In a few seconds, Imogen lost her whole world.

She

lost

Laudna.

Time slowed to a near stop as a desperate cry wrenched itself from Imogen's gut, and the shattering sound echoed in pulsing waves across the vast, barren expanse of swirling dust and sand.

"NO!"

Her throat burned and her gaze blazed as sparks of purple lightning arced from wholly white eyes. Even her heart which pounded violently within her chest seemed to thud slower, slower, s l o w e r.

Otohan, a terrifying portrait of animalistic rage and razor-sharp lethality, carved into Laudna with her sword. Laudna almost seemed to defy gravity as she fell through the air, moving only a few inches between each of Imogen's sluggish heartbeats.

Imogen shot forward, lightning marks illuminating her partially crimson skin, but even at the speed she *needed* to move, it was too *slow*.

She didn't even have time for her tongue to form Laudna's name.

A dark red cloak whirled, and a second blade glinted in the dim light as Otohan drove the tip through Laudna's back, right between her shoulder blades. Laudna arched against the metal which shoved through sinew, flesh, and bone, mouth open in a scream lost in the battering wind. The tip of the blade emerged from Laudna's sternum, breaking through bone and spewing blood.

Imogen's stomach plummeted through the ground.

The warrior held Laudna aloft as Otohan rolled their sharp gray eyes sidelong towards Imogen.

Is she your favorite?

That burning in her throat grew more intense as a storm of fury and grief welled within Imogen.

"I'll go with you!"

Imogen's voice came out muffled, as if the sound hadn't entirely materialized within this plane.

Otohan's mouth moved, but the swelling emotion within Imogen drowned out all external sound. The blood pulsed in her ears with each beat of her heart—slow, forceful, deafening.

Otohan cocked her head and gave a snarling smile. The ringing of metal sang in slow, quivering vibrations as the warrior pulled her blade free from Laudna's spine. Her body collided with the ground with a sickening thud and dark blood spattered across rusty dirt. Unseeing eyes lolled in Imogen's direction, limbs askew in the sand.

Laudna's chest did not rise again.

Her temples throbbed, blood pounded in her ears, and tendons protruded from her neck as every muscle in Imogen's body shook with life-ending lamentation. She gripped either side of her head with curled fingers, nails sinking into her scalp as she clutched at strands of lavender hair. As if an invisible hand reached into Imogen's lungs and *pulled*, an earth-shattering scream climbed up her throat and erupted toward Otohan.

Laudna's murderer merely absorbed the damage and kept her iron gaze trained on Imogen.

Deep, primal power swirled in Imogen's core like a boat tossed on an angry sea. Her lightning-marked hands shook and the trail of tears staining her cheeks evaporated into tendrils of steam as white-hot rage built under her skin.

Something within Imogen called to her. It was as if the power within her very blood sang two words with an increasing resonance—like a chant which continued to build and build and build.

Let go.

Dozens of immaterial voices whispered in her mind; an onslaught of wild, culminating power, commanding her to *let go*.

It was like the constant buzz of thoughts in her head, except these voices were incessant and *palpable*. With each repeated command, Imogen's body responded.

Let go—

Her hair lifted off her shoulders—

Let go—

Her skin tone shifted to an ominous crimson hue—

Let go—

The purple bolts etched into her flesh burned bright—

Let go—

A tidal wave of red, crackling fury crashed into her—

Let go—

Darkness swallowed her—

Let go—

Imogen descended into herself, into that abyss—

Let go—

Until she and the voices were one—

Let go—

Imogen's eyes flashed open—

LET GO—

The swirling dust and wind froze and particles of sand halted in the space around her—

LET—

Within her pocket of magnetic power, the ground shifted and adjusted—

GO—

Imogen flung her arms out and unleashed a roar that reverberated in a circumference around her, releasing all her pain and rage in waves of thundering power.

The buildings of Bassuras tore away as the red cyclone of wind and power rent them into nothing but broken stone that crackled around Imogen like a torrent of debris.

Imogen *screamed—*

White.

White.

All-encompassing, blinding white consumed Imogen's sight and smothered her hearing.

Then, slowly, as if waking from a dream, the white dimmed to the barren Bassuras landscape, and the faint whistle of wind met her ears. Strands of lavender hair blew in her face, whipping in the sharp bursts of dust-addled breeze.

Imogen took a breath.

I n.

O u t.

Then the world rubber-banded back into place.

Reality snapped her back so firmly into existence that stars shot across her vision. For a moment, Imogen teetered in the air, but then, Exandria expanded around her like a fog rolling back to reveal an ominous shipwreck.

Imogen's boots touched the ground only a moment before she collapsed to her knees in a cloud of dust. The purple marks streaking up her arms glowed like a dying ember, and as Imogen caught her breath, lungs burning and throat raw, the lightning's illumination slowly faded.

That brief memory of her mother swam at the forefront of her mind. It had been so tangible Imogen still felt like she could *feel* her.

Gloved fingers curled in the dirt, dust scraping in a mass beneath the exposed nailbeds of her thumbs and pinkies.

Imogen pushed up on shaky legs and straightened as she glanced around.

The words pressing against the back of her teeth evaporated, and the only sound she managed was a strangled gasp.

Rubble and ruin littered the rusty dirt around her, massive chunks of rock and debris strewn about; a map of destruction guided by her hand.

An entire block of Bassuras—razed to the ground.

With a flash, memories sparked through her mind—

Imogen…

"Is she your favorite?"

"I'll go with you! I give in! Don't hurt her—"

A bloodied blade—

The thud of her body—

Imogen jerked her head up so fast a shock of pain shot down her spine. Wide amethyst eyes scanned the atmosphere as she stumbled in a circle, searching, searching—

Laudna? she muttered breathlessly, and even her incorporeal voice trembled. *Laudna?*

She reached out into the ether between them, grasping for that familiar bond, that soft melody which existed the same as Laudna, but—

A broken gasp cracked from her.

There was nothing—no music, no familiar presence, no *Laudna*.

"Laudna…" That word, so familiar on her tongue, now felt like desperate prayer which landed on deaf ears.

Imogen stumbled forward, dirty boots catching on hard ground and broken rubble. "Laudna," she breathed again, terrified tone rising in pitch with each plea. "Laudna." She barreled past Chetney, barely even registering his existence as worry and fear created a tempest within her mind. "Laudna?"

Imogen…
“Is she your favorite?”
“I’ll go with you! I give in! Don’t hurt her—”
A bloodied blade—
The thud of her body—

“Laudna!”

Imogen…
“Is she your favorite?”
“I’ll go with you! I give in! Don’t hurt her—”
A bloodied blade—
The thud of her body—

“LAUDNA.”

Imogen clasped at the sides of her head, chin trembling so much she couldn’t get her tongue to form her name.

The closest felled building still groaned as debris shifted, and at the base, sticking out of gray, dusty stone, lay a pale, ichor-stained hand.

Imogen’s heart dropped and nausea roiled in her stomach. “*No*,” she gasped, breaking into a sprint.

Tears streamed down her face, nearly blinding her. And when she tripped on rock and crashed painfully into the ground, Imogen merely fought to her feet and continued her dash, ignoring the stinging scrapes across her knees and palms.

She collapsed to her knees, the impact of bone on hard dirt rattling through Imogen’s body and into her jaw.

She didn’t let herself think about any of that.

As if someone else controlled her body, Imogen simply watched as her hands clawed at the landslide of stone over and over and over and over—

Laudna—

No—

Her face is what eventually drew Imogen out of her stupor.

She came back into her body as though regaining consciousness, still reeling like she’d been slammed into the ground. Her trembling hands twitched as they hovered just a few inches above Laudna’s body which had somehow appeared on Imogen’s lap.

Her face…

So gentle, so beautiful, so seemingly at peace.

Imogen cupped a dirty, bloody hand along Laudna’s jaw, and despite her mind speedrunning through every scenario in which this fear of losing her manifested, the world around her felt like molasses.

A rough yet gentle touch on Imogen’s shoulder made her blink.

Ashton crouched next to her, gesturing frantically. Their mouth moved, but she couldn’t comprehend the words.

She stared up at them, gaze heavy.

They freed Laudna's legs from the rubble and gingerly placed the lower half of her body on the Bassuras dirt.

Imogen thought she may have grunted in gratitude, but she wasn't sure if she managed any sound at all. She sniffed and the skin of her cheeks stretched beneath the dried salt trails tracked down her face.

She looked down at Laudna once more—at the unnatural stillness of her form, and nearly broke entirely as the weight of the cold, crushing silence of her mind—that *emptiness*—hit Imogen like crashing wave.

"No," she sobbed, dried lips peeling apart. Shaky fingers brushed dust and loose strands of wiry hair from Laudna's emotionless face. "Come back," she cried, another sob breaking from her.

Imogen cradled Laudna's pale, bloody, and broken body to her chest, rocking back and forth as new tears spilled down her freckled cheeks. She placed her forehead against Laudna's cold, paper-thin skin, her once dried lips now wet with ribbons of tears.

"Come back."

Imogen pressed her shoulder blades against the wooden door and leaned back until the metal latch softly clicked into place. Like a dam, that clink of metal released something within her, and as her head fell back against the door, a soul-deep, grief-wrought sigh escaped from between salt-stained lips. The sheer blue sleeves of her dress were smeared with dried snot and tears, and Imogen knew that when she opened her eyes and beheld the sight before her within the tiny ship cabin, fresh tears would track through the trails already dried upon her freckle-adorned cheeks.

Imogen shoved away from the door and took a shaky breath, chin trembling. Eyes still shut, she turned her head to the left and reached an immaterial hand forward.

Thoughts from the crew above and her friends in various rooms throughout the hull of the ship broke through Imogen's non-existent mental walls, and that constant, steady hum of voices settled in around her.

She was pretty sure thoughts had been bombarding her all day, yet they hadn't registered. A sea of grief had swallowed her whole, and Imogen had been slowly drowning. When she did break the surface for gasps of air, fog muddled her thoughts and clouded the way to shore.

So Imogen treaded in a state of dissociation; barely there and so very close to sinking.

Just today, she'd thought on twelve separate occasions about simply…stopping.

That sea was so vast and so cold and Imogen was *tired*.

Yet for the twelve times she nearly let herself sink, nearly let her lungs fill with water as her grief almost consumed her, Imogen pushed to the surface a thirteenth time and continued to wade even as waves pounded against her will to stay afloat.

Even now, another wave slapped Imogen in the face when she opened her eyes and was reminded of the last 24 hours. Even now, she stumbled forward on weak legs, exhausted from the constant fighting—mentally and physically—and made herself look upon the body of her best friend.

Where usually beautiful, haunting music met Imogen's mind, only deafening silence remained. Her melody was usually so full it was practically palpable, but now, Laudna's mind was a shell; hollow and quiet.

Even when sleeping, Laudna always looked like a corpse. Yet something about this moment, this unnatural stillness about Laudna only cemented the permanency of her death into Imogen's heart.

Laudna's dead.

Her own broken voice swam around in Imogen's mind.

Laudna's dead.

Imogen's boot scuffed along the floorboard and she collapsed to her knees before Laudna's body, the impact of bone on wood wrenching a wet breath from her chest. She pressed a gloved hand to her mouth and failed to stop her chin from trembling against more unshed tears.

She reached a shaking hand toward Laudna's discarded one.

Swirling dust—

White light—

Broken stone—

An ichor-stained hand in a pile of rubble—

Imogen gasped and turned her face from the memory.

Laudna's body contained the fatal wound which sundered her chest, yet Imogen felt as though Otohan's blade had pierced her heart too. Her heart bled with each beat—such a stark contrast from and painful reminder of Laudna's still sternum—and every drop of red had Laudna's name woven into the very platelets and plasma of Imogen's blood.

Each pulse in Imogen's temples was a reminder that *Laudna's gone, Laudna's gone, Laudna's gone—*

She placed a hand on Laudna's chest and hung her head.

Come back. Come back.

Imogen sniffed and bit her lip and instead croaked, "Come on." She wrestled her arms under Laudna's stick-thin body, and as if she was holding those leaves Laudna smelled of, Imogen carefully carried her body to the little bed against the cabin wall.

Her skin felt paper thin and so pale it was practically translucent, yet the smell of death—actual decay and rot—had not taken Laudna's body. She still smelled of orchids, persimmons, and of course, fallen leaves.

As she arranged Laudna on the bed, Imogen straightened her clothes and brushed her white-streaked hair out of her face. Then, she waved a hand up and down Laudna's body and the dirt, blood, and ichor dissipated.

The tear in her blouse and hole in her chest, Imogen could not fix.

She sank to her knees at the bedside and took Laudna's cold, thin hand in hers.

A wave crested—

Imogen held back a sob—

Grief disguised as brine and foam slammed into her—

Water filled her lungs—

Her throat closed up—

She couldn't breathe—

Imogen pressed a kiss to the back of Laudna's hand, leaving a trail of tears along her bony knuckles—

She fought against the tide—

Her head crested the surface—

And then Imogen took a ragged breath.

"I'm sorry," she cried, leaning her forehead against pale knuckles. "I'm so sorry."

The empty room echoed her sorrow back at her, and Imogen almost didn't recognize her own voice. It was so…dull, so…broken.

Imogen swallowed hard, sniffed, and then fought to her feet. She folded Laudna's hands on top of her stomach and finished adjusting her clothes just so.

Then, she leaned down and kissed Laudna's forehead. "We're gonna get you home," she whispered against her skin. Imogen closed her eyes and nodded, partially open lips still brushing across cold flesh. "We're gonna get you home."

She unhooked Paté from her belt and set the strange creation on Laudna's chest. Although Paté was neither alive, nor did he have eyes, Imogen almost could have sworn that even the expressionless bird skull seemed ready to weep.

Take care of her, she whispered to the rat.

Imogen sank against the side of the bed as exhaustion pulled her down. She barely got her boots off and nightclothes on before curling into a ball on the floor next to Laudna.

As restless sleep dragged Imogen under, her promise lingered in the air like an unreciprocated kiss.

Imogen's feet hit the ground, and the impact rattled her bones despite Laudna's *featherfall*. Mere moments after shoving forward, the ground quaked beneath them. She glanced behind her at the creature who slammed into the rock, maw gaped and leathery wings unfurled.

"Let's finish what we started," it growled, that animalistic voice like thunder.

He was far too close and Imogen couldn't fly—not in the state she was in. Crusted blood coated the sides of her face from when the Vrocks' cries had Stunned her. Even now her ears rang, and it certainly didn't help her balance. She teetered forward, unsure of her footing on the rocky expanse.

The creature's hot, rancid breath kissed her neck.

Her only thoughts were of Laudna. She had to get away, had to get to safety. Imogen lost her once and damn her if she'd let it happen again. She had nothing left powerful enough to block Extrovass' attacks or do any real damage, but she could hopefully ensure Laudna's safety long enough for her to reach the rest of the group.

In that split-second of hesitation during their full-out sprint, Imogen knew her fate.

Laudna's spindly fingers pulled at Imogen's wrist, but Imogen didn't even have time to cuss as a searing pain slashed across her back. She fell to a knee and let herself pull out of Laudna's grasp. In a breath, another slash of claws struck her hip and the outside of her right thigh. She collapsed onto both knees, her skin in gaping strips and burning like acid. Imogen couldn't conjure any power or spell to save herself from the teeth that punctured her shoulder.

As Extovass' jaw clamped into her and his dagger-like teeth penetrated muscle and tendon, a white flash snapped in Imogen's vision.

Run, she thought. *Please, run*.

Almost as if a candle was blown out, darkness cloaked her, and the world was snuffed into silence.

….

Laudna whirled when her black-tipped fingers closed around air, and what little her heart beat now seemed to stop entirely at the sight before her. "NO!"

Extovass chewed on Imogen's limp body. Her thin blue dress and white vest were bloodstained and became more tattered with each chomp, and gods, her shoulder and chest—he was mauling her, ribboning her flesh with its teeth.

He glanced away from his prey long enough to stare at Laudna.

Laudna's hands shook, and a deep, unbridled fury grew. Her *form of dread* expanded, limbs lengthening further, eyes and mouth darkening. Intense anger filled her gaze as she threw the same stare back at him. "*Let's go, bitch*," she hissed.

Before she could make a move, the glint of a blade caught her eye. From upon the tower, Orym leapt, Seedling drawn. He crashed into the creature and sunk the sword into its back.

Extovass roared and released Imogen, her body dropping to the stone with a wet thud. All Laudna could see was a flash of red and purple as Extovass reared with Orym on his back. In the same movement, Orym pulled Seedling out, blood spraying, and then stabbed it into what she believed to be Extovass' ear canal.

With his left hand where his shield would normally appear, Orym took a fistful of the creature's fur and held on.

She made eye contact with Orym who nodded.

That dark fire inside Laudna burned, and she yelled, throwing a *blight* at him.

The wet blood—Imogen's blood—staining his maw dried up and burned away like ash. The fur along his face fell away as if infected with mange, and his right eye, bright and burning with animalistic rage, dimmed. That didn't stop him from glaring down at her to release an earth-shaking roar.

With hope dwindling, Laudna attempted *shocking grasp*, but something went wrong; the spell didn't work. Then it was just her in her *form of dread* and this gods-damned beast. She glanced down at an unconscious Imogen and that spark of rage reignited. If she couldn't get them away, she could at least keep it away from Imogen.

She hissed and crawled over Imogen, careful not to touch her wounded body, and readied herself for any attack Extovass may throw her way. Laudna was the shield—the barrier between it and her.

She glared up at the creature and hissed, her voice like a storm, "*You cannot have her*."

In her heightened state, Laudna sensed movement beneath her. Then, a ragged gasp of air. Her heart lurched and she dared a glance down. Imogen's purple irises were dazed with pain, but she was alert. Barely, but enough.

Someone had healed her. FCG most likely, but Laudna couldn't care less about that—just that Imogen was alive.

Without even lifting her head from the stone, Imogen turned her face and reached a lightning-marked arm toward Extovass' foot. White electricity pulsed under her gloved hand and it struck him, but the *shocking grasp* had little to no effect; Extovass shrugged it off.

"Shit," Imogen breathed, eyes falling shut.

Laudna lifted an arm to protect them, but then Imogen's good hand was cradling her elongated face. The contact drew her stare from Extovass to those beautiful purple eyes.

