beginning to drip along my lashes. Before I would allow him to see my sorry state fully, I flicked the golden flecks across my face and recast the magic to create the illusory Raspberry visage from the night's performance once more.

“You've just given me more than anyone in my entire life, and I cannot thank you enough for that, Mr. Grey-Scale. I'll leave a note for my parents and let them know I'm leaving post-haste.” A moment's pause withheld his hand to assist me to my feet, but he extended the curtesy as he subtly scoffed under his breath. “They've been on a trip to the Fey Forest for sometime now and I'd hate for them to return to worry and concern. When will we be going?”

“Tonight, Rose.” I noticed a mild curtness as he patted the back of my hand and straightened his collar. “I know it's short notice, but I have much business to attend to at home. Take the week to mull it over if you'd like. I shall be returning with my convoy next week wherein they will return to collect, per my contract with Jerrym. I will accompany you to Areezah myself. Unless you've already decided, that is, then you may come tonight.”

He kissed the back of my hand and looked deep into my eyes, not breaking the hold of our hands until the distance was too great to

maintain. “My airship will be at the city gates until midnight. I hope to see you there, *my* shining star.

This mysterious stranger, who casually strolled into my life and shook it to the core, now just as casually walked away. With his back turned, flanked by his henchmen, they drifted through the snow like silent specters until they had vanished completely. Left in the cold of the night, I was alone, chilled even deeper to the bone from the fading spotlight of adrenaline.

It was long in thought but short in distance, the walk to my family's manor. Though it would be the last time I looked upon the threshold, it may as well have been the first I saw of it for how foreign everything felt. Even the wrought-iron gate I leaned against to keep the entire structure in view felt surreal and out of body. With an exhale, I felt as if I were my father, heaving a sigh of contemplation and gazing upon the hollowed structure that I once called home.

How much did my Rhyonis know of this contract, of this man that seemed so much larger than the whole of reality? Surely a portion of his own findings would be taxed for the purpose of this deal. After all, seventy percent of Jerrym's recovered gems would be collective and affect our family just as any other within Jerrym.

The thought crossed my mind to stay and ask him of this Mr. Grey-Scale, but I knew that if I were to bring it up at all, it would dash any hope of me going as my parents would never allow it. Then, just south of the city gates, bright light burst to life, casting a luminous fog over the entirety of the city, yet I felt its warmth on me like the familiar heat of a spot light. Snow flakes would dance across the sky and land on my lengthy lashes as I stood, transfixed, both lost and found in the

light. A rumbling hum, like the stomach of a starving beast, followed the wake of the light and struck me from the stupor.

The airship! Though it sounded nothing like any of the other models of ships to come to town, I recognized it to be where Grey-Scale said he'd be departing. The choice to run for the light was decided for me as I felt my chance of leaving the city slipping away like noodles through a fork. Every promissory word he spoke to me rattled in my mind, echoing the chance of unknowable greatness. They filled me with a drive towards him, a rush of energy that propelled me through the gathering snow around my heeled boots.

The snow fell heavier and faster with each step, almost as if the water within each flake was trying to hold me back. Light grew closer yet more dim as sheets of thick white ice began to obfuscate my vision. My lungs, empty and torn by frosted shards of breath, threatened to burst before I made it to the veiled light, another tether restraining my forward advancement.

Another step, another breath, another stab, but I continued. Pushing for the sound of the ship beginning to lift and roar to life- a howling dragon over its frigid horde.

"Wait! Please!" I screamed fruitlessly over the belligerent airship's wail and raging storm, my voice lost amidst the violent sounds of a retching arcane engine. "Take me with you, don't leave me to this dull life any longer!" I pushed and forced my legs to stand as the backdraft from the rising ship threatened to launch me into the heaving snow drifts. Small vines wrapped around my ankles, holding me fast and steadying my stance before I was tossed to the ground as the vicious wind whipped against my clothing.

A voice whispered to me, pulling my focus inward and silencing everything around me in a momentary reprieve as I found a steady stance.

