

Project 'Journey'

Beta Readers Copy

Chapter One Scene One

All character names and location names are placeholders

Scene One:

Goals:

Establish Equilibrium (Midgard side).

Start of Ellie's character arc, establish her as the central character.

Establish Mary as a likable character.

Make readers hate Arch-Mother Anne.

Build a world setting and a sense of mystery.

Midgard, Evening of the rite (7pm, twilight)

5 hours before the Rite

At Royal Gallery and Museum:

At the far end of the table, amongst a gathering of guests toasting her heritage, Ellie sat by herself.

The young princess was desperately trying to follow the conversations around her as she gripped her knife and fork, eating just enough of the authentic duck in front of her to compliment the chef but making sure not to over exceed her given calorie intake.

The girdle that had been fastened around her waist dug into her tightly enough already.

'Your grace.'

The clatter of steel utensils on ceramic dinner platters rattled inside Ellie's head, making it hard to follow the muddle of the conversations. This dinner was in her honour. It was finally the day of her rite, a day that was currently being celebrated throughout the city of Midgard. Ellie had never been more miserable.

'Your grace?'

She snapped her head from her ruminations. The man who had seemingly asked her a question stared at her in indignant patience. He was a portly man, ceo of automaton bla bla.

[Opening Line: Enigmatic with the themes of the story]

Here, in the gloomy depths of the Royal Gallery, Ellie could escape the manic noises of the extravagant celebration set in her honor. The sounds of clattering utensils on dinner plates and inane chatter was dampened by the thick oak wood walls that surrounded the young girl. She was observing a family portrait, one she had come to this exhibit to see many times before. It was the last in a long line that stretched monotonously, in a silent parade along the wall. Pictured in the display were four people stood together; a King, a Queen, a Prince and finally a princess.

Ellie wondered why they were smiling.

We haven't smiled together ever since that day.

The young Princess of Midgard stood, staring at her family portrait. She was trying to spot any clues that the white smiles painted onto the characters faces were fake, as if the royal painter somehow used a different secret brush to breathe lies into art. She saw none.

It was hand painted which is a rare luxury in the heavily automated city of Midgard, a luxury only reserved for the highest of the Elite class. A tradition that she thought had lost all practicality in a world of visual media and holo displays. *Couldn't an automaton have done just as well of as a job?*

Posing for the portrait was the last time her family had been together in the same room. It had gathered dust since the last time she had seen it. The warm memories of her childhood, playing with Mary in the Gardens, listening to stories of faraway lands from mother and helping brother with his cuts after his combat practice had

grown distant. Distant, just like the face of her father. She wasn't sure if the one she could see now was real or just another painter's lie.

Her thoughts turned to the matter at hand.

Today was the day of the Sol Rite and she was finally going to find out the truth. Why her father had locked away mother, why he never appeared in public anymore and why her brother, Zuko ...

Ellie bit her thumbnail, a habit she had since she was child whenever she was anxious.

'There you are, I knew you would be here when you snuck away.' Ellie turned to see her handmaiden, Mary, jauntily approaching her. Ellie smiled.

She could tell that the long, rouge dress made it cumbersome for the normally hyperactive girl to move about quickly. The ceremonial dress requirements had caused Mary's frizzy orange hair to be neatly tucked in a bun and her once prevalent freckles to be hidden under a thick layer of pale makeup.

'I didn't get you into trouble did I?' Ellie replied. Mary stopped next to her, recovering her breath.

'Nothing I couldn't handle, she smirked. 'Although Mattieus was demanding to know where you had gone.'

Ellie groaned. *That slimy "duke" just wants to talk about his father's business again. I don't care if he is going to be CEO, it's obvious that he's trying to form some sort of political partnership with me.*

'I think he likes you, he's probably going to ask for your hand in marriage after the rite.'

'Of course he is, he's made it very clear on the "benefits" of the royal family joining Autonomous Industries through marriage. Even though their business wouldn't exist without us.'

'Maybe he just wants to marry a beautiful princess'

'That too.'