She blinked and the world had a silvery sheen to it.

They were invisible, she realized. Imogen had cast invisibility.

Run away, Imogen said into her mind, already struggling to her feet.

Laudna couldn't think of anything other than, *You do the same*, as she got as far away from the creature as she could.

She glanced over her shoulder only to see a silvery, almost translucent Imogen collapse fifteen feet from Extovass—but fifteen feet closer to where she could see FCG stood.

Laudna didn't have time to yell before Extovass teleported and Orym came crashing to the ground. She didn't know where Ashton was—no, they were near Imogen.

She could see FCG, though, so Laudna darted toward them and toward one of the cages at the base of the tower.

"FCG!" she yelled.

The little yellow Automaton yelped, blue eyes searching around him. "Who said that!"

"It's me. I'm invisible. Imogen is really hurt, but she's also invisible." Shit. This wasn't helpful. She waved her hands, black ichor dripping from them. "She's—she's near Ashton!"

"Let her come to me and I'll give her a hug of healing," he said, that mechanical voice too chipper for the situation.

Laudna nodded even though he couldn't see it and turned back toward the fray.

Casting would end Imogen's invisibility spell, so Laudna held off for now and instead focused on Shoebill Fearne who swooped down toward Extovass.

She almost gasped in awe at the glitter and fluff that rained from the sky onto Extovass—until he began roaring. His wings were yanked back as black vines wrapped around his hulking body, tethering him to the ground.

From where Laudna stood, she could see the vines slithering under his skin like snakes, bursting from sections of his body, and then his eyes faded into a milk white before the vines sundered Extovass' form. Chunks of tusks, bones, and flesh flopped to the ground like fish on a dock, and the atmosphere stilled.

"Imogen! Laudna!" Orym called.

FCG got off his stoop and appeared to also be looking for Imogen when Laudna called back, "We're here!"

After a beat, and from somewhere close, Imogen's heavy voice: "I'm over here." Imogen appeared as the invisibility spell dropped.

"Get over here," FCG said, wheel whirring.

She swayed, and even Ashton looked taken aback at her appearance as they assisted her.

Although Laudna wanted to help Imogen, Chetney waved her toward the two cages, and after opening the locks and freeing the captives, Laudna reached a hand out toward the last survivor: Bearnie.

The next few minutes went by in a blur.

Orym rushed to Bearnie, embracing her, more captives walked by, and two Bastion soldiers might have tried to talk to her, but Laudna wasn't paying attention to any of that. Her focus was on Imogen.

Laudna brushed by Orym and Bearnie over to where Imogen sat by FCG.

Even sitting, Imogen's upper half swayed slightly and her eyes were barely open. "If we're gonna rest, FCG, then save your spells."

Gods, she sounded so tired, so weary, and she looked—beautiful, Laudna thought. Still beautiful despite the horrific wounds marring her body.

Launda clenched a fist at her side. No, she needed healing now. Sure, she could heal some with rest, and FCG's spells would replenish, but she was actively bleeding still. Her knees cracked as she knelt at Imogen's side and placed a cold hand on her shoulder.

“How are you, darling?”

It took a moment for Imogen’s eyes to meet hers. Laudna could tell she tried to smile and failed. “I’m—I’m fine, Laudna.”

Laudna tilted her head and stared at FCG. She gave him an eerie smile. “You can heal her some, yes?”

“I have enough to stop the bleeding, but that’s all I can do today.”

Imogen placed a trembling hand on FCG’s metal shoulder and said softly, “That’ll be fine, Letters. Thank you.”

Within a few moments, the bleeding ceased, and angry red gouges were all that remained. She was still left with chunks of missing flesh, claw marks the length of her forearm down her back, and a shoulder that looked like Imogen had stuck her arm in a meat grinder.

Not to mention her clothes. Imogen had lost an entire sleeve of her dress, and the lower right half had been sliced away. Her leather body suit had tears at the hip and back, and most of her outfit was stained red.

It wasn’t in any way ideal, but it would suffice for now.

Just for now.

Bearnie, Orym, Fearne, and Chetney made their way over to discuss getting out of the Valley.

Fearne put a gentle hand on Imogen’s good shoulder. Her faun eyes sparked with concern, but Imogen merely gave a faint smile and shrugged.

As they talked, Laudna only half listened. Though Fearne had exterminated Extovass, Bells Hells could not rest here. Laudna only forced herself to focus when Imogen’s soft, smooth tone pushed its way into her thoughts. She glanced up.

Imogen shifted her weight, and a sturdy hand from Orym at her hip steadied her. “I can’t teleport us right now,” she breathed. “Maybe in the mornin’.”

Laudna’s breath caught in her throat at the exhaustion in her voice.

Looking no wearier than the rest of them, Bearnie spoke up. “There are caves near here. Finding shelter in one of those will be better than hiding under the trees in the Valley.”

Laudna glanced at Imogen.

Her eyes fluttered closed, but she blinked and lifted her head, the hand on Orym’s shoulder tightening. There’s no way she’d get farther than the cave without further healing or time to rest.

“I think that sounds like the best idea at the moment,” she said softly, still eyeing Imogen. “At least until the Silver Sun can find us again.”

Fearne’s eyes widened, fingers twiddling. “I agree with Laudna.”

“Alright,” Chetney said loudly, pushing toward the front of the pack, “let the alpha lead the way.”

“Well, then shouldn’t Ashton be leading us?” Fearne retorted, a wry smile on her face.

“No! No!” Chetney cried, shaking his head. “Sit back and relax. This old motherfucker’s got this.”

Fearne winked. “Oh, I know you do, baby.”

Chetney’s eyes went wide before he cleared his throat and began leading Bells Hells through the Valley.

As they walked, Laudna’s neck craned to the side almost involuntarily as her *form of dread* pushed and stretched just beneath her gray skin. She fiddled with her black-tipped fingers, a restlessness accompanying the unease which had curled itself into a knot inside her chest. The last hour settled into her bones like cement.

Flashes of the fight appeared. Bits and pieces, like metal sparking, burst in her mind. Unbridled fury, purple lightning, and blood mingled in the metal-scented air.

Now, she glanced sidelong at Imogen who leaned a hand on Orym’s shoulder as they walked. She wanted nothing more than to take Imogen in her arms and help her along. Although Laudna knew Orym was more than capable of assisting his friend, she wanted to do something selfish for a change.

Laudna hung back to get Orym’s attention. She widened her eyes and flicked them at a weary Imogen.

No words were needed. Orym nodded and guided Imogen over to Laudna.

A small yelp escaped Imogen’s lips when she was led toward Launda—apparently blindly since her eyes had fallen shut—when the warlock’s taller figure practically wrapped around her entire body.

Even those few steps seemed to suck the remaining energy from Imogen. She could barely lift her face to stare into Laudna’s eyes. The ghost of a smile appeared, though. “Hi…”

Laudna opened an arm and pulled Imogen in. Her warmth was a welcome bit of softness in the rapidly cooling Valley, and though Imogen kept her chin high, her gaze focused on the ground. She was tired, Laudna knew, yet she remained strong for them.

She was their rock, after all. Everyone looked to her.

Laudna wasn’t sure where she could touch Imogen that wouldn’t hurt her. While most of the damage was to her right side, any bit of comfort she could offer her would most likely result in pain. So Laudna ended up stroking Imogen’s hair as they walked.

Though Imogen’s mouth didn’t move, a wispy tendril of power, like a finger tapping lazily on a windowpane, nudged against her mental walls.

Laudna almost smiled. She let Imogen in and that gentle, drawling voice filled her head. *I can sense your worry without even lookin’ into your mind*, she whispered. Even this internal voice conveyed Imogen’s exhaustion, yet she was concerned about Laudna.

And I can feel your pain without being in your body.

It’s…better.

Laudna sighed without meaning to. *You can barely stand, darling*.

Imogen’s mouth crinkled against Laudna’s shoulder. *Thank goodness I have you, then*.

Can you blame me for worrying?

I’m fine, Laudna.

Laudna nearly chuckled, but it was a heavy, disbelieving breath of air. *You almost died.*

Imogen glanced up at her, love and fatigue in her gaze. *FCG healed me.*

Barely.

I'll be fine. As if to call her out on her lie, Imogen stumbled.

It had been subtle enough the rest of the group wouldn't notice, but being pressed against her, Laudna glared.

Shit, Imogen huffed, her eyes closing.

Laudna's expression softened. *You don't need to be so strong with me, darling. I know you're in pain. I know you're exhausted. You needn't hide that*.

Imogen's fingers clenched Laudna's dress and her gait slowed.

Imogen?

She shook her head, eyes still squeezed shut. *The ground's waverin'*.

Though she already was, Laudna said, *Lean on me.*

Laudna wished she could take her pain. Wished all those wounds had been inflicted on her. She'd rather die than be that helpless in the wake of Imogen's downfall.

I lost you once, Imogen said, breathing harder. *I will not lose you again*.

I'm a bit sturdier than you, darling.

Oh, I'm plenty fuckin' sturdy.

Imogen—

No. Imogen seemed to barely be conscious, but her tone left no room for argument. *I lost you before. I won't let that happen again. Never again. Whatever god wants to take you from this life can pry you from my cold, dead hands because that is the only way you're leavin'*. She glanced up at Laudna, fire blazing in her tired eyes. *I fought Delilah fuckin' Briarwood to get you back. It'll take a whole lot more to keep me down*.

Laudna paused and faced Imogen. *And yet you almost died. You're very capable, Imogen. We both know this, but*—She sighed. *I can't lose you, either*.

I was just tryin' to protect you.

And I'm grateful for that, Imogen, but my death would just be a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'm a dead end, darling. You have so much to live for. I've lived a long life already. You're young and alive and—

Imogen stopped, her breaths beginning to sound wet and labored. *So you're allowed to throw your life away for me, but I can't do the same? You claim you're a dead end, and you talk about your life as though it's* worthless*, and I can't bear it, Laudna. You tell yourself you're a bad person and that you believe yourself to be so similar to that* bitch *Delilah that you can't tell the difference between your souls anymore.*

Imogen's eyes welled with tears, and her chin trembled not with sadness, but anger. *I told you this the day I kissed you, but you are not a bad person, Laudna. You're music in a world of harmful noise. You're light in the darkness. You're peace when I'm overwhelmed by chaos. You are beautiful and wonderful, and you are* loved*, Laudna*.

Her words resounded in Laudna's head. Music, light, peace, beauty, wonder, love—all words Laudna had never considered for herself, and the way Imogen said them with such conviction made her throat swell with the beginnings of tears.

She was dead, though, and Imogen deserved someone better. Someone she could live her life with. Someone warm and soft, not someone like her made of all cold, bony edges.

Imogen's hands found Laudna's shoulders and she grasped the material of her dress as though the latter might dematerialize into dust carried away by the wind. *Enough. Enough of those thoughts. I don't care about the way your body feels, Laudna. It's beautiful the way it is. I don't want someone who's not you.*

She shook her head. *All these things you view negatively are what make you so amazin'. Your soul is warm and gentle like a summer breeze rollin' through the Taloned Highlands. Your voice is a soft, tentative symphony which soothes my panic and smooths out the clankin' notes in my own head. The coolness of your touch keeps me grounded; it tempers the hot lightin' that scars my skin. Your ferocity and passion give you an edge that I can't help but adore because you'll do anything for those you love.*

Imogen tilted her head, a sad smile on her lips. *You're beautiful, Laudna, and I love you. I love everythin' about you.*

Laudna wrapped her spindly fingers around Imogen's arms when she teetered forward. She was so stunned by the words that she muttered, "I love you too, darling."

Imogen's fingers fisted around the dress material and she ground out, "I can't stand it when you talk about yourself in such a way." She took a moment to inhale. Then, "I wish you could see what I see in you." Her chin lowered slightly and her grasp loosened.

"Imogen," Laudna said, panic beginning to bubble. She placed a hand against Imogen's warm cheek and tilted her face up.

Imogen's eyes were closed, but a soft smile graced her lips. *That's the soothin' cool touch I was talkin' about*, she hummed.

Imogen wasn't just warm; heat radiated from her.

Laudna glanced over her shoulder at the rest of the party who continued on ahead, unaware of their conversation or halted movement. She glanced back at Imogen. "Hold on, darling."

As if her words released something in Imogen, she mumbled, *Laudna, I can't*— before her legs gave out and she collapsed to the ground.

With both hands cradling Imogen's head, Laudna shouted over her shoulder, "Ashton!"

The barbarian turned, purple crystalized hair flashing in the evening light. His eyes widened as he hurried to their sides. "What the fuck happened?"

Laudna ignored the question and fumbled for a pulse. She released a breath when she found one. "I—I'm not strong enough." She glanced up. "Can you carry her?"

Ashton nodded. "Of course. According to Bearnie, the cave's not far," they said softly.

They knelt and reached a hand toward Imogen's immobile form, but Laudna blurted, "Careful."

“It’s alright, Fun-Scary,” he said, eyes softer than usual, “I got her.”

Although she trusted Ashton with every fiber in her, Laudna’s fingers itched to reach for Imogen, yearned to touch her, hold her. Yet she refrained.

They caught up to the group, and Fearne gasped, “What happened? Is she okay?” She placed an arm around Laudna’s waist, gently pulling her in. “Is she—is she alright, Laudna?”

Laudna shrugged warily. “I’m hoping she just needs rest.”

…

Tucked away in the back of the caves, cloaked in shadow, Laudna cradled Imogen close. She kissed lavender hair and let her lips linger at the roots. Open fields and lilac greeted Laudna as she breathed Imogen in. It was a scent she’d come to associate with warmth and safety. It was a feeling she’d follow blindly knowing the destination was *her*.

I’m afraid I’m a bad person, Imogen.

I’ve heard everythin’ inside of you, Laudna. You are not a bad person.

Laudna caressed the red threaded bracelet around Imogen’s wrist between her fingers.

I called you my anchor, my tether. We’re that for each other.

Laudna’s throat bobbed at the words said so softly, so sincerely to her—*about* her—and nearly managed a smile.

Then, she slowly and meticulously mended Imogen’s shredded clothing, letting her thoughts focus on each arcane stitch instead of working herself into a spiral of worry.

Once her sheer dress had been made whole again, Laudna waved a hand and the blood stains evaporated.

No more evidence of such a terrible, deadly encounter; yet the memories could not be erased so easily.

Imogen’s bloody body—

The sound of wet flesh hitting the ground—

Laudna ground her teeth and blinked the visions away. She gently took Imogen’s lightning-marked hand in hers and planted a soft kiss on the back of her knuckles.

Imogen jerked awake, amethyst eyes blood-shot and frantic.

Laudna clutched her hand. “I’m here, darling.” She tucked loose strands of lavender hair behind an ear and cocked her head. “What happened, Imogen? Are you alright?”

Imogen blinked, breathing hard. Slowly, her gaze lifted until those stunning amethyst eyes met Laudna’s. She leaned forward ever so slightly and then halted. After what seemed like a moment of contemplation, Imogen repeated the same halting movement, but this time, with her stare affixed lower.

Laudna didn’t dare move. Half-hidden in darkness, Laudna remained so still she convinced herself she may have melted into the shadow itself.

Imogen raised a hand, lightning-touched fingertips reaching for Laudna's chin. Slowly, purposefully, her index and thumb caressed the soft part of jaw between chin and throat.

Static danced along Laudna's flesh at the contact.

Then, Imogen leaned forward once more, lids lowered as her eyes focused near where her hand cradled Laudna's jaw like a sacred relic. This time, she didn't halt or second-guess her actions because just as Laudna put the pieces together, Imogen's lips were on hers.

It was patient and soft, and oh so *gentle*. Imogen's lips moved like her drawl—slow and smooth.

The tension in Laudna's shoulders eased as she sank into the kiss. She let herself *feel* Imogen's mouth against hers, and she couldn't imagine a more perfect sensation.

It was just one tender, beautiful kiss.

Then, Imogen broke away, though she did not relent her touch. She settled her forehead against Laudna's and took a breath. "Bad dream," she muttered.

"Feeling better?"

Imogen smiled against Laudna's mouth. "Much."

Imogen's body ached and her skin burned where her lightning marks stretched across her limbs. She glanced at her bare legs and then the sheer blue dress under her vest, the damage done in battle the only indicator of what happened. The proof remained on her skin in the form of angry pink gouges, but she couldn't recall the details.

Though exhaustion weighed on her, she dreaded falling asleep because she feared she would dream. Imogen hadn't slept through the night in months because most of the time she woke up screaming, and she hadn't slept at all in the past few days.

Despite having a better handle on her powers, Imogen almost felt like her dreams became more uncontrollable. It was as if becoming Exulted had strengthened Ruidus' hold on her because that urge to delve deeper and give in only weakened her ability to resist its call.

For the years that Liliana spent saying nothing more than 'Run,' perhaps Imogen at last knew why. Giving in would perhaps be irreversible, and she believed her mother had found that out the hard way.

Why her, though, Imogen still did not know. She had guesses, of course, but couldn't quite wrap her head around the fact she herself could be the key.

The last few dreams Liliana had been more distant, yet her words had held even more desperation, which was strange since Imogen felt like her mother had never been so close. She was thankful Liliana never showed, never physically presented herself in the dreams because Imogen didn't know if she'd be able to look at her.

Not after what she'd done for Ludinus.

Not after what she'd done to that dark-winged angel who had appeared to save the Tempest.

Not after all the destruction Liliana had played a part in causing.

Imogen knew in her heart that her mother was not bad. She'd felt her mind, seen the core of her. Whether Liliana was being controlled or just misled, she was not evil.

That's what hurt Imogen so much—her mother was serving an asshole like Ludinus when deep down, she believed her mother to be...good.

Imogen closed her eyes and sighed.

A wave of vertigo-laced exhaustion washed over her and Imogen placed a palm against the wooden wall. After it passed, she made her way outside.

With the warmer months here, she'd put up a hammock out on the deck so her nightly terrors would not be confined to the same room as the rest of Bells Hells. It helped, she thought, to sleep in the open. It was as if her brain could sense the freedom, so her anxiety didn't spike as much. She did, however, miss sleeping next to Laudna. She'd grown used to having her there, her cool presence comforting when fear threatened to swallow Imogen whole.