Step to the deck, the snow will part for you, Rhyo of Roses.

It was Odezz't- the nature spirit who first taught me of my magic- speaking to me through the coalesced Life Essence within the snow! I braced myself against the wind and scoured the skyline for the little I could see for their form. Just as I found it- two massive glowing orbs of yellow moonlight, a mirage of magic in the sheets of slick white, shrouded by the growing blizzard- they nodded to me, vanished, and were driven through by the fog lights heading the airship. A sharp yelp slipped through my mouth before I, too, vanished from the root bound spot and reappeared on the top deck of the vessel in a silent pop of soft magic.

“Ahh, Rose, you've decided to join me, how lovely!” Grey-Scale was there, just as I lost my balance and crumpled to my knees in exhaustion, catching me before my gown-covered knees collided with the frost-laden deck. His embrace was warm and soft against the Living Shadow suit he wore, offering immediate comfort within the bitter cold of the thinning air as we ascended.

Quickly, he guided me beneath the deck into what looked to be the captain's quarters. In a swift series of stifled movements, he retrieved a massive fur coat that nearly swallowed me whole, blocking my view of the people gathered at the back of the chamber; or perhaps blocking their view of me. With a matter of speed that felt secretive and almost dangerous, he ushered me through a maze of several doors, passages, and rooms that defied the logical parameters of the vessel. After each swift movement, he closed off the previous space, locking

each one before I could move my head out from the heavy black fur that seemed to move against my attempts to restrain it.

“You should be safe in here.” I heard Grey-Scale call, though muffled by the coat. I finally managed to force it down and threw it off to find myself standing in an elegant space that baffled me beyond words. Grey-Scale stood several feet away from me at the center of a massive grey stone chamber with the appearance of an officious workspace in a circular tower. It expanded upwards out of sight, well beyond where the ceiling of the airship's lower deck should have been and filled me with a sense of vertigo as I tried to estimate how tall it actually rose.

“What is this place? I thought we were on an airship?” Panic began to take my voice as I realized it wasn't just the two of us in the confounding space. Just past him, behind the heavy looking wide set wood and metal desk at the front of the room, the three henchmen from before stood camouflaged against the rough hue of the stone walls of the chamber. It was eerie how I couldn't see anything except their piercing yellow eyes that would follow mine as I glanced from one to the next. I didn't like this, and the situation made me increasingly anxious and apprehensive by the moment.

“There's no need to worry, Rose. I simply don't trust the crew of this ship and felt me and mine would prefer the safety of our own accommodations.” He placed both hands on my shoulders and guided me towards a black leather sitting chair that sprung out of the floor and into position in front of the immaculate roaring fireplace. “This is a Quarters Cube. It's a revolutionary prototype from one of my backers and I've been using it as a sort of portable safe haven, you see?”

From my seated position, I witnessed the foundation of the room shift around all those inside of it to provide a matching chair beside me for Grey-Scale. With a silver plated tray of steaming mugs rising from the ground between us, three cushioned stools arose for the henchmen who sauntered from their camouflaged positions to kneel, watching our exchange passively, if intently.

The magical distortion of the walls and floors made me slightly nauseous, but as I settled into the chair and took the mug from Grey-Scale's expectant reach, I calmed at the warming sensation between my palms.

"I had no idea magic could do something like this." A repulsive feeling of inadequacy washed over me. I was embarrassed to even admit my ignorance of magic and what little I could do compared to creating an entire shifting room from nothing.

He nuzzled himself into the black leather seat beside me, purring like a contented panther with his face obscured by the ornamental curling shoulders of the chair's back. The unsettling sound, a combined sizzle and animalistic hiss, slipped through his lips and sent a shiver down my spine as I found my own chair becoming increasingly uncomfortable. There was a momentary pause before he began to explain quickly, and in great detail, just how expansive Areezah was and what I was getting myself into.