Indeed Ellie's beauty was known throughout the city, she only needed to look out across Corporate plaza at night to see giant holo displays of herself lighting up the dark sky. Close ups of her crystal white skin and raven dark hair next to lotions and dye products. Promotions of products she had no intention of using.

'Are you ok?' Mary said softly.

She must've noticed me biting my thumbnail.

'I'm fine.'

'It's ok to be nervous. You told me yourself how Zuko changed after completing his rite, I'm worried too you know.'

Indeed. It had been four years since her older brother turned sixteen, the age when the descendents of the royal bloodline performed the sol rite. The process was supposedly to demonstrate the power of the Royal Family for the denizens of Midgard. A tradition where -at the stroke of midnight- the newly of age royal would impart a piece of their soul into an empty automaton, signifying their loyalty to the people whilst demonstrating the royal power that had made Midgard the most prosperous nation on Panem. The process itself was a unique ability gifted only to the royal bloodline by the first king, five centuries ago, to give life to a machine that had none, the name of this miracle lost to time. It had turned into a festival, a chance for the overworked masses to celebrate the power of royalty and to see the

protection the crown offered. A tribute to 500 years of peace. But Ellie knew there was more to the rite than what people said.

It was subtle at first but her brother had changed after his rite. He grew more distant, spending more time at the academy and training late into nights. He seemed quick to anger, immersing himself in the military violence against the so called “savages” outside the city’s steel walls. He spoke of vivid dreams with loud voices and strange symbols. Then he stopped speaking of them. He didn’t seem like himself, as if someone, something else was slowly replacing him.

‘I know it has something to do with that facility under military headquarters, he’s been spending more and more time there without telling me why.’

‘But Ellie, it nearly broke on the news the last time you tried to sneak in. Even a princess isn’t above some laws.’

‘Mary, this might be my last chance to find out, tonight the same thing might happen to me. I’m not going to let that happen without learning the truth.’

I can’t let whatever’s happening destroy my family. I have to fight back.

Mary sighed. ‘I guess there’s no stopping you when you get like this. Ok.

Let’s do what we did last time, I’ll create the message whilst we fly back to the palace.’

‘I knew you would be up to the task’ Ellie beamed.

‘Yeah, well your wish is my command your majesty’. She cocked her head with a cheeky smile.

‘Whatever happens just promise me you won’t get caught again.’

‘I promise.’

The girls held hands, the fading glow of the sun passed through the thin windows scattered on the high tops of the dark passageway. For a moment, the light rested on the pair, then it disappeared.

‘Where have you been? A sharp voice directed itself towards the girls.

‘You were supposed to give your speech to the council twenty minutes ago.’ The shrill voice belonged to Anne, Ellie’s other handmaiden. The previous arch-mother in charge of training the novice handmaidens and direct head maiden to the king himself had been recently appointed to Ellie by her father to keep her -as Anne described- "out of trouble." The tall, elderly woman looked down her thin nose at the two girls who quickly let go of each other's hands.

‘I don’t know what compelled you to sneak away like that young lady but you have a responsibility to perform your duties for this city and to your father, his majesty the King.’

‘Yes arch-mother Anne’ the girls said in practiced unison.

‘And you need to show more professionalism in your job at being a handmaiden for your royal, it’s an honoured position and if it were up to me you would have been let go a long time ago.’ she said, narrowing her sharp eyes at Mary.

‘She came to bring me back, I was just nervous around so many people’ Ellie said in as much childlike innocence as she could muster. The arch-mother clearly had more she wanted to say but simply huffed, turning away from the girls as they quickly followed to match her long strides. She muttered to herself, something about a direct servant of the king being reduced to a babysitter. Ellie wasn’t paying attention, she was planning how she was going to infiltrate the elusive military compound.