On the upper deck of the airship, Imogen found Laudna sitting in the hammock. Though dawn peeked over the horizon, none of Bells Hells had slept since they'd all just stumbled back to the ship after a hard-fought battle, and Laudna didn't seem to be the exception. She rocked slowly back and forth, her long, thin legs dangling over the short end as though she sat on a tree branch. Her fingers idly stroked Pâté's mangy hair as she hummed an airy, wordless tune.

Imogen leaned a shoulder on the nearest mast and reached out with her mind. Laudna's soft, eerily beautiful melody of thoughts swelled toward her like an ocean wave. It climbed toward Imogen, soaking her in the music which soothed her soul, and like the tide going out to sea, pulled her in. As Laudna's essence enveloped her, she tapped immaterial fingertips on the tether which bound them. *Can I join ya?*

Laudna blinked and glanced sidelong, her pale face lighting with a small smile. *Hi*. She patted the space beside her and Imogen almost managed a smile. *You're always welcome, darling*.

Imogen took a wavering breath, but the air didn't quite fill her lungs.

Laudna, ever observant, frowned. *What's wrong, darling?*

Imogen shook her head as she eased into the hammock next to Laudna. *Just tired*.

"Imogen..." Concern filled that gentle whisper.

Another shake of her head. "I'm fine, Laudna."

"Nothing else is bothering you?"

Imogen sank into Laudna and leaned her head on the other woman's shoulder. Words took too much energy, so she thought, *Just tired*. Her eyes flitted shut as she settled in and Laudna resumed her gentle rocking.

The cool summer morning air played with her lavender hair, and the scent of fallen leaves met her nose—Laudna's scent of fallen leaves, orchids, and persimmons.

Imogen breathed her in as they rocked, and sleep wrapped its arms around her. A flash of red wind and dust drew a sharp inhale from between her lips and she shook off sleep's grasp.

Laudna placed a kiss on her head and said, *Are you alright?*

She nodded, cheek brushing softly against Laudna's dress. *Just tired*.

You've said that three times already. When's the last time you slept, darling?

Imogen didn't have an answer. Along with all the voices around her, she felt like whatever tether she had to Ruidus tugged at her periphery constantly. There was nothing she could do to escape it. Some days that made her feel powerful, but most times it left her wary and drained.

You need to rest.

Imogen swallowed her trepidation as she tossed around what to say—how much to say. *I don't want to quite yet*.

Darling, you can barely keep your eyes open.

Even as Laudna said the words, Imogen found herself fighting to keep the darkness away. She wanted to sleep, but that red storm loomed just around the corner. To occupy her mind, she fiddled with a bit of material on Laudna's dress.

A gentle hand cupped Imogen's jaw and pulled her gaze upward. Laudna's eyes glinted in the blue morning light. "Imogen, I cannot read your thoughts, dear, but I know there is something wrong."

Imogen wrung her hands, grimacing. "Is it ridiculous if I say I'm scared?"

Something in Laudna's gaze shuttered. "No. Never." She slid her hand in between Imogen's and held them still. The contact was gentle, but firm—a reminder of her presence. "What scares you?"

She took a breath. "Sleepin'." Then she tilted her head and clarified, "Well, dreamin'."

Laudna glanced away, nodding slowly. She whispered, "Is that why you've been sleeping out here?"

Imogen nodded. "I feel guilty about wakin' everyone up every time I dream, especially since it has become more frequent."

"We all understand. Nobody holds that against you."

"That doesn't change the way I feel about it."

Laudna inhaled deeply, which for someone who rarely had to breathe, drew Imogen's attention. She was thankful for it because that warded fatigue off for that much longer. Another breath.

"I've missed you," Laudna whispered. She shook her head after a beat and said, "I'm sorry. That was selfish."

Imogen planted a kiss on Laudna's shoulder. "That's not selfish. It's how you feel." The ghost of a smile picked at her mouth. "And I've missed you, too. I miss sleepin' beside you like we used to."

Laudna gave her leg a squeeze. "Is it better? Sleeping out here?"

Imogen shrugged. "I don't feel like I'm trapped as much out here, but I feel more vulnerable. I felt safe with you by my side."

"Would you let me sleep out here with you?"

It took a few moments for the sentence to sink in, and when it did, Imogen chuckled. "I'm such an idiot. I don't know why I didn't think of that."

Laudna shrugged. "You were just thinking of us and didn't allow yourself to think about you."

Imogen took a deep breath and did her best to keep her eyes open. She tried to speak but found her voice depleted like her quickly fleeting energy. She nudged her cheek against Laudna's shoulder again and whispered, *Please stay*.

At that, Laudna seemed to sink farther into the hammock as she pulled Imogen closer into her side. *Of course, darling*. Silence fell as Laudna's long fingers caressed Imogen's scarred hands. The pad of her index finger ran along the marked grooves which indented her flesh in streaks of purple lightning. *Do they hurt anymore?*

They're sore, kind achy, but not painful.

Good. That's good. An hour ago, you could barely stand me touching you.

She hummed an acknowledgment. *I don't remember that*.

What do you remember?

Imogen peered up at Laudna's face which was drawn. *Everythin's kinda blurry.*

That was partially true. Imogen recalled flashes of blood, claws, and blades. Sections of the fight zoomed in, coming into focus with crystal clear clarity, but then other parts were

unfocused and cryptic. It hurt her brain to try and root through each interaction and attempt to separate reality from imagined scenario.

Imogen laced her fingers through Laudna's black-tipped ones and held their hands on her thigh. She was wary to ask but did anyway. *What happened?*

Instead of answering, Laudna shifted which caused Imogen to jolt from the brink of sleep. She lifted her eyes once more only to find Laudna's dark eyes scanning her body. She touched a cool finger to the scars visible just under her sheer dress and something like a shudder went through her.

Her head tilted. "Darling, why are these gouges still here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mended your dress because his claws had nearly torn it to shreds, but—" Laudna's beautiful dark eyes lifted and met Imogen's. "Why haven't you healed?"

"Letters didn't have enough—"

Laudna shifted her entire body toward her and cupped both hands on either side of Imogen's face. "Darling, are these from the fight against Extovass still?" Her gaze slid along the remnants of the injuries.

Imogen blinked, struggling to fight for authority over her movements since exhaustion tore all control from her. "We just got back from the Valley," she said slowly, shaking her head. "I don't understand..."

Laudna's thumbs caressed her cheeks in soft, smooth motions, but her expression held panic and concern. "Imogen, darling, the confrontation with Extovass in the Grey Valley was two days ago."

It took a few seconds for the meaning of Laudna's words to sink in. She blinked. "What?" Imogen chewed on her lip. Blood, claws, and blades flashed through her mind again, but the details didn't elucidate. Yet she was sure that had happened only a few hours ago. Imogen turned her face toward the edge of the airship, toward the endless expanse of sky, and tried to organize the timeline of events in her head, but whole gaps of time seemed to be missing.

"Look at me."

Imogen wracked her brain for answers, yet all that appeared were glimpses of that impending storm. Flashes of vicious red replaced any memories she might have of battling Extovass and saving Orym's sister and her compatriots. She knew it happened, but Imogen had no independent recollection of it happening.

"Look at me, darling."

Weariness pulled at her. It was a soft, gentle tug like a parent tucking their child in at night.

Red—

Streaks of lightning—

Deafening, destructive wind—

That terrifying, ominous storm which reached its gnarled hands toward her—

Imogen jerked away from the edge of sleep she teetered toward only to find Laudna's dark eyes flitting along her figure. Both her hands were clasped around Imogen's, her cool skin tempering the warm scars. Laudna relented a hand to cup Imogen's flushed cheek and brushed a thumb along her freckles.

Her voice was low and calm, as though she chose her words carefully. "Have you been forcing yourself to stay awake?"

Imogen's mind could hardly put meaning to Laudna's words, and it took every ounce of her will to focus, dissect the sentence, and then replied, "Laudna, I—"

"If you had rested, you would have healed by now, yet your body is still marred by these horrid claw marks," Laudna whispered, hints of anger weaved throughout her worry. "Imogen."

She couldn't make her eyes focus.

"Imogen, have you been keeping yourself from sleeping?"

Imogen closed her eyes and sank into Laudna's touch. She took a breath, then another.

Sleep called to her like a siren's song.

She was so tired—

That red storm hurtled toward her, tearing at her mind, and threatened to cast her into cold darkness.

Imogen inhaled sharply and her eyes snapped open again.

This time, Laudna gazed at her with visible apprehension. She muttered, "You have."

"I'm sorry, Laudna," Imogen mumbled, laying her forehead on Laudna's shoulder.

"Darling, why haven't you come to me? Why haven't you told me this?"

Imogen shrugged. She didn't have the energy for words. After several moments of silence filtered by the gentle breeze, she said, *It shouldn't be your burden to bear*.

Laudna released a breath. Then, she tilted Imogen's face up toward her. *How many times have you reassured me that I am not a burden? How many times have you seen the worth in me when all I saw was a dead end?* Laudna continued before Imogen could decide if she wanted an answer or not. *You are not a burden. These nightmares of yours are not a burden. They are part of you, and though I hate that you have to deal with them, I love you. I can hate those awful storms and love you, which I do.*

Laudna reached an arm behind Imogen's head and carded her fingers through her lavender hair. She said thoughtfully, *Do you remember how you'd always clutch my hand whenever we'd take the cable cars?*

Imogen almost chuckled. *God, I still hate those fuckin' things*.

And isn't that why you'd take my hand? Because they scared you?

Yes, Imogen admitted. She focused through the fatigue and said, *Nothin' seems quite as scary when you're at my side*.

Laudna's hand made another sweep through Imogen's hair. *Did it feel burdensome when you sought solace in me during those cable rides?*

No. It helped—quite a bit, actually—knowin' you were there and you weren't scared. You anchored me, eased my anxiety.

And that's all I wish to be for you—an anchor, Laudna whispered. *The cable cars are something you fear, same as these dreams. You did not shy away from me when you feared those, so you needn't feel like a burden seeking my help when you must face these dreams*.

Imogen huffed a bit of air through her nose. *These dreams are way fuckin' scarier than the cable cars*.

Laudna nodded. *I understand that, but the situations are similar. I cannot ease your fear or prevent you from traveling into the storm, but I can stay by your side. I can hold you and help you through*. She clutched Imogen's hand. *Your fears are not a burden. They are real, and they are a part of you, and asking for help does not make those fears any more invasive in our relationship. Knowing does not prohibit me from loving you, nor does it make you any harder to love*.

Imogen laced her fingers through Laudna's but couldn't find words. She simply existed in the moment, feeling her presence, the coolness of her touch easing some of the heat of her marks.

I would do anything for you, Laudna said, grazing her thumb over the back of Imogen's hand. *I would gladly hold you every night if that meant you could sleep peacefully. You—along with all the fucking shit you face—are not a burden. You are a gift and a light in my life which used to be shrouded in darkness. You brought me back from death*.

Though I didn't fully know it, Imogen said, *I loved you, even then. When you died, I felt like a part of my soul had been stripped from me. In those days you were gone, I felt so alone*.

Laudna raised her right wrist, revealing the red thread bracelet and the serpent ring. *I may not always be able to come into your dreams with you, but this bracelet is your reminder that you are not alone*.

Imogen shook her head. *Sometimes the dreams feel so isolatin', you know? I get carried into the storm, and all that surrounds me is red dust and chaos*. She took a shaky breath. *I get so close to bein' swept away*. Then, a smile picked at the corner of her lips. *Then I remember you and I latch onto the thought of you—your essence. You keep me from bein' dragged under*.

Don't be afraid to fly, but know that I will always extend my hand if you fear you'll come undone. Laudna rested her forehead against Imogen's. *As long as you need grounded, I will not let you go. I'll hold fast to you in the storm*.

Imogen smiled. *Tethered hearts*.

Tethered souls.

Another forceful wave of exhaustion washed over Imogen, and when red peeked through, she clutched Laudna's hand tighter.

Laudna squeezed back, her slender fingers strong and steady. *I've got you*, she whispered. *I'm right here. I've got you*.

The storm's been knockin' on my door for days, Imogen breathed, teeth clenched.

You are not alone. You're safe.

Laudna's presence filled Imogen, and her beautiful melody of thoughts eased the panic within her like warm water on achy bones. Sleep called to her, and this time, its siren song

bewitched her. It was Laudna's song, and from somewhere at the back of her mind, her love hummed softly.

Imogen let herself be swept toward sleep, toward a long overdue rest, and as Laudna murmured the tune, her melody chased away the impending storm.

Her body relaxed; all tension that had built up trying to stay awake, melted.

Laudna was at her side, a gentle, steady reminder as her thoughts echoed, *I am here. You're safe. You're not alone*.

Like the clearing of the night sky after a storm, an endless expanse of stars greeted Imogen on the cusp of sleep. Laudna's beautiful, dark melody was the expanse of space, and her words, carried on a gentle wind, adorned Imogen's mind like the stars.

Part of Imogen feared the storm's return, but she simply clung to Laudna.

She was not alone.

She would never face this alone.

I am here, Laudna said. *Sleep, darling. I am right here*.

Imogen let go—not of Laudna, but her fear—and allowed herself to be carried away by sleep's outstretched hand toward the dark, starry expanse formed by Laudna's music.

Tethered hearts. Tethered souls.

Dreamless at last.

Imogen tucked her hair behind an ear as her apprehension grew. Laudna often remarked at her beauty, at the prettiness of her scars and the ease in which Imogen wielded her power. However, Imogen only saw her mother. Only saw that which made her like Liliana.
It only proved how sometimes the most beautiful things could be poisonous.

Imogen ran a gloved finger across the small inscription at the base of the statue and read the sentence again. This man—the man important and revered enough that stick-in-his-ass Lord de Rolo would build a statue for—was gone because of her mother. He was trapped in a lens to be utilized by Ludinus in whatever fucked up way he saw fit to implement his plan.
Imogen had tried getting through to her, yet it hadn't been enough.

She hadn't been enough.

She pressed a hand to her mouth and then looked up at Lady de Rolo. "Do you know anythin' about despisin' your family? About bein' ashamed of who your parent is? About wantin' nothin' to do with their name?"

A shadow passed over Lady Vex'ahlia's eyes. She was quiet for a moment before she said, "I know exactly what that is like."

When Bells Hells are in Whitestone during 3x76, Imogen wanders into the Greyfields away from her tether, from Laudna, and she begins to spiral thinking about the Solstice, her mother, Ludinus, and what all of it means. A conversation with Lady Vex'ahlia de Rolo helps Imogen ground herself, but perhaps Vex hadn't appeared solely for a comforting conversation.

While Gelvaan was beautiful in its own humble way, comprised of worker folk and simple, sturdy buildings, Whitestone sustained an elegant edge as though gold thread weaved throughout the fabric of the city. Even the poorest of their people were well off it seemed. It flourished under the rule of the de Rolos.

The warm spring breeze carded through Imogen's lavender hair and soothed the heat of her lightning scars which had spread to whole facets of her body in the last few months. As she walked, she noted the various trees throughout the streets bloomed with white and pale pink buds, and the leaves of the Parchwood Timberlands almost looked like emeralds against the clear blue sky. Everything displayed an air of regality—even the landscape.

Imogen felt particularly out of place in her simple sheer dress, leather bodysuit, well-worn boots, and yellow scarf. Compared to the majesty around her, she looked like a commoner. Well, she was a commoner. She came from a town of pastures and farmland; she'd grown up working as a stable hand.

She'd been afraid to touch anything in the castle for fear of breaking or tainting it. Especially when Lady Gwendolyn had been so scared of her, Laudna, and Fearne, though particularly Laudna.

Sure, Laudna could look scary to those who didn't know her, but even the scariest things could be beautiful if given a chance.

Imogen tucked her hair behind an ear as her apprehension grew. Laudna often remarked at her beauty, at the prettiness of her scars and the ease in which Imogen wielded her power. However, Imogen only saw her mother. Only saw that which made her like Liliana.

It only proved how sometimes the most beautiful things could be poisonous.

Imogen hadn't been able to stand being in the clean, respectable castle, and in an overwhelming moment of disgrace, she'd slipped away and didn't bother explaining herself to Laudna.

I'll be back, Laudna, she said as she made her way onto the cobblestone streets just beyond the castle walls.

Would you like company, darling?

No, thank you. I'd just like a little time with my thoughts.

Alright. Holler if you need anything.

I will.

Imogen held Laudna's voice close to her heart. The last time Bells Hells had been in Whitestone, Laudna had been dead. Imogen had been so caught up in her grief that she hadn't fully experienced the magnificence of Whitestone. It was strange to have been in the city before but not really seen it. She'd been too blinded, too focused on one thing: bringing Laudna back.

Part of her feared that when she returned to the castle, Laudna would be dead. That her resurrection and the months that had passed since then had been a dream. That getting to love her and be with her would turn out to be nothing more than a fabrication of her mind.

Imogen's empty hand felt cold, strange. She kept rubbing her fingers across her palm as if that would cause Laudna's hand to materialize.

Laudna was safe, she reminded herself. Safe and alive.

Alive. Much like the atmosphere of Whitestone.

Everything here seemed so full of life—the people, the streets, its creatures, and wildlife. Imogen marveled at everything as she walked, and she became so engrossed in studying the colors, sights, and smells, that she didn't realize she'd reached the outskirts of the city until she'd wandered upon the Greyfields.

Through the gate and into the open expanse of soft, green grass and hedges, she noted a building. As she neared, she realized it was the Matron of Ravens' temple, and in close proximity to the temple, stood two statues. The larger appeared to be the Matron herself, her blank face and robes looming over the smaller statue.

Imogen approached, astonished at the intricate design and beauty of the second statue—the winged man. His long hair had been carved half up with loose strands in a bun. He wore a vestige which bore symbols painstakingly carved into the stone between sections of the breastplate, and his wings—large and powerful, curved around him.

Imogen took in the details of his face—sharp cheekbones, blank, intense eyes, and an expression of stony certainty as though he knew his purpose and would give his life for it.

Stoic, but beautiful.

She glanced down at the small plaque at the base of the man's feet. *The Champion of the Raven. In memory of friendship, sacrifice, and the day that he carries us all upon the threshold and beyond*.