I didn't quite grasp a lot of what Grey-Scale was saying, the immediate vicinity capturing my attention more than his grandiose explanations of something beyond. Just as he finished, he set his drink down and leaned forward to look me in the eye again, almost piercing directly through the wide black pupil into the reeling circus my mind has become.

“Are you afraid, Rose?”

“Of?”

“Anything?”

“Should I be?”

The question hung on the air for a painfully long moment, echoed by the crackling fire that danced across our still faces; his in eager anticipation, mine in cool calculation. An unsteady crawling began to itch beneath my skin but was sated by a particularly sharp snapping of a burning log and I found myself in the moment once more.

“Are you afraid of anything, Mr. Grey-Scale?”

He barked, rather than laughed, and the henchmen snapped their necks so fast to one another, it was evident their guffawing boss was an uncommon occurrence.

“I’d say I used to be, but it’s truly astounding just how much a sense of security coin can buy.” He leaned forward, holding his chest still with the rolling waves of amusement still leaving his body. We met eyes for a moment before he began to look over the gem studded gown I adorned. I wasn’t sure if he could perceive the illusory elements that gave the garment an extra layer of sparkle but, with the intensity of his glances, it seemed like he was desperately trying to.

“Are you afraid of me?”

I knew I should have been, but it seemed like a challenge, or a test of some sort, and I’d be damned to a dark walk on the Grey-Lit Path before I didn’t rise to every occasion.

“No.” It was curter than I had meant. “I’m intrigued by the opportunity you’ve presented,” I added, leaning to mirror his pose. He retreated at that, apparently satisfied in my response and hiss-purred to himself, steadily drinking from the steaming mug once more. In truth, *intrigued* was putting it mildly. The idea of grander stages than I’d ever imagined, crowds chanting my name with deafening volume, recognition and adoration to lengths I’ve never known yet always dreamed of! Thinking of it in that instant brought me joy and a tear to my eye, despite the intimidating, odd company I kept.

I dotted it away delicately, but with just enough embellishment to have it noticed. Feeling a little more confident with him back pedaling, I pressed forward, legs crossed and shoulders back, dignified and demanding. “I am also curious, however.”

“Oh?”

“What, in particular, was it that sparked your intrigue in me to offer this *opportunity*?”

Grey-Scale’s manner melted into an alluring chuckle, robust and reverberating in a way that I felt in my stomach and bones.

“That’s simple, love; I am the night sky, my influence and power vast and encompassing. You are, without question, a star the likes of which Rhyonis has never known. Where better for a star to shine than with the night it belongs to, Rose?”

He was good. I had charm of my own, but this was a tycoon that had undoubtedly pulled similar woos over many a competitor to yank the rug right out from under their false comfort. And just like the dirt from beneath those rugs, I was swept right off my feet and fell for every line. My composure weakened and the elegance of my poise

wavered as I was reeled deeper and deeper in, validated in my own ego by his masterfully played hand of wit and charisma.

“You have so much to offer Areezah, Rose, and with my help I will set the stage for you to take the world by storm! Through closed doors I was entranced by your performance in the Tavern Jerry, and with my resources, Raspberry Rose will become a household name if you so wish.”

He set his mug down and kneeled before me on the dirty hard wood floor, no mind paid to value of the suit that I couldn't guess the cost of. He was quiet for a moment but as the gears ground together in my mind, he could have been shouting in my face and I would have heard nothing.

I stammered clumsily, not sure of what to say other than, “Uh, I do?”

“Hey Boss, Chasm's Claws will be coming into view in a minute or two if you wanna catch a glimpse again.” With a tempestuous speed, Grey-Scale rocketed from his kneeled position and moved to the door of the chamber. Though a stoic and intimidating figure, he beamed with palpable excitement as he reached for the door which swung inwards to lead out into what looked like the galley of the air ship. He smiled, that anticipatory glee painting color across his grey-hued stony demeanor, and reached an expectant hand towards my direction.