After the speech -a series of hollow words practiced and perfected by the princess- the trio were escorted to the Gala’s landing pad, where a silver hover ship was

waiting to chauffeur them back to the palace. Surrounding the ship was a large crowd of cheering people, held back by a perimeter of heavily armed automatons, their intimidatingly large human-like frames keeping the crowds at bay. In the midst of the crowds that swarmed to see the princess, one small figure broke Ellie's deep thought. It was a girl, barely six or seven years old. She was perched on the top of what must've been her mother's shoulders. They were noticeably different from the rest of smartly dressed citizens on their sides. They both wore simple brown attire, leggings and dull grey jackets, the uniform representing factory workers. However the little's girl's jacket had bright yellow cloth in the shape of small flowers meticulously sewn into the tough fabric. What had caught Ellie's attention was what the little girl was holding, a pure white lily, the kind of flower that grew in abundance in other lands according to the stories mother told. Lands that hadn't been ravaged by the great war and transformed into Ashen Desert. The little girl's eyes lit up when Ellie approached her, she bounced up and down on her surprised mother's shoulders.

'Let them through, it's ok.' Ellie ordered.

The automaton looked down at Ellie, its bright green eyes processing her request. Mary and Anne were still behind her, distracted by the loudness of the crowd. The large automaton lowered its rifle, standing to the side to allow the girl and her mother to approach Ellie, much to the jealous jeering of the rich attendees. They had no love for the lower class.

The mother shuffled towards the princess, lowering her daughter onto the ground in the process.

'Your majesty' she took an awkward bow, unsure how to address royalty face to face.

'That's ok' Ellie said, waving her hand for the mother to raise her head.

'We got this for you, for your special day' the little girl said, excitedly presenting the flower to Ellie.

'It's beautiful, where did you find it?'

'In the big rubbish piles we-'

'-we made it your grace, it's a tradition our family has carried on for generations' the mother said quickly interrupting her daughter.

The young girl looked confused, a shade of sadness swept over Ellie's expression.

'Did you find it all by yourself?' Ellie asked, ignoring the mother's lie.

'Yeah, I find lots of things in that place, flowers are my favourite. And this is my favourite, favourite'.

Ellie chuckled.

'Thank you, I'll take extra special care of it.' Ellie delicately took the flower into her hands. The girl clapped her hands.

'Are you going to use your magic tonight?'

Ellie had never heard her ability being called magic before.

'Of course. I'll use my princess power.' The girl giggled.

'Can I be a princess too?'

'Maybe when you're older' Ellie laughed. Mary and Anne had caught up to her, Mary smiling warmly, Anne staring coldly.

'I have to go to the palace now but I'll make sure to keep the flower with me for tonight.'

'And after tonight you can get rid of the king and make everything better?'

Ellie's smile abandoned her, she didn't know what to say.

'Forgive her, she says things she doesn't mean, please, forgive us your grace.' The mother grabbed her daughter pulling her close to her chest, trying not to look at the rifle of the automaton.

Ellie hated how scared they were, how the fear of her father had covered her with its ugly shadow.

'It's ok-' she tried to explain but now the automaton moved forwards, pushing the mother and daughter back into the crowd with ease.

'Wait.' Ellie shouted, grabbing the automaton's arm.

'Be gentle, please.'

'Let's go your grace' Anne said, who had swiftly placed her hand on Ellie's slim shoulder. Ellie looked back, the mother and daughter had disappeared into the throngs of the crowd.

Are they ok?

'Your grace...' Anne repeated, appearing calm. The old woman's fingers squeezed tightly, digging into Ellie's shoulder.

Ellie winced.

'I'm coming' she relented, turning towards the arch-mother who released her grip.

Mary quickly stood in between them. As they boarded the hover ship, Ellie quickly scanned the crowd, she saw the little girl, back on the mother's shoulders towards the far end of the crowd. She sighed a breath of relief. The little girl waved frantically, the yellow flowers on her jacket fluttered in the wind of the ship's engines as it began to take off. She was yelling something, but the drone of the engines and the crowd drowned out her voice. As Ellie was led into the lavish interior of the vehicle, she wondered if the girl was repeating what she had said before. She sat down next to

Mary, who *-away from the gaze of Anne-* squeezed her hand in comfort. Ellie whispered a thank you. She let go and looked out the window.

I don't know what's going to happen after tonight, all I know is that nothing will be the same again.

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