The Champion of the Raven.

She looked back up at the face hewn from stone. He seemed...familiar.

A flash of black sliced across Imogen's mind—back to the day when everything went to hell. A broken earth elemental, a bloodied and paralyzed Keyleth, the merciless Otohan Thull whose blade sought to end of the Tempest, and...black feathers. Raven feathers.

It was the winged angel, she realized. The dark angel who had saved the Voice of the Tempest. The dark angel whom her mother had banished into purgatory within the lens.

Imogen ran a gloved finger across the small inscription at the base of the statue and read the sentence again. This man—the man important and revered enough that stick-in-his-ass Lord de Rolo would build a statue for—was gone because of her mother. He was trapped in a lens to be utilized by Ludinus in whatever fucked up way he saw fit to implement his plan.

Imogen had tried getting through to her, yet it hadn't been enough.

She hadn't been enough.

She wondered if being Liliana's daughter meant anything. Imogen previously believed Liliana had spent almost ten years trying to protect her, but after the betrayal at the Key, she wondered if it had been manipulation all along. In the end, her mother had been nothing more than a follower of Ludinus.

With each day that passed, Imogen's resentment for the Temult name grew. It connected her to Liliana, and she wanted *nothing* to do with the choices her mother had made—wanted nothing connecting her to a person who would willingly assist Ludinus Da'leth in destroying millions of innocent lives to ensure the reign of a select couple thousand.

Imogen chewed the inside of her cheek and wondered if those they wished to save would ever be able to put their faith in her. She'd barely gained the trust of Lady Keyleth during their visit to Zephrah, and that was only after Orym had vouched for her.

"We're tryin' to find a way back for you," she whispered. "*I'm* tryin'. I'm tryin' to right my mother's wrongs." She caressed the tip of one of the Champion's wings, the cold of the curved surface seeping through her glove. "I'm sorry."

"Please don't touch that."

Imogen jumped, whirling.

Lady Vex'ahlia, dressed in hunting leathers of dark browns and blues, armaments absent, entered under the east archway of the Greyfields from the Parchwood.

"Lady de Rolo," she gasped, bowing her head. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean any harm."

Even in well-worn attire, Lady Vex'ahlia looked regal. She tilted her head. A small smile appeared, yet sadness dimmed her eyes. "I know you didn't. I'm just rather…protective of it."

The intensity of her focus waned, and her expression morphed into one of stony detachment.

The realization hit Imogen like a fist to the gut. Her eyes flitted to the Champion of the Raven who bore an almost identical expression Lady de Rolo had made. As Imogen stared, she could see the similarities in the bones structure, in the undertone of contempt, in the intensity yet gentleness Lady Vex'ahlia shared with the man carved in stone.

Invisible tendrils of her power leeched from Imogen, seeking Lady de Rolo's mind. She pulled back. Instead, Imogen nodded at the statue and said, "You share the same face."

Lady Vex'ahlia clasped her hands in front of her, wrung her fingers once, and then folded them together. She didn't look at Imogen for a long while since her gaze had fallen upon the Champion's stone face. Her brows knitted, throat bobbing. "We do," she said softly.

Imogen extended her power a little, just so she could get a feel for the Lady's emotions, though she doubted she needed to.

Sorrow greeted her. An old, voracious sorrow that nearly knocked the air from her. It was a sorrow Imogen knew too well—one she had nearly drowned in during the few weeks Laudna had been gone.

"How are you two—" She ventured, pointing a finger between Lady Vex'ahlia and the Champion of Ravens.

Lady Vex'ahlia squinted and blinked away invisible tears. She lifted her chin and sniffed once before she said softly, "That man is my brother." A sad smile. "My twin brother."

Imogen didn't doubt Lady Keyleth had informed the Lord and Lady de Rolo of the events which transpired during the Apogee Solstice, yet this statue hadn't just been built; it wasn't in memorial of the Champion's recent downfall. Though still pristine, it showed minor signs of age—weathering and slight imperfections which would occur with the passage of time. There was something she didn't know.

"He wasn't here the last time." She shook her head, searching for better words. "When we sought your help with Laudna, I mean." More eloquent words escaped her. "He wasn't here."

Lady Vex'ahlia must have known her real question because she said, "My brother has been dead for over thirty years."

Imogen's heart dropped.

She pointed to the inscription on the archway above the statue. "He serves the Matron of Ravens. He is her Champion."

"Oh," was all Imogen managed. She hadn't known the weight of that reality.

Lady Vex'ahlia stepped forward, moving her hands from in front of her and clasping them at her back. "To this day, I am indebted to him."

Imogen had so many questions, yet she knew this was a personal story, and one she had no right to. She nodded and bit her lip. Then she glanced away toward the statue once more.

The warm spring breeze filled the space between them for a moment before Lady de Rolo said, "May I speak freely?"

Imogen scoffed and waved a hand. "You're the Lady of Whitestone. I believe you could say whatever you wish."

A breath of air escaped her nose. “While that is true, I do wish to be polite.” She cleared her throat and brushed a stray strand of dark hair from her face. “Her name is Laudna, right?”

Imogen nodded.

“When you came here seeking my help, I kept my distance, and I apologize. It was never my intent to be rude or cruel.”

Imogen shook her head. “Those words never crossed my mind. I knew the risk you were putting all of Whitestone in when you found out about Del—about who lived within Laudna. Lord de Rolo made that quite clear.” A chuckle died in her throat. “I am forever indebted to you for what you—the de Rolo family—and Miss Trickfoot did.” Her next sentence ended in venom. “I understand why you’d try and stay away, especially with the possibility of bringing that *bitch* back.”

Lady Vex’ahlia loosed a humorless chuckle. “While I agree on that sentiment, it wasn’t because of her that I did not near.” The corner of her mouth twitched. “I kept my distance because I saw my brother in you. You came here bearing the body of someone you loved, begging anyone who’d listen to help you do *anything* to bring her back.”

Imogen inhaled and then slowly released the breath. If she’d been given the chance, Imogen would have dropped to her knees and begged the Lord and Lady. She would have given anything and everything. She would have given her life for Laudna’s.
Imogen brushed away a tear before it could fall.

The Lady continued. “Your arrival here re-opened a wound that had started to close after thirty years, and I couldn’t stand it. You and she were parallels to my past, to memories I don’t possess but merely know of. Of a sacrifice my brother endured so I could return.”

“Return?” she whispered. “Where from?”

“Death.” Imogen’s breath caught, but Lady Vex’ahlia continued. “I was killed inside the Matron of Ravens’ temple, her sunken tomb, and my brother gave his life for mine. He demanded she take him instead.” She folded her arms across her chest. “So when I saw you, shattered and barely holding on amid your grief over the body of that young woman—who in a past life had been made to look like me—and imploring we bring her back, I saw my brother. I imagined him pleading with the Matron of Ravens over my soul.

“Seeing how broken you were awakened a lot of extremely painful memories for me. I remembered my debt to my brother and how I am alive today because of his deal.” She took a breath. “I could see that look in your eyes—that look of desperation to the point of inconsolable, illogical action. Because I’d felt the same. If there had been anything I could have done to stop the death of my brother and his eventual ascension as Champion, gods know I would have fucking done it. I would have given my life right back for him if it had changed the outcome.”

Lady Vex’ahlia stared Imogen in the eyes and her gaze sliced to the latter’s core. “I saw the despair within you, and it would have been really fucking stupid for you to try and wager your soul for hers. The only person you would have been able to gamble with would have been that *bitch* Delilah Briarwood, and she would have taken both your lives instead of just Laudna’s.”

Imogen hadn't realized her desperation had been so apparent, yet she'd felt every ounce of it over and over again like a tidal wave crashing over her. Her thoughts had been a storm of apologies and pleadings that swirled and collided within her mind, and nothing—*nothing*—calmed them.

Please, please, please.

Bring her back.

I'm so sorry, Laudna.

I couldn't save you.

I'm so sorry I couldn't save you.

Please.

Someone—anyone—bring her back. Please bring her back.

Please.

Please.

PLEASE.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

For every moment Laudna remained dead, Imogen hadn't been able to think anything else.

Lady Vex'ahlia moved closer, and Imogen almost retreated a step back, but she held her ground despite the torrent of thoughts raging within her. "If I could save you from doing something insanely stupid during your mourning and hopelessness, I wanted to. If I could save you from ending up like my brother and leaving the woman you love here to live without you like I must, then I would."

Imogen swallowed. "And you did," she said softly.

She smirked. "I also apologize for my husband. The Briarwoods—" Lady Vex'ahlia released a breath of air, her mouth a thin-lined half smirk. "Well, let's just say he perhaps has the most reason to hate those people more than anyone."

"From the way he acted, I devised as much," Imogen said. She shoved down the truth—the fact they hadn't killed her, that Delilah had returned—and instead said, "You know now what Delilah did to Laudna, so even if Lord de Rolo only lent us aid because of you, then I still thank you."

Lady Vex'ahlia crossed her arms, and her right brow rose slightly. "Percival is very good at living in the present now. He's good at focusing on what he has and what he doesn't want to lose. He spent so much of his youth living in the past, focusing solely on revenge, so I had to remind him of that." She shrugged. "Funnily enough, he's actually the reason I died in that tomb."

Imogen gaped, but the Lady waved her hand. "It's quite alright. However, I do still use that to my advantage sometimes." She grinned, a youthful, mischievous glint in her eyes. "Utilize the old "you killed me, so now you owe me" schtick." Another wave of her hand. "Anyway, I had to remind him of someone else"—she pointed at the Champion—"who had done whatever he could to bring me—the other half of himself—back."

“It was so long ago, though,” Imogen said and glanced away when visions of the woman before her flashed to cold, pale skin and unseeing eyes. Those images of a dead Lady Vex’ahlia morphed into Laudna, including the jagged cut ears and dark hair. She shook her head, willing them away. “Laudna’s death—her first death, rather—too. It could have been so easy for you to brush us off. Chalk it up to past regrets.”

“Just because we move forward doesn’t mean the past can’t catch up,” Lady Vex’ahlia said quietly.

Imogen huffed a humorless laugh. “I’ve never been able to escape my past, and I certainly don’t think I can flee the fate of my future.”

A somber, knowing expression passed over Lady Vex’ahlia. “Yes,” she nodded slowly, “Keyleth has offhandedly mentioned your lineage.”

Imogen grimaced. With a shake of her head, she said, “I didn’t choose this. Any of this. For most of my life I hated this power. It’s isolatin’ and lonely despite hearin’ the spectrum of emotion of the world around you.” She pressed a hand to her mouth and then looked up at Lady de Rolo. “Do you know anythin’ about despisin’ your family? About bein’ ashamed of who your parent is? About wantin’ nothin’ to do with their name?”

A shadow passed over Lady Vex’ahlia’s eyes. She was quiet for a moment before she said, “I know exactly what that is like.”

Imogen nodded. She grazed a finger along the surface of the circlet but caught herself before she could fiddle. “So you know, then? Who she is to me?”

A nod. “Liliana Temult. Your mother.”

Imogen’s scars began to crackle at the surge of anger. Not enough to harm, but enough that she had to clench and unclench her hands to disperse the energy elsewhere. “I bear her face, her blood, her powers, and sometimes I want nothin’ to do with her.” Through gritted teeth, she said, “I tried to do anythin’ to separate myself from her, but I find I’ve only grown to resemble her more, and I *hate* it. I feel corrupted by her just through association—just from bein’ her daughter. If I could remove any part of me that mirrors her, I would.”

Imogen closed her eyes and turned her head. She let her power rumble within her core, allowed herself to loosen the reigns a little bit. She didn’t have to look to know her scars faintly glowed purple. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—to say all that.”

“No, I understand completely. Trust me, I really do.” Lady Vex’ahlia placed a hand on Imogen’s shoulder, and at that moment, she was grateful for the circlet—grateful her mind couldn’t immediately intrude on Lady de Rolo’s thoughts. She bit her lip.

Lady Vex’ahlia breathed, “Our father had no love for us—me and my brother.” She chuckled. “I actually remember saying something very similar to him when my brother and I returned years later. ‘If I could pull the blood of you from my veins and give it back, I would’.”

She shook her head and made a face. “My point is that you are not defined by blood. Sharing similarities with your mother does not make you like her. It’s your actions and heart which define you, and if you wish to walk a different path than her, then create one.”

Imogen shut out her own thoughts of the swirling red storm, her mother's eyes, and the tug of Ruidus which called to her. "I'm scared I won't have that choice."

"How so?"

"My power comes from Ruidus; I'm Ruidusborn. All of us Ruidusborn are linked somehow, and I'm terrified that whatever power—whether it's Predathos, Ludinus, or some machination he may have created—will take my agency as it has so many others. I'm terrified I won't be able to fight the source of my power to stay afloat in the red ocean and not become a part of it."

Lady Vex'ahlia studied her with considering eyes. "What will you do if that were to happen?"

Imogen huffed a sigh, and after a moment, she gave a weak shrug. "I've heard my friends' thoughts. They've already come up with a plan that if I turn, they'll...take me out."

"Does that scare you?"

A shake of her head. "It's relievin' actually. I wouldn't ever want my power to be used against those I love—the one I love."

Imogen's heart strained at the thought of Laudna. Gods, she missed her. She wanted nothing more than to be near her, kiss her, listen to her melodic thoughts which were like a balm to the fire that blazed in her head. She pushed past the barriers of the circlet and reached for Laudna's mind.

Laudna?

After a moment, she replied in a breathy tone, *Imogen? Is something wrong, darling?*

No, nothin' is wrong. I just...wanted to hear your voice.

Where have you gone, darling?

Imogen got the feeling Laudna didn't just mean where she had walked to. Instead of going into the thoughts which had overtaken her mind the last half an hour—her mother, Ludinus, Ruidus, her power, and the inevitable battle ahead—she tucked that conversation into her pocket to perhaps have in person at another time. At a more private time.

Imogen bit her lip and instead replied, *Went for a walk.* She chuckled in her mind. *Funny story—I ran into Lady de Rolo.*

What?

It's alright. We're just talkin'. I'll be back soon.

Alright.

Imogen hesitated but then whispered, *Laudna?*

Yes, darling?

I love you.

And I love you, darling. Come back to me soon, please.

Always.

And Imogen?

Yes, Laudna?

I can't always follow where you go, so don't wander too far from me.

I'll never be far from you.

Promise?

With all my heart.

A half-smile blossomed on Imogen's lips as she looked up at Lady Vex'ahlia who stared intently at her. "Were you talking to her?"

Imogen shook her head, blinking. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"No, it's quite alright. I just wasn't sure. You had a distant look in your eyes, and I realized your mind was elsewhere."

"Just checkin' in."

Lady Vex'ahlia clasped her hands behind her back once more. "I don't want to keep you." She gestured with her chin at the direction Imogen had entered the Greyfields. "Go be with her."

Imogen's heart swelled, and for a moment, her mind held nothing but the soft, haunting music that was Laudna. Her voice, smell, touch—it encompassed Imogen like a veil, soothing her thoughts which rattled within the barriers of the circlet like a silver coin in a cup.

It was as if Imogen had been laid to rest in a blanket of fallen leaves surrounded by orchids and persimmons, and she wanted nothing more than to fall asleep there with Laudna at her side.

She wanted nothing more than Laudna.

Laudna, with her cold skin, bony angles, and dark eyes which soothed Imogen when her scars seared. Laudna, with her raspy, quiet voice and gentle heart, which grounded Imogen when outside thoughts berated her like that swarm of bees she'd grown to know all too well. Laudna, whose beauty was like Catha—mystifying and surrounded by darkness, yet radiant despite it all.

Imogen wanted all Laudna was, despite Delilah. In spite of Delilah.

Laudna was not Delilah, and it was Laudna whom Imogen loved like breathing.

I'm findin' my way back to you, she whispered.

I'd love to hear all about it when you return, darling.

"Imogen."

She blinked. "Yes, ma'am?"

Lady Vex'ahlia took a breath. "I don't blame you for what happened to my brother. You had nothing to do with it. In fact, I've heard through the grapevine that you tried to stop your mother." She shrugged and placed both hands on her hips. "You're fighting for the same thing as us. The last thing you want is more innocent blood spilled and more minds given unwillingly to that"—she growled—"stupid fucking elf Ludinus. I can see that."

Imogen barely restrained a grimace, but instead of focusing on the past, she thought of Laudna. Of the future she had waiting for her back at the castle. "Thank you," she whispered. "That means more than you know." She turned and began walking but paused. "In case Bells Hells do manage a way to free the Champion of Ravens," Imogen ventured, "can I—I mean, does he have a name still?"

Lady Vex'ahlia's throat bobbed. Her gaze grew distant for a moment as memories seemed to push to the surface of her mind. Then, a slight smile. "Vax," she breathed. She nodded and looked at Imogen. "Vax'ildan."

The ghost of a smile reached Imogen's lips. "Vax and Vex?"

Lady Vex'ahlia rolled her eyes with a huff, though a smile peeked through. "Vex and Vax, thank you very much."

"Yeah," Imogen nodded, "that sounds better."

Lady Vex'ahlia rubbed her palms up and down Imogen's arms, and with an incline of her chin said, "Go. Be with her. Love her. Don't waste a second of it."

"I don't intent to," Imogen whispered, an unbridled smile appearing at the thought of her. Her love. Her Laudna.

…

As Imogen walked away, lavender hair rustling in the breeze, Vex faced the statue of her brother. She patted the Champion's stone wing and hissed softly, "Fucking dick. Of course you had to save her." She sighed and shook her head. "I'm really, really glad you did, but now look where you're at." Vex looked up at his blank eyes and imagined the gray slate replaced by sharp hazel irises. "If you're going to risk punishment by disobeying the Matron and coming to this plane, the least you could do is visit me next time." Her voice wavered. "Please?"

She ducked her head. No, she shouldn't think that. The more she saw Vax, the harder it would be to accept his death, to accept the hole in her heart his absence created. She hadn't seen him since her wedding day 32 years ago, yet sometimes it still felt like he'd left only days prior.