“Come with me Rose, I want you to see this!” Without much thought, as if all self-volition was sapped from myself, I stood and straightened my ruffled gown to take his lead. With a gentle grasp and rushed step, he led me through several more doors and up a flight of stairs to the deck. Without the cover I wore on my descent, I caught

glimpses of workers tending to engine rooms and machinery and huddled over cards and dice around dingy looking tables before we emerged to a star-speckled night sky.

Wind whipped violently against my cheeks and I struggled to see much past the thick clouds of black smog streaming from beneath the underbelly of the ship.

“Look, just there on the horizon!” It was difficult to see what he was pointing at, but I squinted my eyes and waved away the smoke that swirled up into my face. He stood half behind me, steadying my stance on the windy deck with his chest at my back and arm pointing to somewhere far to the south, sunlight just beginning to crest over to the east, eclipsing my sight almost entirely.

Just as I was about to ask what I was looking for, I saw the monstrous curved spires, blackened in shadow poking into view thousands of feet into the sky and miles upon miles ahead of us. There were nine of them, jagged stone obelisks that jutted from the ground and stuck upwards haphazardly, carving scarred silhouettes into the air as they desperately exhumed themselves from the unseen ground. They loomed over the region, casting the majority of it into darkness in the early morning. Even as we neared and the sun rose more, the oppressive spires still clung to the horizon like a beast's talons clawing through the earth. It was daunting, even at this distance, how they seemed to threateningly grow to overcome what appeared to be a deep crater at their base.

“What *are* those?” I admittedly had little knowledge of Arhan-Zoul outside of Jerry and felt childlike in my ignorance of what must have been a national landmark. His arms tightened around my shoulders and, as he pressed his scaled jaw against my cheek, Grey-

Scale whispered in a low tone that turned what would have been butterflies in my stomach to moths chewing at its silken lining.

“My inspiration. Those are Chasm's Claws. An ancestor of mine erected those to save the city of Areezah from the Fire Worn Spires during an unprecedented eruption centuries ago. Chasm's legacy is known as a wonder across the realm and I want my empire to outshine them, to be known in cities where remarkable starlets will balk at my name.” He took a step back as the gale died down and leaned over the edge of the airship, taking a deep breath and satisfied sigh, absorbing the view. I could tell he wanted to say more, but was hesitant, so I anxiously placed my hand upon his and squeezed softly, urging him to continue.

“Grey-Scale Industries will take the world by storm. First Areezah, then Arhan-Zoul, and then onto all of Rhyonis. The only thing that could make my reign even more wondrous would be a queen.” He stopped abruptly and looked at me in a way that made me feel so exposed, but melted away inhibitions, and I kissed him.

I felt the tangible power he possessed and wanted it for myself, to rule the world with my name as he did and, even if he turned caterpillar dreams into carnivorous moths, I wanted to tame the scaly king. Every inch of my body moved into his embrace, seeping into the Shadow Silk suit that felt like a cool breeze caressing and chilling my skin, inspired by his encompassing warmth. I paid mind to nothing except the sensation of connection, to give into it as much as I could stomach. He didn't push further, but he didn't pull away, and as the sun rose behind us, illuminating the massive city coming into view beneath the shadows of Chasm's Claws, I felt a serene peace. A sense

of rightful belonging. Not with him, but within myself as I did what I knew would garner me all I had ever wanted.

“Mr. Grey-Scale?” A timid demur voice broke our embrace; a small gnomish man with a strange mechanical eye that swiveled and whirled in its socket looked up at us. He scantily fidgeted his metallic fingers against each other with a grating sound of mismatched gears as he struggled to find his follow up. “We’ll be nearing the Budding Garden Towers in a little over an hour, I’d prepare your entourage for departure.”

There was a tone of urgency and withdrawn fear. I could tell the man was the captain of the ship and he seemed to be no stranger to danger with the plethora of scars that scattered from the prosmechic puzzle pieces of his body like spider webs. Despite this intimidating visage, in Grey-Scale’s presence, he bowed reverently.

“Thank you, Captain Steamfinger,” Grey-Scale said, clapping a shoulder on the gnomish man. “Your family’s marvels truly know no bounds! You truly are a gentleman and noble friend for your aide in this endeavor. Speak with my associates to ensure you and your crew receive the proper payment, and here’s a little something extra for the expediency.”

Discreetly, Grey-Scale slipped his hand into the breast pocket of his suit, retrieving a small black vial with a bright green stopper. Despite the dark color of the glass, it was translucent enough to display the sloshing liquid it contained. He held it out to the gnome who made it look large in his dainty hands and was just about to uncork it before Grey-Scale lashed out and held it closed. He kneeled towards the startled captain and whispered something in his ear that I couldn’t quite make out.

“Ahh, I see, thank you Mr. Grey-Scale . . . i-i-it’s an honor!” Face red and lips pursed, Captain Steamfinger turned on his heel and hurriedly rushed off into the lower deck of the ship. With a heavy slam of the door separating us from the stairs below, Grey-Scale and I were alone against the railing of a wind rattled deck.

I turned to ask what that was, but he put his finger on my lips and turned my shoulders to look over the edge, thousands of feet above the green grassy ground that rolled in the wind like waves on the Continental Sea. It was breath taking- the shock from the height and the beauty of the untouched plains of Arhan-Zoul.

“I’ve never seen so much green before. Even Summer in Jerrym is cold and covered in frost.”

“There’s so much more than that Rose . . . look.” He gently placed his hand on my chin, guiding it to look out over all the horizon encompassed. Unlike anything I could have imagined, the massive stretch of green pointed towards and surrounded a monumental circular crater, fully shrouded by Chasm’s Claws until the moment the sun hit just right. I almost fell off the ship with the loss of footing, blown away by the sheer mass of the city I instantly knew to be Areezah. It was the remarkable capital of Arhan-Zoul, where countless legends had their stories told and honored at the center of the Land of New Beginnings.

We approached the city from the north and flew over so much, it was hard to take in, but Grey-Scale explained the layout to me as we progressed. Areezah, in its entirety, spans the width of a 100-mile diameter crater that is the city. It’s comprised of six, clearly separate, concentric circular rings, each one a layer almost 100 feet lower than the previous and designated as a specific sect of the city. Divided even

further into Quarters, each one represents a Phase, or season, and its districts are locked in a permanent corresponding climate state.

The First Ring we flew over, the largest and outermost ring, was meant to act as the city's primary defense. Countless maze-like gates and wards speckled the ground beneath, projecting up and over Areezah with a thin, magical, membranous shield that could be seen pumping like a heartbeat from key tower points around the perimeter of the city. We almost collided with it, but a deckhand signaled a tower with a small flashing key card she held in the brim of her wide and elegant hat.

She withdrew the card and the barrier thinned until there was a space just wide enough for our vessel to fly through unperturbed. As it whizzed past below, we flew over the Northern gate that separated the Spring and Winter Quarters; juxtaposed warm and cool breezes licked over either side of the ship as we faced light buffets from the other aircrafts- models of all sorts and sizes- that occupied the skyspace as well.

“This is incredible, look at it all!” I couldn't help but giggle with giddiness, pressing into the guard rails to see as much as I could, afraid that, with the sheer immensity of it all, I would miss everything. Suddenly, a bizarre craft rocketed skywards past our ship- faint purple mine tracks appearing ahead, and vanishing behind, as they coasted up out of view- and then just as quickly to a destination far to the south.

“That was the strangest airship I've ever seen. Was it on tracks?”

Grey-Scale scowled at it and grumbled. “It's a farce is what it is; The Magimotive Railway.” He said it with sarcastic intent that

dripped with disdain as he rolled his eyes and twitched his fingers in quotations.

“It's a Hallicianous product . . . curse that damn enchantress, Cymack.” He spat on her name. “She proposed it to the Republic of Peoples last Winter and it seems her blasted corporation has already gone to testing.” He just watched it soar further and further away. The smaller it became, so too did his eyes beneath heaving scanning squints. For the first time since I had known him, I saw that charming exterior drop. In those eyes there was hatred, scorn, and loathing.