Vex sniffed and blinked away tears. "I know I just requested your presence here, and I know that makes me a hypocrite, but sending ravens to Kiki isn't helping her move on. She's been stagnant and angry for thirty years, Vax. She's going to live to be thousands of years old. You can't hold onto her. You need to let Kiki live her life out on this plane. Let her be happy, even if it's with someone else. Know that she'll always love you even if she lets you go. Letting go isn't forgetting." She sighed. "We all need to let you go."

Vex glanced over the last few words of the inscription: *he carries us all upon the threshold and beyond*.

She sniffed again but didn't manage to stave off the tears which had returned with a vengeance. "We'll all see you again." Vex nodded as if convincing herself of that statement. "One day you'll come to take us home. You'll come to bring me to our mother, and at that time—" she laughed, brushing wetness from her jaw with the back of her hand— "I'm going to give you the biggest fucking hug. You'll probably have to pry me off you."

With a shake of her head, Vex whispered, “There are people working to get you back. I believe you’ll understand why I’m not getting involved, but I just wanted you to know that you haven’t been forgotten. Gods know Keyleth hasn’t been able to rest. She—”

“Vex.”

Vibrant autumn leaves, carried by an arcane wind, floated along the grass and across Vex’s feet. She turned to the Voice of the Tempest, the leader of the Ashari, and beheld her best friend. “Kiki,” Vex whispered, pulling the half-elven woman into a hug, careful to avoid her antlers. “I really should put a bell on that tree.”

Keyleth pulled away and smirked. “Don’t tell me you’re losing your touch?”

“Or perhaps you’re getting sneakier.”

Keyleth barked a laugh and motioned to her mantle of leaves trailing behind her and the tree she’d stepped through. “We both know that’s not true.”

“Oh, so you’re saying I *am* losing my touch?’

She merely shrugged. “Motherhood, you know? It can be so trying.”

Vex chuckled but still arched a brow. “Whatever you say, darling.” She tossed her braid off her shoulder. “I’m as beautiful as ever.”

Keyleth tilted her head and smiled softly. “You only get lovelier.”

“Well,” Vex sighed, holding her hands out to the side, “I know you haven’t come to insult and compliment me in the same breath.” She stared at the Tempest. “What brings you to Whitestone?”

Keyleth nodded toward the center of the city in the direction Imogen had gone. “What do you think?”

Vex tilted her head. “She seems sincere. She has no desire to purposefully follow in her mother’s footsteps.”

“Orym vouched for her.”

“And what do you think? It’s your opinion I care about.”

“I don’t sense,” Keyleth began with a sigh, “hostility. She seemed anxious, but genuine. She cares—about stopping Ludinus, about saving those who can be saved, and especially about her friends.”

Vex glanced over her shoulder and then looked at Keyleth. “She reminds me of Vax.”

Keyleth cocked her head. “The Temult girl?”

She nodded. “Gods, Kiki. I almost vomited when I made the connection.” She folded her arms across her torso. “I could tell she was holding back, but I could see the desperation, see how badly she was silently begging anyone—anything—to bring that woman back. This woman whom she loved, was dead, and she looked utterly…hopeless.”

A small gasp made Vex turn her head. Keyleth stared at her, eyes wide. “The sunken tomb,” she breathed. “Oh, gods. I hadn’t realized how similar the situations were.”

“It was quite the shock after over thirty years.” Vex tucked a stray orange strand behind Keyleth’s ear, head tilted. “But I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

Keyleth placed a hand against Vex's but her eyes remained lowered, unfocused. A few seconds after, she hummed an acknowledgement of sorts.

Vex cocked her head the other way. "Keyleth, darling?"

"Yes?" she said, still half absent from their conversation.

With a gentle hand, Vex tugged Keyleth's face up toward her. The Tempest blinked a few times before her gaze fully focused. Vex smiled tenderly. "There you are."

Keyleth's brows scrunched and she shook her head. She loosed a faint laugh. "Sorry."

"How are you doing, darling?" Vex whispered, softness and patience in her tone.

Keyleth huffed another laugh and waved her hand as though she'd brush the question off with a light response, but her expression sobered. Her shoulders drooped ever so slightly as she ran a hand down her face. "I've never held so much power yet felt this helpless," she breathed.

"I'm just glad to see you on your feet. See you well."

Keyleth rolled a shoulder, grimacing. "The wounds—they're still not quite healed." She pulled at the collar of her tunic, revealing pale pink slashes across her neck and collarbone.

"Oh, gods," Vex breathed.

A moment of quiet filtered between them before Keyleth whispered, "He saved me, Vex."

"I know."

"No, I mean he *saved me*. I would have died if he hadn't shown up." She shook her head. "That woman—the power she wields is terrible and astronomical. It didn't help they knew I was coming." Keyleth clasped Vex's hand in hers, almost absentmindedly. "I was as close to death as the attack on Zephrah six years ago, yet Thull brought me to the brink exponentially faster." She released a long, heavy exhale. "This has all gone to shit."

Vex nodded, unsure what to say. She'd promised Percy they'd stay out of it. However, she wouldn't abandon Keyleth while her mind wandered between past and present. She squeezed the hand Keyleth clutched. "You are brilliant and powerful, and while you can do incredible things by yourself, you are not alone. You have all five continents backing you. You have your friends, and—" Vex shrugged, "—you even have Bells Hells."

Keyleth nodded. "The Temult girl—she's powerful. I'm not sure if she even knows to what extent."

"They killed Delilah Briarwood to bring their friend back," Vex whispered. "They stand a chance in this fight. It won't be easy, it won't be clean, but they stand a chance."

"You think so?"

"I have as much faith in them as I did Vox Machina all those years ago."

Keyleth made a face. "So is that a lot or practically none?"

Vex scoffed, rolling her eyes. "It's a lot, silly." Her throat bobbed. "What you're facing and what they're facing is..."

"A lot," Keyleth sighed, "which is probably the biggest understatement of this century." Another long pause. Keyleth adjusted her grip on her staff and leaned her shoulder against it. "It's strange," she whispered.

"What is?"

“That I haven’t received any ravens since—since...” She closed her eyes. “I know why. I know why I haven’t, but their absence is just further reminder that he’s gone. Not gone and fulfilling his purpose as Champion but gone—a prisoner.”

“A prisoner to fucking Ludinus Da’leth,” Vex spat as if his name was poison. She hissed, “That stupid fucking elf.”

“He’s been scheming for hundreds of years,” Keyleth said. “That means he’s prepared. He’s prepared to implement whatever plans he’s been calculating, and he’s got the resources to do so.”

“Her mother works for Ludinus,” Vex said and waved a hand. “The Temult girl.” After a breath, she said quietly, “Are you worried? About what might happen if Liliana or Ludinus get a hold of her?”

Keyleth shook her head. “It’s certainly crossed my mind, and it won’t be good. Having two Exultant sorceresses of the same blood along with an Exultant Psionic Warrior? That does not bode well in our favor.”

“And if Imogen Temult remains grounded? Remains against Ludinus?”

A grimace. “It’ll alter the tides some, but not a whole lot.” Angry shadows flashed in her eyes. “Otohan Thull needs taken care of. With how powerful she is, she’s going to cause a lot of devastation. A high-level warrior like her out of the race will even the odds more.”

“If only the gods would fight for themselves,” Vex murmured.

Keyleth inclined her chin at the Matron of Ravens’ temple. “Have you tried speaking to her?”

“No. I have more faith in my friends than the gods.”

“We’re basically gods,” she said with a smirk.

Vex wrapped a careful arm around Keyleth’s shoulders. “Darling, when are you going to stop tempting fate like that?”

“When it kills me, perhaps.”

“Well, then you must stop saying it.” Vex involuntarily shivered when she remembered Keyleth’s broken body reforming under her hand as life drew into her blood and bones.

“You’re never going to let me live that down, will you?”

Vex shook her head. “You turned into a goldfish, Keyleth. A goldfish. A thousand feet in the air.”

Keyleth sighed. “I was young and reckless and stupid.”

Vex rubbed a hand up and down Keyleth’s arm. “You were also courageous, intelligent, and powerful. You’ve only grown in wisdom and grace, darling.”

She nodded. “I’m trying. Every day I’m trying to be the leader everyone expects me to be.”

“And you’ve been amazing to the Ashari for over three decades.” Vex grinned. “You’re quite astonishing, Kiki.”

A laugh bubbled up and Keyleth blushed. “Thanks, Vex.” Vex gave her a wink and Keyleth grinned. “That never gets old.”

With a sigh, Vex pulled Keyleth into a hug. “I should let you go. We both have duties to attend to.”

Keyleth nodded, but she placed a hand on Vex’s arm. “It’s always nice to see you.”

“Seeing you is always lovely, darling.” She bit her lip—an action she’d never do in front of anyone she trusted less. “I’m always here,” Vex said softly. “Always.”

The Voice of the Tempest bowed her head and turned toward the tree she’d arrived through.

“Keyleth?”

Keyleth paused at the glowing green threshold created from the center of the tree just past the Greyfields archway. “Yes?”

“Stay near, darling.”

She gave a half-smile. “I won’t go far.”

Imogen stared at the destruction they'd caused, at the dead Reilorans and Shrikes, at the absolute mayhem that had ensued, and they'd been on Ruidus for less than a day. She'd nearly decimated the village in an attempt to protect her friends, yet she hadn't been trying to harm anyone. Not all Reilorans were part of the Ruby Vanguard, and not all were guilty. Most were simply farmers who worked alongside the Bormodos to harvest the red, rocky land and forage what they could to provide for Razora.

But destruction seemed to follow Imogen like a shadow—always at her heels, always appearing a split second after she moved.

Power's very tempting.

She'd said the same thing to Laudna, but at this moment, she didn't want a drop of it. After nearly being pulled in by Predathos last night, the power within her both frightened her and drew her in, which frightened her further. It was danger dressed in vermillion perfume.

Imogen ran the tips of her fingers along her lightning scars and hissed when the feather-light touch sent pain down her hand and up her shoulder. She pulled away and then shook out the affected hand, but that only threw pins and needles along the underside of her skin.

She huffed but winced at the throbbing pain in her abdomen. The bolt from a crossbow had managed to catch her in the midst of her fight with a Shrike. She'd shrugged it off at the time since the adrenaline from her power had overwhelmed her other senses, but now, after the dust had cleared, all postponed injuries yelled at her.

She'd barely managed to de-mist in time for Willmaster Edmuda and her lackeys to attack, and Imogen had taken the brunt of the force. She hadn't wanted to retaliate initially because a part of her felt connected to these people. They were Ruidusborn as she was. Most were cult members, not soldiers, and the way Edmuda had controlled them told her as much.

They'd torn into her nonetheless.

As soon as Imogen had gone down from the first attack—along with possibly cracking a few ribs—Laudna had cast a fireball into the crowd of people outside Elder Barthie's door.

The ensuing hits she'd taken after that were a blur.

There were several Ruby Vanguard, the young boy whom Laudna accidentally Exulted, the Shrikes, and the unseen ranger who'd shot her. All she remembered was grasping the bolt with both hands, yanking it free, and then sending a Witch Bolt screaming in the ranger's direction. She had no idea if it hit or not because she'd already turned to fend off another attack. She couldn't decipher much more because the battle had gone by in a whirlwind.

Near the end, Imogen had managed to overpower Edmuda and cast Command on the Willmaster. Bruises littering her skin, nose bleeding heavily, and head pounding, she'd stared at the humanoid shark-like creature and growled, "*Submit.*"

Controlled by the Command, Edmuda had collapsed to her knees and opened her arms, baring her front to Imogen, and with her compliant for a few seconds, Imogen had gone into Edmuda's head and rendered her unconscious.

Imogen wiped at her nose, which boasted both fresh and dried blood coating her philtrum. She made a face; her mouth tasted of metal.

A wave of vertigo yanked Imogen from her thoughts and back to the present—back to the red landscape surrounding her. She stood only a few yards from Elder Barthie's hut but couldn't bring herself to move. Her bones ached and her skin throbbed along with her pulsing scars.

The voices of her companions' thoughts filtered in as they neared the hut.

Balls, Chetney exclaimed as he nicked himself with his whittling tool. *Why do the things I love most hurt me?*

Fearne's whimsical thoughts reached her next. The faun squatted on her hooves to look at the ground, and a light, *Hi, little wormie* shoved past Chetney's following innuendo.

Orym's arms were folded, and his thoughts generally consisted of relief and planning—already planning what to do with Edmuda. He rarely thought about himself, though Imogen tried not to peer into everyone's thoughts if she could help it.

She shook her head. For some reason, at the moment, she couldn't seem to pick her walls up. Imogen blinked a few times and took a breath. She tried again, imagining that wall which would cut off her access to everyone, but instead, Laudna's thoughts floated in.

No words, just her dark, airy music which made its way to her. Its smooth, minor tone wrapped around Imogen's mind like black silk. For a beat, that cool touch within her head soothed the persistent throb which became more noticeable.

Imogen inhaled again as nausea began to swirl in her gut.

—okay?

She tilted her head as only part of a thought pierced Laudna's song.

—kind of pale.

Imogen blinked at the presence she sensed next to her. Ashton was talking about her, she realized as they stopped a foot from her, their face drawn.

"Imogen," he said, "are you okay?"

She forced her mind back and focused on his words.

Are you okay?

She heard the words, but it took effort to comprehend the meaning behind them. Ignoring a new wave of vertigo and resulting unsteadiness, she mumbled, "I'm fine. Just…strugglin' to keep my mind shit to myself at the moment."

Ashton lifted a brow. "Have you had any problem with that so far?"

Bits of Laudna's song came through but muffled as though underwater. A cresting melody, beautiful and eerie—

Seems fine. Ashton tilted their head, rocky arms crossed. *No, something's…off—not focusing on anything I said.* Bits and pieces came in and out of focus. *What the fuck—that?*

Imogen raised a hand. "No, no I heard you, Ashton."

He chuckled. "Oh, so you heard that part?"

"I told you," she said through gritted teeth, "I'm not tryin' to."

Several beats passed before Ashton said, a little softer, "You sure you're okay?"

"Fine."

"Nothing's wrong?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes when her brain seemed to pulse with the movement. After another breath, she gave him an awkward thumbs up. “Peachy keen.”

Feelings of intense doubt and worry met her this time instead of Ashton’s words.

Imogen inhaled through her nose and met their suspicious gaze. Then he glanced behind him—toward Laudna, FCG, and Orym. “I’m sure Laudna would love to know that you were swaying on your feet just now.”

“NO,” Imogen hissed, grabbing for Ashton’s arm before they could walk away. “You dick. Don’t you dare. I’m fine.”

Ashton flashed her that grin they knew made her see red and winked before cupping their hands and calling, “Laudna!”

“Ashton!” Imogen practically leapt on them to try and get a hand over their mouth, but the damage was done.

Laudna straightened and looked in their direction. “Yes?”

Imogen glared daggers at Ashton, but he ignored her. “Imogen—”

Laudna’s eyes widened, and a note of her beautiful melody went sharp. “What’s wrong?”

Imogen clenched her jaw. *I’m gonna murder you*, she whispered, glancing once more at Ashton.

He shrugged. *If you won’t take care of yourself, she will*.

She’s gonna worry now. Ashton Greymoore, you—

But Ashton was walking away toward Elder Barthie’s hut.

—fuckin’ dick.

They waved her off, the words *Just Don’t* on the back of their jacket practically mocking her.

Imogen yelped both in pain and surprise when Fearne appeared at her side. She nearly folded when the faun poked at the hole in her abdomen.

“Fuckin’—balls, Fearne,” she gasped, a hand finding the wound as she bowed her head.

Fearne stared at her hand, the airy aura around her sobering.

She had just caught her breath when Laudna came up to them and placed a cool hand on Imogen’s shoulder. “Something wrong, darling? Are you alright?”

Fearne sniffed the blood—Imogen’s blood—on her hand, and then whispered, “Poison.”

As if the verbalization of the word awakened its effects, Imogen’s legs weakened. She searched for Laudna’s arm and met cool, smooth skin. Dread laced its fingers around her stomach.

A few notes clanked as Laudna’s music stumbled in response. “What?” she breathed.

Worry and rage bubbled to the exterior of Laudna’s immediate thoughts. *Shit. Godsdamnit*. *Poison? I can’t—not poison. Can’t be poison. I can’t fucking neutralize poison*.

Laudna’s surface thoughts were a torrent that Imogen couldn’t block. She couldn’t focus enough to keep that wall up.

What do we do? What do we do? What do we—

“What can we do?” Laudna said, her thoughts halting.

Fearne fiddled with her hands, eyes darting between them. “I—I don’t know,” she said softly. “I can cure wounds, but I don’t have the ability to neutralize poison.”

It’s fine. Don’t stress. We’re okay. We’re okay—everything’s gonna be okay.

It was probably the most Imogen had ever heard from Fearne’s mind. Usually, it was a ditzy melody that floated around her head like drunken faeries.

“FCG,” Imogen mumbled.

Her head ached at the flurry of noise which felt too loud, too sharp.

FCG.

FCG.

FCG.

Why had she mentioned him?

She shook her head and reaffirmed her grip on Laudna’s arm. “FCG. See if he…”

Her scars pulsed with heat and another wave of pressure crushed her head. Imogen winced and placed her thumb and middle finger on either temple.

Laudna’s music clanked again before returning to its slow melody, though her voice came out barely restrained. “See if he can neutralize poisons?”

See if he can—

See if he—

See—

Thoughts pushing their way into her mind slowed. Imogen gritted her teeth and forced herself to take a deep breath. *Come on, Temult. Focus*.

The only thing that made Imogen’s anxiety ease slightly was the fact that the scroll was still up so their minds were protected, which was a relief since her mind was currently a shit show.

“—Imogen.”

She blinked. Her name sounded muffled again.

“—listening, darling?”

The last of Laudna’s words broke through the surface of the water and her voice became clear. Imogen turned her head, hissing as a sharp ringing pierced her mind.

She thought she said something like, “Yes, I heard you,” but Imogen didn’t remember if she verbalized the words or not. Her scars were a blazing fire, and even the touch of the sheer dress on them was like embers grinding into her flesh.

Imogen didn’t realize Laudna reached forward until the warlock’s thin fingers made contact with her hand and pain erupted.

She bit her tongue to keep from hissing but pulled away. “Don’t,” she said, voice low and shoulders curled in on herself.