“It simply collects whoever stands at a post and presses a button, free of charge, and delivers them anywhere in the city. The amount of coin being lost on such an innovation is astronomical and it makes me absolutely sick.”

Just then he spit again into the deck, and to my horror, I watched as the bubbling green liquid popped and sizzled, boring a hole right through the wood at our feet. Instinctively, I held my fingers to my lip for fear our kiss had left me burned and unaware, but thankfully there was nothing, just rose petal soft flesh.

“Don't worry my dear, my business doesn't deal much with transport. If anything, I should be rejoicing! Saves my patrons the coin to invest and spend on *my* products and investments!”

With no hesitation, he left me there staring at the smoking hole left by his saliva, unsure of which he viewed me as; an investment, or a product. After signing a few documents presented before him, Grey-Scale ducked through a door to the cabin and turned to me with a driven fixation.

“I’ll return in a minute, Rose. Enjoy the view of the city, it’ll be yours tomorrow.” And with that, I looked across the intimidating vastness of impossibly many airships, Magimotive rail cars, and the massive singular structure aloft over the dead center of the city.

Floating, untethered to any portion of solid land- drifting over skyscrapers, towering gates, and clustered seasonal trees- was an hourglass. Larger than any structure I had ever dreamt of, with looping tunnels and passages jutting from the buildings built into the top and base of it. It was a fortress of levitating mass, and it lazily spun as I stared at it in confusion. From this angle, it looked like a performer atop a stage that spun and twirled for an entire city of spectators. I knew, someday, I too would be lauded as this castle was.

“Welcome to Areezah, Ms. Rose. Is this your first time in the city?” I didn’t turn to look, but I just listened to the question posed by the woman who had the card that allowed our passage. She shifted into view slightly, leaning her back against the rail to look at me herself. Her eyes were silver and calculating; calm but knowing. They looked through me in a way that made me feel even more exposed than Grey-Scale’s, yet they didn’t deconstruct me or make me feel unsafe as his had come to.

It was haunting how wise they looked: framed by the youthful pale blue elvan face, occasionally obscured by the obsidian sheen of her long black hair tucked beneath the mint green hat with its colorless plume. She said nothing else, but uncrossed her arms from over her blue leather armor and placed a hand on my shoulder. It was delicate, yet firm and confident in its grip.

“You’re in good hands; Areezah will take care of you, I promise.”

Without warning, she slightly bent her knees and flipped backwards over the railing. My heart hit my throat and I yelled, rushing to look over and extend a hand to possibly catch her, but as I clung to the edge myself, there was no sight of her.

“Rose, what is it?” The heavy wooden door barring the deck from beneath slammed open and Grey-Scale rushed to me, claspings both his hands around mine in a panic. “Thank the gods, I thought you fell over, are you alright?”

“That elf, she just jumped over the edge, I- I don't see her!”

“Elf? There are no elves on this crew.”

“What do you mean? She just used the key card to let us through the barrier!”

“You mean this card?” Just then, from the bow of the vessel, right where she had been standing before, was a woman in a large tricorn hat, but it was black and she was a pale skinned Yoziel woman-tall, menacing and with pale scarred skin exaggerated by dark tattooed lines in their shadows- and waving the card I had just seen in the hat of the elf a moment ago.

“I think you may need some rest, Rose. You haven't slept since before your performance last night and it sounds like you may be hallucinating.”

I groaned my refusal but rubbed my eyes and looked across Areezah once more, glittering countless rainbow colors in the early morning light of Balasar. I realized just how exhausted I was, feeling the tiredness seep and soak into my bones like frozen water.

“Maybe you're right . . . maybe I should get some sleep.” My body almost slumped in that instant, but before my eyes closed entirely, I felt myself caught against the supple Shadow Silk suit and lifted off my feet into the arms of the man that whisked me away from home and into this brand new life.