“Sorry, darling,” Laudna breathed, raising both hands in front of her. Her black-tipped fingers twitched. The melody went flat as her thoughts swam. *Shit. Sorry. So sorry, darling. Didn’t mean—*

Not your fault. Didn’t know.

Imogen knew Laudna wanted nothing more than to help, but physical contact sent electricity burning through her. *Focus, Temult. Get inside. Move*.

Sweat beaded along her back despite the cool wind blowing red dust around them.

Fearne moved a strand of lavender hair out of Imogen's face. "—cold?"

Imogen blinked. It took further effort to pull her distant gaze from the ground. "Hmm?"

"You're shivering. Are you cold?"

She shook her head, but it was true. Her limbs prickled with chills, and an icy finger ran up her spine.

Laudna's face appeared close to hers, her cool hands cradling either side of Imogen's face. "You're quite warm, darling."

It's the poison, it's the poison, it's the poison.

Though Imogen just wanted to sink into Laudna's touch, she made herself focus.

Orym.

After a beat, he replied, *Where are you three? We're waiting on you*.

She couldn't put her thoughts into coherent sentences but tried anyway. *Comin' in now. I—poison. I can't*—She tried to convey with as much feeling as she could what she meant. *Poison. Unknown*.

Oh boy.

Imogen pulled away from Laudna and stumbled forward. Her skin screamed, and the closer she got to everyone else, the louder and more painful their thoughts became. She almost lost her footing at the threshold of Elder Barthie's hut but managed to catch herself on the siding.

Orym was there, small hands reaching up at her, and before she could warn him not to, he latched around her left arm which was out for counterbalance.

Fire prickled along her scars again. "Fuck—shit balls," she hissed through clenched teeth.

"Sorry, Temult," Orym whispered but didn't relinquish his touch. *She looks bad*.

"Thanks," she muttered.

Beautiful as always, but you're clearly unwell, he replied. His small stature couldn't catch Imogen from falling to her knees when a tidal wave of vertigo washed over her, nearly throwing her into blackness.

Her knees slammed into the hard dirt floor, but she managed to catch her upper body with her hands. She just needed a moment. *Just need the world to fuckin' stay* still.

"The poison is affecting your powers?"

She lifted a weak hand. "Stop fuckin' yellin', Orym. For the gods' sakes."

I'm—not.

"What the *fuck*, Ashton?" When had Laudna come in?

Ashton's voice floated to her among the others' thoughts. "She said she was fine—"

"And you believed her?"

"No, not really, but I fucking trust her."

"But you also know her. She'll deny anything's wrong as persistently as the day is long." As Laudna's voice rose, so did the volume of her melody. Except now, it clanked and crashed as if a pianist had palmed a dozen different keys.

Imogen clenched her eyes shut as she knelt there, back curved in on herself, and tried to make it stop.

Poison? Chetney thought. *Cool, cool, cool. Fuck that*.

Shut up, Chet, Imogen growled.

He yelped out loud from across the room.

Imogen burrowed into herself, into her power, and tried once more to pick up her walls. When she reached for them, those adamantium walls misted in her hands and swirled like tendrils of shadow around her lightning-marked fingers.

She couldn't grasp them. Couldn't tune out the world.

Even though it was only her six friends plus Elder Barthie and Dono, it was too much. Whatever the poison was doing, it seemed to multiply her symptoms without allowing Imogen to cure the disease.

"Well, what do you propose, Laudna?"

"FCG—"

"I can't—"

"What do you mean, you *can't*?"

"We haven't had time to rest—"

"Fearne?"

"I'm sorry, Laudna. We've been running ourselves ragged. I'm scooping from an empty well of magic as it is."

Imogen didn't have the energy to open her eyes or shut out their voices or lock out their thoughts, so *everything* inundated her. That tornado of noise raged through her mind, bombarding her senses like one of those nightmarish red storms. She pressed her palms over her ears and tucked her chin to her chest, though she knew the effort was futile.

A cool, gentle hand traced along Imogen's spine, sending tingles down her scars. *Darling?* Laudna's voice was quiet and cool against the raging headache threatening to split her mind open. *We'll figure this out. Until then, perhaps you should put on the circlet.*

No. No, she couldn't.

Knowing was her power. Knowing was her strength.

She couldn't give that up—couldn't *risk* leaving herself in the dark.

Ashton had almost died—

She had to know—had to *protect* them—

Imogen.

She shook her head and inhaled sharply through her teeth when another wave of damaging, throbbing pain pulsed through her head.

Elder Barthie stepped forward. “The Imperium have created a poison which specifically affects psychic powers. With so many Reilorans and children of the Sleeping One, the Weave Mind saw it advantageous to engineer something which would keep those people in check.”

Laudna’s body shifted against Imogen’s and her voice carried up and away as though she turned to face the group. “This isn’t crowd control; this is torture.”

The Elder’s tone fell flat. “Sometimes, they are one and the same.”

“So that ranger knew Imogen was Ruidusborn?” Chetney asked.

Fearne’s lighter tone was like a blade against glass. Imogen flinched away, curled fingers nearly tearing at her hair. “I mean, up here, it’s visible. Though hers is more prominent, there’s clearly an energy around us. It’s not difficult to detect.”

“Do you know how exactly the poison affects people like Imogen?” Orym asked, “You know, apart from making her fucking miserable?”

Elder Barthie shrugged. “I’ve heard tell from Zesh that the poison can also double as an enhancer if given the appropriate amount. It elevates psychic activity and strengthens a Ruidusborn’s connection with the Sleeping One. However, only in very, very small doses.”

He paused as though the Elder glanced at Imogen, but she merely drew farther into herself, failing over and over again to haul up her walls.

Laudna’s wavering voice spoke up. “And if given too much?”

Too much—

Too much—

Too much hurts—

Too much—

Gods, she’s in so much pain—

I can’t stop it—

Darling, I’m so sorry—

Too much—

My heart can’t take this—

Imogen wanted to sob at the guilt and sorrow Laudna felt, but before she could voice anything, that whirlwind swept up Laudna’s words and carried them away into the maelstrom.

Elder Barthie sighed, and the sadness of his thoughts hit Imogen like Ashton’s hammer. “Too much of anything is no longer a good thing. It pushes one’s mental capacities, one’s growing psychic and telepathic abilities until they can no longer be contained.” He said softly, “It’s madness in a vial.”

For a split second, Imogen faltered, and the barrage of thoughts beat down on her, voices whispering like phantom cries swirling around her head. They pulled in and out of focus, drawing between audibility and nonsense like the storm which haunted her.

Stop, stop, stop—

Imogen.

Swirling echoes gusted through Imogen as her scars pulsed and her hot skin throbbed. She pressed her hands over her ears and a whimpering sob broke from her. She couldn't breathe, couldn't focus. She just needed it to *stop*.

A slash of red-hot pain lanced through Imogen's head and she gasped, eyes flashing open.

Darling, please—

Please listen—

Please—

"Darling," Laudna whispered, "put on the circlet."

A shuddering breath escaped Imogen. "But what if I can't sense—what if somethin' happens—" She took a labored breath. "Someone almost died the last time I had it on. Ashton could have—"

"This isn't about Ashton, darling. This is about you." Laudna's voice was a balm against the ravaging chaos. Her calm, sweet tone shoved all the other voices down. "You can't keep your walls up and that's—"

Imogen hissed as she inhaled, claw-like fingers clutching at her head.

"—hurting you."

Hot tears pricked at Imogen, but she merely clenched her teeth harder even as her vision swam. She shook her head. "No. No, no, no, no, no. I can't—"

Cool hands cupped her face and Imogen sank into the touch. Gods, she just wanted everything to *stop*.

The world titled, and Imogen almost careened head-first into the floor, but Laudna caught her. She cradled Imogen's head against her chest, carding spindly fingers through sweat-damp lavender hair.

The tide threatened to pull her under, but with every last bit of strength, Imogen fought through the next wave of chaos and pain. Pulling to the surface, she gasped for air as her lungs caught and Laudna's scent filled her nose.

It pains me to see you like this, darling. Please. Put on the circlet.

Black edged Imogen's wavering vision.

Please put on the circlet.

Please put on…

Please put…

Please...

...

Laudna couldn't believe just how quickly the poison had sapped the life out of Imogen. Her usually tanned skin had turned sickly, her scars dulled, and a sheen of sweat covered her

body. Even her beautiful amethyst eyes, typically glowing with life and power, were sunken and muted.

Please put on the circlet, she whispered, fingers cradling Imogen's feverish face.

Imogen was hurting herself and Laudna just wanted to make her put the circlet on, but that wouldn't be fair. She knew better than most how not having agency felt, and she would never take that choice away from Imogen.

No one gets to control you anymore.

Imogen's eyes fluttered shut and her chin lowered to her chest.

"Darling," Laudna gasped, the word taut with worry. She stroked Imogen's cheek and the latter jerked up, purple eyes clouded and dazed.

Imogen's mouth moved like she tried to speak, but the words that came out were a mumbled amalgamation of gibberish. Even the telepathic bond between them didn't seem to quite be connecting because all Laudna picked up was the sound of screaming wind and an ever-present static.

Elder Barthie approached, giant hands cradling a small cup of steaming liquid. "Drink this, dear."

Laudna kissed Imogen's damp forehead and rubbed a hand up and down her arm, urging her awake.

For a moment, Imogen merely stared ahead, eyes focused on nothing.

Imogen, darling? Laudna breathed, *Can you hear me?* Another kiss against her lavender hair. *Darling?*

Then, Imogen blinked, lashes grazing softly against Laudna's sternum. A low, faint groan sounded in the back of Imogen's throat, and that chaos between their minds—the storm ravaging Imogen's—faltered for just a moment as if she fought through it.

Two weak words broke through and trickled down the bond. *I'm—fightin'.*

I know you are, dear. I know you are. I'm sorry I can't help. Laudna pointed at Elder Barthie now that Imogen seemed to be somewhat coherent. *Elder Barthie might have something to help*.

Imogen, complexion wane, eyes sunken and barely open, reached trembling hands forward. Her voice was gravel as she breathed, "What is it?"

He smiled, though it was sad. "It will hopefully help delay the poison's effects until your little friend can regain their spells."

Imogen blinked slowly. After a moment, she nodded even slower and lifted the mug to her lips.

Laudna continued to rub her back as she gazed around the group. She did her best to limit her panicked thoughts—tried not to let them through, allow them to hurt Imogen.

Your thoughts are never painful, Laudna, Imogen whispered as she downed the rest of the drink. *They're...musical.*

Laudna wrapped her arm around Imogen and carefully pulled her closer. Though Imogen winced, she did not balk from her touch. She touched two fingers to Imogen's chin and tugged

her face toward her. *Please put on the circlet, darling. You're suffering when there's no need. We're all here. Nothing is going to happen.*

Imogen's throat bobbed, but through half-closed eyes, she shook her head.

We went through Nana Morri's trials for a reason; to learn to trust each other. Ashton wouldn't do something like that again. Nobody would.

I can't—

Laudna pressed a kiss to Imogen's lips which halted any bubbling protests. It was soft, gentle, and slow. There were no sparks of sensuality; it was an intimate reminder of her presence, of her love.

Imogen made a small sound in the back of her throat and her hot, scar-inflamed hand cradled Laudna's cheek.

She brushed gentle circles over Imogen's cheeks with her thumbs and then pulled away before Imogen would be left gasping for air in her dilapidated state. *If you don't trust them, then trust me, darling.*

Imogen nodded, eyes closed. *I do.* She nodded again. *I do.* She placed the cup to the side and leaned her head on Laudna's shoulder. *I trust you with my life.*

Laudna retrieved the circlet from Imogen's bag and presented it between two fingers. *Put on the circlet, darling.*

Imogen's lids flickered but remained closed. *Alright,* she exhaled. Her cheek moved against Laudna's shoulder in a nod. *Alright...Laudna.*

Very slowly, very carefully, Laudna encircled Imogen's body with her long arms and placed the thin band of metal on her brow as if she were crowning her.

All tension in Imogen's body melted, and a little sigh escaped her cracked lips.

Laudna carded some stray lavender strands out of Imogen's face. *Better, darling?*

A moment of silence stretched longer than the immaterial tether between them. Then, she breathed, *The poison still fuckin'...sucks, but no more...thoughts.*

The gaps between words grew as Imogen's sentences slowed.

Laudna cradled Imogen's head with a hand. *I know you're worried, darling, but you needn't be.*

Imogen's breathing slacked.

Laudna glanced down when Imogen's weight increased and the human sorceress collapsed into her, scar-flecked hand falling to the wayside.

Panic snapped at her. "Imogen?" Laudna clutched at Imogen, but that bridge between their minds—the one previously filled with a tempest—had been snuffed out. "Imogen!" she cried when she couldn't keep the upper half of Imogen's body from sinking into her lap.

Ashton snapped to attention. "What the fuck?" they hissed as their hard gaze fell on Elder Barthie.

Fearne's brows pinched together. "Imogen?"

Ignoring Ashton, Elder Barthie placed a large hand on Laudna's knee. "Do not worry, my dear. She is simply sleeping."

"You *drugged* her?"

"The poison attacks psychic movement, and her mind was too chaotic. Sleeping will subdue further psychic connections, which will help limit the poison's spread until your little metal friend can heal her."

No matter how hard Laudna tried to connect to Imogen's mind, that tether between them had been severed.

Exhaling a shaky breath, Laudna clutched Imogen's feverish body to her chest, cradling her carefully as though she were made of that pretty Ruidian glass.

Imogen, head nestled in the crook of Laudna's elbow and throat bared to the ceiling, did not stir. Sleep evened out the pained and panicked grooves of her face, and for this moment, peace seemed to have found her.

Laudna pressed a gentle kiss to her head and whispered against her hair, "I'm right here, darling. Hold on."

Laudna clutched Imogen tighter to her, finally letting her thoughts run rampant now that they wouldn't be overheard or harm Imogen.

I trust you with my life—
Yet she hadn't been able to stop Elder Barthie—
Because they'd decided to trust them—
They didn't know these people—
Gods, she's burning up—
Sleep will help—
Just until Letters can heal her—
Hold on, Imogen—
Sleep will help—
Hold on, Imogen, hold on—
Sleep will help, sleep will help, sleep will help—

Laudna gasped.

She whirled in her seat, jaw ajar, still carefully cradling Imogen. She met Fearne's gaze, ready to speak, but Ashton seemed to have come to the same conclusion as her since he was already storming over to Elder Barthie.

He jabbed a finger under their chin. "Do you have any idea what you've fucking done?"

"I am simply trying to buy your friend time—"

"She's RUIDUSBORN," they snarled. "She's connected to PREDATHOS. You've just given that God Eater full access to Imogen."

"And now," Laudna said softly, voice filled with barely subdued rage, "she has no way out."

She clenched spindly fingers into a fist, remembering the events in the cave.

If I go deeper, I won't be able to fight it; I'll be part of it.

That guttural scream—

The way her marks and eyes glowed red-hot—

The tremble in her voice and shaking of her hands—

Y'all, I don't know if I—I don't know if I'd be able to fight that again.

Elder Barthie's eyes went wide as he seemed to piece together their implications. "Oh, dear..."

"She barely got back safe last night," Fearne said softly, fear laced through her words.

Imogen had been *terrified*.

You're our best shot of getting close and understanding—

You want me to go back in?

Laudna's rage simmered within her recalling the stony coldness to Orym's voice—the way he said those things so bluntly, so...emotionlessly.

You don't have to do anything you—

No, of course she doesn't have to...but I don't want to think of the alternative. So does she have to do it? No. But I am pressuring her to do it.

Laudna glanced at Orym, shooting him a glare. "I guess you won't have to think about your alternative anymore," she growled.

Orym, eyes filled with an emotion Laudna couldn't place, had the wisdom to look away. Laudna pulled Imogen's feverish body closer.

"What can we do?" Ashton asked.

"Hope that she's strong enough to fight it," Laudna whispered.

Terror coursed through Imogen, carving into her like the grooves of her scars. Her own words rang in her head: *There's also a chance that if I go in, I might have trouble comin' back out*.

Imogen took a breath.

I might not come back, I might not come back, I might not come back.

Those five words swirled around her mind like dust in one of Ruidus' red storms.

I might not come back, I might not come back, I might not come back.

She glanced at Laudna who slept only a few feet away. Imogen's fingers twitched; she longed to take Laudna's hand, but something stopped her. It almost felt like a rift, a distance between them. Not physically, but emotionally. She didn't know what to make of it.

Imogen pushed past the barriers of the circlet, and like dropping a coin into a fountain, released a gentle message into Laudna's subconscious. *I love you, Laudna.*

I might not come back, I might not come back, I might not come back.

She pushed those thoughts aside and said again, *I love you, Laudna*.

If there was one last chance of bringing Liliana to their side, then Imogen had to take it. She had to, no matter the cost. Imogen took another breath, deeper than last. She hoped the risk was worth it.

Huddled on the dirt in their little cave, FCG at her side while she prepared to delve, Imogen recalled Ashton's words: "An estranged parent is just a stranger who can make you believe any bullshit."

Imogen knew nothing about her mother. Liliana was a stranger with whom she shared blood and nothing more. She had no memories, no good times she could recall, and certainly no trust between them. She could not trust Liliana. Imogen reminded herself that. She may love her, but Liliana was a wild card and Imogen didn't know the rest of her hand.

As Imogen's thoughts wandered, she slipped into sleep and that red world approached. It drew her in and embraced her like a warm bath. It was a familiar false comfort, one that prodded Imogen with promise of belonging and safety, though she knew better.

Well, she assumed she knew better. Giving in to Predathos, especially after all Bells Hells had learned about being Marked and the Weave Mind, couldn't possibly provide the freedom Imogen sought. She didn't know for sure, but that knot in her gut tightened whenever some small part of her even considered letting go.

Otohan's silver blade slashed through her mind and her words echoed. *You don't just give in. You let go when the time is right.*

Blood and whirling dust, Orym, Fearne, Laudna, all dead, debris, skeletons of dozens of buildings—it all bombarded Imogen.

She'd let go and destruction and death had followed in her wake. Imogen couldn't imagine the ruination she'd cause if she gave into Predathos and no longer had any agency, no longer could tell right from wrong. She couldn't imagine being like her mother.

Her mother.

Imogen opened her eyes to the lights of the Ruidusborn flickering like starlight, so she thought of Liliana. A small light in the distance flared. Imogen focused on it and pulled the little orb towards her. Without knowing how near or far her mother may be, in an instant, Liliana's energy lay before her.

She was dressed as Imogen had seen her last in her simple pants, button-up shirt, bandana around her neck, and long coat, but Liliana sat curled up in an empty space.

"Mama," Imogen whispered.

Liliana looked up and her eyes locked on Imogen's. "Imogen." She looked so small, so *human* huddled on the ground with her knees tucked to her chest. She didn't look like a sorceress who could level a town block or raze dozens of soldiers with a thought. Liliana unfurled slightly and the light of her spirit seemed to grow a little brighter.

Imogen glanced down at the tether which connected them, even in the dream. The space between them thrummed with their shared energy and warmth.

Like an embrace.

She had maybe one vague memory of Liliana holding her.

Imogen shook her head and forced her thoughts back to the present. "I'm here." She wasn't sure what else to say.

Liliana nearly smiled. "You're as stubborn as your mother, you know that?" Imogen could only release what was almost a laugh from her nose. "It seems the harder I try and push you away, the faster you run towards me. Maybe that's my fault."

Imogen blinked a few times and leaned forward as she tried to come up with words—questions, accusations, pleadings—anything which would make this risk worth it. Instead, what she said was, "You make me want to help."

It was true, Imogen realized after she'd said it. She did want to help her mother. She'd written Liliana off—had settled on labeling her a lost cause, on labeling her a danger which had to be stopped, yet now a spark of doubt pricked at her.

Imogen didn't want to kill her mother. She loved her. Despite not knowing her, and despite knowing the awful things she'd done for Ludinus, Imogen loved her.

Or perhaps she just loved the idea of someone Liliana could be—someone she used to be 25 years ago before Ludinus dug his claws into her and twisted her mind. If the things she'd sensed at the Key were any indication of her mother's intentions, then part of her wanted to fight whatever force pulled her away.

"I know you don't want to be here," Imogen said. She hoped. She prayed Liliana wanted to come back to her.

Liliana's expression scrunched into one of pained contemplation. "It's almost over. It's almost over and you won't have to worry about any of this."

"Nobody will." The truth came to the surface again. "I don't want to lose you."

"You don't have to lose me. I'm not goin' anywhere." Liliana sighed. "I just—I didn't want this to be a burden thrust upon you."

Imogen gave her a small, thin-lipped smile. “It’s already happened whether you meant it to or not, Mama.”

Liliana nodded. “Yeah. I guess it found you anyway. Maybe that’s my naïveté.” She shook her head and added, “I’m sorry.”

Imogen tried to discern Liliana’s energy, her emotions, and sensed waves of kindness, pain, curiosity, wariness, and...absolution. She proceeded carefully. “You said before you were tryin’ to make a difference from the inside.”

Could Liliana still be useful to them from Ludinus’ side? Could Imogen convince her to help change the tide for the Volition?

“I am.”

“In what way?”

Liliana tilted her head. “He listens to me.”

Ludinus.

Imogen shook her head. “You said so yourself that he’s cunnin’.”

“He is.”

“Do you think—” Imogen bit her lip. “How do you know he’s actually listenin’ to you?”

“Because I’ve seen his behavior change.”

That look in Liliana’s eyes—there was the absolution. Imogen tilted her head. Along with a new emotion—uncertainty. It was barely there, but it existed.

“I’ve pulled him from the edge a few times and he’s done some good after.” Liliana believed what she was saying, Imogen realized. Truly.

Imogen scoffed and rolled her eyes.

“I’m not sayin’ he’s good, but I’m worried what would happen if I wasn’t there.”

“So you think you’re actually doin’ us a favor by remainin’ with Ludinus?” Imogen tilted her head. “Why not fight him? If you’re worried about how he’s affectin’ people, why attempt to do damage control? Why not stop him?” Part of Imogen didn’t want to know the answer to her next question. “Do you even want to?”

After a moment, Liliana muttered, “I don’t know.”

Somehow, that was worse than if she’d said no. Because that just made Liliana’s alliance even more questionable than before. But perhaps that meant she’d have a better chance at changing her mother’s mind.

“This is all so much bigger than either of us, but here we are.”

Here we are.

Here we are.

Here we are.

Yes, they were here. Talking. Just talking. Something Imogen hadn’t been able to do before. She’d only had one face-to-face conversation with Liliana and that was right before she failed to convince her mother to—

Imogen closed her eyes when a flash of black sliced across her vision.

Despite trying her damnedest to appeal to Liliana's conscience, she'd trapped that black-winged man into the lens.

But she was here now. Alone. Just sitting there. There was nothing at stake. Just…them.

And at this moment, an overwhelming yearning washed over Imogen. She just wanted to collapse into her mother's arms. She wanted to feel her touch, smell her coat, be coaxed into sleep by her voice.

You can't trust her. She's your mother, but you don't know her.

Imogen ignored the voice and reached out a tentative hand. "Can I touch you?"

Whatever Liliana had prepared to say died on her lips. Her eyes scrunched into something like distressed yearning, and for a moment, she just stared at Imogen's scarred hand. Then, she mirrored the motion.

Their hands passed through one another, but a feeling of warmth, connection, and nostalgia nearly overwhelmed Imogen. It was like walking through the pastures in Gelvaan on a warm spring day. She sensed memories she didn't remember having, yet the emotions the feelings evoked were nearly tangible. For a breath, Imogen closed her eyes and soaked in the years she'd missed with her mother and what it may have been like if she'd had the chance to live them.

Imogen didn't understand how Liliana could have given up that feeling of freedom and peace to serve Ludinus. How could any of this be worth leaving her and Relvin? Imogen hadn't been worth fighting for to Relvin. Perhaps Liliana viewed her the same way.

Imogen shoved that thought away.

She said softly, "Are you doin' this all for Ludinus, or do you also feel that pull from the Sleepin' One?"

"I'm not doin' any of this for Ludinus," Liliana sneered. "I'm doin' this because I didn't have a choice."

Didn't have a choice.

Didn't have a choice.

Didn't have a choice.

Inside, Imogen's mind raged. *Didn't have a choice? Nobody dragged you away from me and Daddy*. *You CHOSE to leave*—She slammed a door on the end of that thought.

You can't trust her, you can't trust her, you can't trust her.

"Neither of us do," Liliana continued.

She couldn't stop the next word that escaped. "Bullshit," Imogen whispered, quiet venom in her tone.

Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.

You can't trust her, you can't trust her, you can't trust her.

"We're here," Liliana said, folding her other hand on top of their connected ones. "I tried to keep this from pullin' you, but you're here nonetheless and now we're both at the center of it all."

Tried to keep this from pullin' you—

Tried to keep this from pullin' you—

Tried to keep this from pullin' you—

"Oh, by tellin' me to run?" Imogen cocked her head as fury began to bubble like hot, caramelized sugar. Sweet to taste, but nasty to touch. "That's all you said for ten years, Mama. *Run*. What was I supposed to do with that? Run where? From what? Or to who? You left me with so many questions and you weren't around to answer any of them." She shook her head. "The only time I could glimpse you was when I faced those terrifyin' storms, and even then I thought I was hearin' the voice of my dead mother."

A shadow passed over Liliana's eyes. "You thought I was dead?"

"That's the excuse Daddy told me. I believed you were dead up until a few months ago."

She nodded slowly. Liliana was quiet for a moment before she said, "Perhaps it should have stayed that way."

Perhaps it should have stayed that way.

Perhaps it should have stayed that way.

Perhaps it should have stayed that way.

"It sure would make my next steps in this journey a hell of a lot easier," Imogen mumbled. "I mourned you, Mama. I've been mournin' you for years and now—" She cast her eyes up, huffing. "It's strange knowin' you're alive even though my heart still believes you're gone."

Liliana glanced away. "I tried to keep you away. Tried to warn you." Her gaze found Imogen's. "I wanted you to be free of it."

Imogen scoffed. "Good fuckin' job."

She'd never been farther from freedom. She'd never been so close to being entirely consumed by Predathos. It was a mighty thin line Imogen walked—one that kept her from barely being sucked in.

I might not come back, I might not come back, I might not come back.

I love you, Laudna.

"Imogen." Liliana made to squeeze Imogen's hand, but her fingers curled around her own palm. "Once this is over, all of us will be free—those who were not given a choice but be born into this red light and changed."

"Will we be free, or will we just be servin' a different authority under the guise of freedom?"

Liliana shook her head. "Free like the birds in the sky." She exhaled and her eyes became distant. "You know how much I miss just takin' care of those horses?"

There. There was a glimpse of the mother Imogen remembered. The woman she was before Predathos and Ludinus had consumed her. Gentle, bright, kind.

"You know how much I dream of just walkin' the fields and makin' breakfast at sunrise?" Liliana closed her eyes and inhaled as if she could smell the pastures of Gelvaan.

There were days when Imogen missed it too. The Taloned Highlands were beautiful, but along with the beauty was the pain of the past. She'd been ostracized from there. Even if Liliana did change sides, Imogen didn't think she'd ever go home with her. Gelvaan wasn't her home.

Bells Hells were her home.

Laudna was her home.

I love you, Laudna, I love you, Laudna, I love you, Laudna.

"All that was taken from me."

Imogen dragged her thoughts from Gelvaan and Laudna and focused on the words Liliana had just said. She couldn't help the edge to her tone. "You left, Mama."

"All I could think about was makin' sure I didn't take it from you."

"What, my childhood?" Imogen scoffed. "I grew up terrified of who I was, Mama. You left me and Daddy without you. You let your personal need for answers override your judgement. You left physically twenty-five years ago, and Daddy left mentally not too long after. Sure, he was there, but he was as absent in my life as you. As soon as my powers started comin' in, he pulled away. Do you have any idea how isolatin' it was to hear the worlds' thoughts yet always be on the outside of them?"

"Yes, I do."

"Could you imagine how much easier that could have been if I'd had you around to teach me?" Imogen exhaled. "Daddy isolated himself from me because of my powers. I had no idea how to control them or what they meant. I've lived most of my life alone because I was as scared of interaction as much as people were scared of me." She glanced at Liliana. "I almost killed a dozen people back in Gelvaan. I didn't start livin' until a few months ago."

"So I failed at that too, it seems."

Imogen reigned in her anger. It wasn't entirely aimed at Liliana. Most of it was because of Ludinus. "Mama, I want you to leave him." Liliana licked her lips but didn't manage words. "There's a fight comin'," Imogen said, leaning forward. "I don't want to fight you."

"Imogen, there are children here that rely on me."

Children here that rely on me.

Children here that rely on me.

Children here that rely on me—

"And what about me?" Imogen said, sharp eyes slicing to Liliana. "What about me, your own child? Did I not need you?" She shook her head, angry tears welling behind her eyes. "Are these Reiloran children more worthy of your love and protection?"

"No, Imogen," Liliana breathed. "No, that's not—"

"Yes," Imogen huffed, slapping a hand against her thigh, "please explain."

"I never got the chance to protect you from this," she said softly. "I tried to keep you away, but you're stubborn and smart." Liliana gave a small smile. "You're very smart."

Imogen's brows furrowed and she gave a slight shake of her head. "You don't know anythin' about me, Mama."

"That's not entirely true," she replied. "I know you're smart, fierce, capable—"

"Don't say that," she hissed. "Not that word. Not from you."

Liliana's throat bobbed. "I failed at protectin' you, so now that I have a second chance, I'm goin' to take it."

"So that's what this is? Atonement?"

"No. No, I care, Imogen. I care about these people. I feel as though they're part of me in some way. Well, they are part of me. They're part of you, too. We're all Ruidusborn."

"Can't we just make sure he never wakes up? Put him to sleep. Get rid of Ludinus and keep him asleep."

"I don't know if that would just be delayin' the inevitable. Bein' so close to this, I feel like I can guide this the best way it can be. I'm surrounded by some very dangerous people."

Imogen lifted her chin. "You're also lookin' at one."

Liliana chuckled. "I don't doubt that. You're like me, after all." Imogen could almost sense the warning woven in those casual words.

"We share the same blood, Mama. That's it."

Her mother lowered her eyes and whispered, "They need me, Imogen."

"So did I." Liliana seemed to be ignoring any and all of Imogen's attempts to humanize her, reason to her mother as her daughter. "*I* needed you," Imogen snapped, tapping her index finger against her chest. "Is that not enough?"

"You've always been enough."

Imogen couldn't stop her breath from shaking. "Then why did you throw us away like garbage? Why did you leave me alone as the maddenin' noise of the world slowly suffocated me? Why were the answers to your questions more important than watchin' me grow up? How was that more important than stayin' with Daddy and gettin' to love him?"

"I do love him," she muttered.

I do love him.

I do love him.

I do love him.

No, you don't. Love is stayin'. Love is perseverin'. Love isn't fuckin' leavin'—

What Imogen said instead was, "Abandonin' your husband and daughter sure is a funny way of showin' that love."

"Imogen," Liliana breathed, "I can't take back what I've done. I can't. Even I don't have that kind of power. But trust me when I say my presence here matters. I have influence."

Imogen couldn't look at her. "I'm sure you do," she mumbled.

"They listen to me. I'm scared of what would happen if I wasn't here. What would happen to these children."

"Saving these children won't atone for abandonin' me."

"No, it won't." Liliana sighed. "It will, however, save that many more innocent lives."

"You'll save these just to end how many others?" Imogen shook her head and glanced at her. "Think of the children that will die if you set him free."

Liliana shook her head. "I don't know why you think people will die for this."

“People already have died, Mama!” Imogen yelled, waving a hand. “Children, too!”

Liliana backed away slightly, shaking her head. “Predathos doesn’t want to destroy the world.” She sounded as though she were convincing herself more than Imogen.

“Just the gods,” Imogen said. “Who do you think those gods protect?”

“That’s a good question, isn’t it?”

Truthfully, Imogen knew next to nothing about the gods. She’d prayed to the Dawnfather once regarding Laudna and Delilah, and she’d received no response.

“Fine. Tell me what you know. I’m here to convince you the other way, but if you have somethin’ that could bring me to your side, I need to know it.

“What is a god but a tyrant that’s always been? They protect those who give themselves to them, just like any other king. I know that change is hard, and I know that—”

“This isn’t change, Mama. This is extermination. This is genocide.”

“Part of me just wants to run away from it all, but I know I can’t. It’s too late, and I—”

Imogen shook her head. “It’s not too late.” The ghost of a smile appeared. “It’s not too late.”

“You know I love you, right?”

Imogen knew that, just as she loved her mother, yet at the moment, those three words felt…empty.

“I love you and I’m so sorry.”

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.

Imogen turned her head from the memory. Liliana’s apology held no weight to it. It floated past Imogen’s heart on a red breeze.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there.”

“Are you?” Imogen hadn’t entirely meant to say the words, but they were out of her mouth before she could stop them. “You made the choice to leave us. To leave me. I was three. I was *three years old*, Mama. Neither Predathos nor Ludinus made you leave your family. You did that all on your own.”

“I had to—”

“That’s fuckin’ bullshit,” Imogen growled, “and you fuckin’ know it.”

Liliana opened and closed her mouth several times before she said, “Maybe one day when you have a child of your own, you’ll understand.” She shrugged. “Or not.”

“Are you prepared to take my life? Keep that child from bein’ born?”

“Don’t say that, Imogen.”

Imogen shrugged. “It could happen. We’re on opposin’ sides here, Mama.”

“You just need to run away.”

Run away.

Run away.

Run away.

That’s all her mother ever said, and Imogen had had enough. She tilted her head and said slowly with serious calm, “I’m not runnin’ anymore.”

Liliana actually looked…hurt. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"I love you." It was true. Imogen hated what her mother did, how she'd abandoned her, yet she still loved her. "Daddy still loves you."

"If I do this right, maybe we can all go home."

"No, Mama," Imogen whispered. "You're lyin' to yourself. They're lyin' to you. Ludinus is an evil, evil man, and he's gotten into your head."

Liliana's expression hardened. "History is filled with evil men, but few have the courage to stand up and try and stop them."

"You're not stoppin' anybody. You're helpin' Ludinus persist. You're helpin' him succeed."

"Where I'm standin', I don't think we're on the opposin' sides like you think we are. We just have a different method. That's all." She lifted her chin. "That's all."

"As long as you're servin' someone like Ludinus Da'leth," Imogen breathed, "we'll always be on opposin' sides. It doesn't matter the method if the end goal is the extermination of the gods and in the process, innocent people."

"Please, Imogen," Liliana breathed. "Please see it in yourself to understand why I've done and given up all this."

"I hope losin' me all over again is worth it in the end, Mama."

"Please, Imogen."

Imogen stared Liliana in the eyes as she pulled her hand away and stood tall.

Liliana hesitated, hand still lifted, before she drew in on herself.

She muttered with composed indifference, "Maybe it's your turn to run."

Imogen, Laudna, Orym, and Chetney ran through the crumbling streets of Kreviris, unfortunately at a slower pace than Imogen preferred since they had to help a recently freed Evoroa along. They'd evaded the biggest explosion—the bombs Ira, Ashton, Fearne, and FCG had set off—but then a second explosion hit and that scream—

The gut-wrenching sound rang in Imogen's head. It echoed through her mind and a wave of chills spread down her arms.

They'd almost reached the secret entrance to Volition headquarters when Chetney called, "Everyone still here?"

Orym hurried along only a foot from the gnome. "Right behind you, Pops."

Laudna barked her name. "Imogen?"

"I'm here," she huffed just a few steps away. "We're all here—" Her hand met smooth chiffon and not scales. "Where's Gona?" Imogen yelled, whirling. The Cytaa wasn't on her shoulder. She circled, frantically searching the wreckage as more fires came to life a few feet away.

The group stopped and Evoroa, an arm slung around Laudna and supported by Chetney, went pale. "Gona!" she called, gaze flitting along the ruins. "Gona!"

Imogen glanced at Laudna who shook her head. *Don't*.

"I'll find her," Imogen said, nodding to Evoroa.

Laudna took a step toward her. "Imogen—"

"Don't wait for me," she said, already turning on her heel.

"Imogen!"

But Imogen had already broken into a sprint. "Get everyone to safety!" she yelled over her shoulder.

Invisibility still held strong, but it was never cast on Gona, so she should be able to spot the Cytaa easily. Sure enough, within a few breaths, she spied the little lizard-like creature bounding towards her.

A flash of red drew Imogen's attention toward what remained of the building, its glass dome shattered open like a skull. Purple flame mingled with the red, and Imogen halted. That tug, that connection awakened within her.

She's alive.

The realization hit her like electricity, and in the next breath, Imogen was moving again, reaching for Gona.

From the corner of her eye, huge chunks of rubble and debris were thrown to the side to create a path. A blast of telepathic emotion hit Imogen—unadulterated anger.

Imogen glanced at Gona and then at the group who continued their escape. "Trust me," she said, hand outstretched.

Gona looked terrified. "What?"

Using her telekinesis, Imogen took Gona and flung her through the sky toward the group.

Orym!

Orym looked up just as the Cytaa came into view. As smooth as a dancer, Orym kicked off a chunk of wall, caught Gona in the air, landed into a roll, and popped back up to continue running without missing a beat.

Laudna's low, smooth music entered her thoughts, but her voice was strained. *Imogen? I'm right behind you*.

Imogen broke into a run. Casting that spell had relinquished her invisibility along with Laudna's. *Shit*, she hissed as she picked up speed.

"YOU."

Imogen whirled but couldn't cast a spell in time.

Liliana, eyes illuminated, crimson marks glowing, and skin a deep red hue, flung Imogen against the nearest chunk of debris with such force the air evaporated from her lungs and several ribs cracked.

From the energy rippling around her, the fury blazing in her eyes, and the way her voice wavered, Imogen knew it had been Liliana who screamed after the explosion.

She'd warned her. She'd tried to give Liliana a chance to change paths, but she'd chosen to ignore Imogen's words.

She's alive.

The red beam, the explosion of purple and red energy through the dome of the building, her scream—

The weight and reality of that recognition settled into Imogen like a stone in water. Liliana was alive.

That meant the assassination attempt had failed and there were probably a dozen dead Volition members. Rashinna, Gaz, Vazoden...

Part of Imogen was relieved. The other part was terrified because of the situation she currently found herself in—the target of her mother's fury.

"YOU KNEW," Liliana growled, and the pressure of her telekinesis increased over Imogen's chest.

"I warned you, Mama," Imogen breathed, unable to move her arms which were spread to either side as Liliana held her a few feet in the air against the rock.

"Do you have any idea where I was?" Her lightning marks flashed and electricity popped like dying embers. "Do you have any idea *what you've done?"*

"I haven't done anythin', Mama."

Not a lie. She'd had no hand in whatever happened with the assassination. She'd refused.

I don't think I could forgive you if you had a hand in it.

Now Imogen had to stain her hands with her mother's blood or risk not walking out of this encounter alive.

She's out for blood.

Mustering her power, Imogen shoved through the mental binds Liliana had on her and fell to her knees, bare skin scraping against red rock. As soon as she hit, Imogen propelled her hand forward in an attempt to Psychic Lance Liliana.

Liliana brushed off the attack with a wave of her hand.

Imogen's stomach dropped. *Oh, shit*.

Her mother cocked her head, red lightning appearing in both her palms. Voice low, she muttered, "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lyin'."

Do you have any idea where I was?

Rashinna had mentioned Liliana's location.

Imogen wracked her brain, trying to focus through the haze of pain that had begun to spread through her core. A hall. Something with music—the Woven Music Grand Hall. Yes, she knew that. Bells Hells had been told Liliana would be there where all the Ruidusborn were gathered.

There are children here like you that rely on me.

Flashes of events that happened minutes before bombarded Imogen's mind. The explosion, the collapse of the hall, the blast of red energy, that earth-shattering scream—

There are children here like you that rely on me.

The explosion, the collapse of the hall, the blast of red energy, that earth-shattering scream—

That scream of unfaltering *fury*.

A sharp inhale entered Imogen's lungs like a knife.

The second explosion—the assassination attempt on Liliana. She'd been with the Ruidusborn—with children.

Her next words were little more than air. "How many?"

Liliana's bright red eyes sliced to Imogen and her voice held primal sorrow and wild rage. "*All of them*."

I don't know why you think people will die for this.

Liliana hadn't needed to wonder for too long. She had her answer now.

Imogen! Fearne's voice pierced her mind.

Fearne, she breathed, *you're alive*.

We're okay. A sigh came through. *Oh gods. I was so worried. I saw that explosion of the Woven Music Grand Hall and you—you'd risen from the destruction*.

That wasn't me.

Then who—

Stay away, Imogen commanded as she stared her mother in the eyes. *Do not come find me. I don't want any of you on the wrong side of her*.

A beat of considering silence took over the space between their minds. Then, *That scream…It was her? It was Liliana?*

Imogen weighed her power in her hands, mind racing to think her way out of this. She couldn't willingly put anyone else in danger. If Liliana wanted to blame her, then so be it.

So long as Laudna was safe. So long as Bells Hells were safe.

Find the others, Fearne. Stay safe. Stay away. Imogen shoved the faun from her mind.

Silence gathered in her thoughts as the energy between her and Liliana intensified. Then, *Imogen?* Laudna's angry, terrified voice pushed through. *What the fuck do you think you're doing?*

Keeping her away from you.

No. Don't you dare. We can fight her together.

I won't let her take you away from me.

And I won't stand by and let her take you *from* me. Laudna's voice rose, and the music of her thoughts peaked into an ascending torrent of angry notes. *Imogen, where are you?* Her voice cracked on Imogen's name.

Truthfully, Imogen didn't really know. Ruin surrounded her. Debris littered Kreviris' broken streets, and smoke and fire lay thick in the air. The carefully carved infrastructure of the city undergrounds she'd seen on the way in did not remain. Destruction had altered Kreviris to a staggering degree—at least the sections closest to the Prime Pillar.

She glanced up. Liliana stared at her as though trying to read her mind, but the circlet kept her out.

Laudna's eerie minor chords shoved their way through to her mind again. Several notes at once sounded as if she'd placed her black-tipped fingers on an amalgamation of piano keys. *Fuck—Imogen*. Imogen shook her head, chewing on her lip. *You promised "I will not let you go." You promised—you PROMISED*. Desperation filled Laudna's usually soft tone. *Don't fucking let go of me because I promised I wouldn't let go either*.

Imogen was glad she wasn't speaking aloud because she didn't know if she would have been able to manage words without breaking. *She thinks I am responsible for all those Ruidusborn deaths, and nothin' I say will convince her otherwise. She's out for blood*. She paused and whispered, *I won't fuckin' stand by and let her take you away from me*.

You don't get to make that decision for me. I get to choose to fight for you, too.

I'm sorry, Laudna.

Don't you fucking dare. Imogen—

Don't come for me, Imogen breathed and then heaved her mental walls up, locking Laudna and the rest of Bells Hells out.

I love you, she whispered into the void.

Imogen let the power of Ruidus fill her, let her scars crackle with energy. Liliana might not kill her, but if she sensed any of her friends—if she sensed Laudna and what she meant to Imogen... She doubted Liliana would spare Laudna with a merciful death.

Imogen clenched both hands into white-knuckled fists. She could not have her. Laudna was hers and she was Laudna's. Tethered hearts. Tethered souls.

You cannot have her.

Eyes burning, she looked at Liliana.

"Saying your goodbyes?" she said in a softness that conveyed thinly veiled wrath.

"At least I have people to say goodbye to," Imogen countered.

Liliana's red eyes flared and she lifted off the ground, long coat flapping in the wind. The red atmosphere seemed to glow around her, and dust picked up as crimson lightning crackled, striking the air surrounding her. Her power was tangible and strong—strong enough Imogen felt its pull and their connection tugging at her core.

They were like magnets and the tension between them buzzed with electricity.

Are you prepared to take my life?

She'd find out now if Liliana was willing to do just that.

Imogen flew up to match the distance with Liliana. "I don't wanna fight you, Mama," she said softly but not meekly. Resolve settled into her bones.

Liliana's expression was granite. "You should have thought of that before you betrayed me—before you betrayed all Ruidusborn."

As if Liliana's lightning was a whip, she lashed out a streak of red at Imogen, but the latter managed to dodge so the attack harmlessly struck rubble instead. A streak of black remained in its wake.

Imogen retaliated, throwing a lightning bolt back at her, and though it hit, the blow seemed to barely faze Liliana. *Shit balls*, Imogen hissed.

In quick succession, Liliana drove forward throwing bolt after bolt, and all missed but one. Imogen gasped as a streak of red hit just under her collarbone, nearly knocking her from the air. She righted herself just as a sea of broken rock and debris rose like an army around Liliana—soldiers ready to defend their general. Dozens of boulders and stones hurtled at her, and Imogen used her own telekinesis to evade the biggest ones, though some small pieces made contact with her ribs and shoulder.

She grunted when the ribs that may have cracked earlier broke entirely. Heat spread through her chest, and each breath was fire. "Mama," Imogen gasped, trying to catch her breath, "I had nothin' to do with the attempt on your life."

Liliana stilled, lavender braid whipping in the wind. Red eyes focused on Imogen and tone laced with rage, she uttered, "But you *knew*."

Imogen wrapped an arm around her ribs and raised the other hand in the air. "Not about the bombs."

"LIAR." An explosion of power burst from Liliana which slammed Imogen into the side of a crumbling building.

The impact dazed her and white-hot burning spread to her back. She didn't know why she was trying to make her mother believe she wasn't involved. She was involved. Maybe not directly, but she'd have some hand in everything with the Volition going forward.
If she survived that long.

Ludinus needed to be stopped. Him, Otohan, Liliana, the scientists—

Oh, gods. The laboratories they'd found earlier where Evoroa was being kept—

Imogen struggled to her feet, breathing heavily. She rolled her shoulder but could feel the lightning bolt's impact spreading through her flesh like vines of dulled electricity.

"You claim to care for the children here," she said, swallowing her pain.

“They relied on me,” Liliana hissed. The air seemed to get heavier as Liliana approached. Lighting curled around her hands. “It was my job to protect them.”

Imogen tilted her head and cast a Witch Bolt at Liliana which hit the outside of her thigh. “Do you know what the scientists are doin’ in the laboratories?”

“Of course!” she snapped, shrugging off the bolt and continuing her stalk towards Imogen like predator to prey, a limp barely visible.

“So you know about the fetal jars?”

Though her expression did not change, Liliana blinked—perhaps the only evidence of her surprise. Instead of answering, she blasted Imogen with two lightning bolts, both of which found purchase.

Searing, shocking pain coursed through Imogen and she fell to the side from the force of the hit. Gritting her teeth, Imogen fought to her feet again despite the smell of burnt flesh wafting around her. Through the large hole in her dress, the blackened flesh of her left arm and torso were visible. “The scientists here are experimenting on Reiloran fetuses,” she muttered. “On babies. Innocent children. They don’t just tear apart prisoners of war—they cut into children.”

“No,” Liliana growled. “You *lie*.”

Another torrent of rocks pelted Imogen and more struck this time than last—on her legs, arms, chest, and one even clipped her forehead. The world titled and blurred as the force split open the skin at her hairline. Blood poured into her eyes. Imogen wiped a hand across her face to clear her vision, but the overwhelming scent of metal stuffed itself up her nose. Her clothes were tattered, the rest of her body burned, bruised, bleeding, and broken.

“I have never lied to you, Mama,” she said through gritted teeth. Imogen licked her lips and tasted blood. She spat red onto the ground. “I saw the experiments myself. Shelves filled with dozens of organs and other body parts.” Imogen recited one in particular: “Use of strong psychic influence at second stage. Ruined brain stem. Failed.” She stood on shaky legs. “Ludinus has been lyin’ to you. He’s only ever lied to you.”

A shadow flickered over Liliana’s gaze, but it was gone a moment later. “He put me in charge of those children.”

“To keep you occupied. To keep your focus elsewhere.” Imogen forced herself to stay upright. “He’s usin’ you.”

“You know *nothing!*” Liliana yelled, and the space around her pulsed with a violent wave of energy,

“Ludinus doesn’t care about anyone or anythin’ that doesn’t fulfill his plans. He only cares about that. And if experimentin’ on Reiloran children—on Ruidusborn—to try and create powerful soldiers even at risk of death gets him one step closer to that goal, then he’ll do it. He doesn’t care about innocent lives. He cares about power.”

A rock the size of the Treshi scry ball slammed into Imogen’s left thigh, and with a cry, she collapsed to a knee. Her femur cracked and nausea roiled in her stomach. Saliva filled her mouth as bile burned the back of her throat, but Imogen focused on the rocks and dirt under her

hands to ground herself and stop the world from wavering. A beat later, Liliana's worn, dusty boots appeared in Imogen's vision.

She craned her neck back and beheld the ferocity in Liliana's eyes. "Mama, please…"

A lightning-wrapped hand reached down and took Imogen by the throat, hauling her to her feet. Imogen barely held back a whimper when she put weight on the broken leg, but she sucked in the pain, forcing it into her core.

Liliana's face was inches from hers. "Ludinus is not good, but he's never lied to me."

"He can't lie to you about somethin' you don't know is happenin'," she muttered, clutching at her mother's wrist.

Liliana appeared to be fighting some internal battle, and Imogen knew she was doing everything she could to deny her words. She could see the conflict racing behind her eyes. For a moment, the all-consuming red that had swallowed her eyes, flickered.

Then the red storms raging in her gaze took over again and her grip around Imogen's throat tightened. "I will destroy anyone who stands in the way of this—of us." She shook her head slowly. "I'll give you one last chance, Imogen. Try to see this from my side. Understand and accept why I've done all this. Can't you see how their ways are so twisted? They blew up *children*, Imogen."

Imogen's heart cracked, but she verbalized the reality of the situation anyway. "More children will die by the end of this, Mama. Collateral damage will occur whether you want it to or not. War does not only take the guilty."

Liliana pulled away slightly, eyes wide. "And you view me as one of the guilty?"

Imogen's throat burned as Liliana's touch branded her skin. "Neither one of us are innocent, Mama."

Her mother looked away. That conflict waged within her, and for a moment, Imogen thought her mother might surface through whatever lies Ludinus had poisoned her with. When Liliana looked back at her, she tilted her head, a manic gleam in her eyes. "Those people you sent to kill me? They were guilty. And they received their retribution." Her breath kissed Imogen's face. "You're the only survivor that has yet to be dealt justice."

Imogen swallowed her trepidation and focused on the resolve coursing through her. She let the hatred in Liliana's eyes, her own hatred for Ludinus, her anger at her mother for leaving, for abandoning her to protect children which were not hers—she let all those emotions fuel her anger.

The roiling storm within Imogen corroded and its power intensified. Her scars glowed brighter, purple lighting deepening to a vicious red. Her hair lifted off her shoulders, and the very air between them seemed to shift and shake at the gathering of energy she called upon. She set glowing eyes upon Liliana who actually looked…worried.

Mirroring imagery she'd experienced before, Imogen loosed a scream that sent a wave of Dissonant Whispers at Liliana, blasting her into the lower portion of a two-story building. Rock crumbled and a pillar of dust rose like a mushroom cloud.

Imogen let the lightning lick around her arms and legs, let the atmosphere shake with her power, and lifted into the air. She called upon Ruidus, her eyes flashed red, and the moon seemed to flare in response. They were connected; their power became one, and Imogen let it wash over her, through her, and allowed that red tether to awaken the depths of her power.

Liliana emerged from the wreckage, face bloody, hair stained red at her temple, and clutching her left arm to her torso. Streaks of lightning crackled around her in bursts of angry red light. Her eyes had faded back to normal, but they were still alight with rage. She sliced a hand diagonally, and like a whip hitting Imogen's mind, psychic damage lashed her.

She turned her head from the attack, thankful the damage hadn't been severe. Imogen lifted her chin. "I love you, Mama, but this is bigger than us." Lightning danced around her fingers. "I won't stand idly by while you aid Ludinus Da'leth in destroyin' the gods and millions of magic users in the process."

Her mother stumbled over rubble and into the clearing between them. "You would have been saved, Imogen," she said, voice gruff. "*I* would have saved us." Her expression set into a scowl. "But it's too late; you've chosen your path."

Imogen nodded once. "I'm sorry, Mama. I'm sorry I couldn't save you from him. I'm sorry I couldn't save you from yourself." Her throat bobbed. "But I would choose savin' the world over you." She nodded again, brows furrowed. "I do choose that. I choose the gods and the people they protect over you and that fuckin' elf Ludinus."

Liliana's top lip pulled up in a sneer. "So be it." Her lightning flared. "You won't last the comin' storm."

"I am the storm," Imogen retorted, head cocked. "Better run, Mama."

A dull, sharp laugh echoed in the air. Liliana inclined her chin, a cold grin on her lips. "Better be careful, lest the storm consume you, Imogen."

"It's already consumed you," she said, vitriol laced in her words. "You were gone a long time ago. I should have realized you were beyond savin'."

Her mother laughed. "The only person who'll need savin'" —she snarled— "is you."

Liliana had cast before Imogen could comprehend how to evade the lightning rocketing toward her. She barely managed to throw up a wall of her own lightning, which absorbed the impact and protected Imogen from the worst of it. She hissed as some of the red lightning singed the hair on her arms.

Liliana had not finished; she launched two more attacks in a matter of seconds.

Another Mind Whip slashed into Imogen's head and white flashed across her vision. Before she could right herself, a Seething Storm gathered around her. Imogen escaped taking damage and flew out of the area before it could get the chance to harm her.

She glared at her mother and growled, "My turn."

Imogen summoned an Investiture of Lightning, gathering her lightning around her and wreathing her limbs in purple electricity. Her eyes blazed brightly before she tilted her head back and released a shockwave of energy that blasted everything around her—including Liliana.

The energy hit Liliana and she let out a bark of pain as she suffered the full effects of whatever damage the wave dealt. Imogen held her breath, but Liliana did not move; she was paralyzed. Imogen gathered energy in her hands, readying to strike again—her stomach dropped.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit.

Liliana had Resisted the paralyzation and already moved to attack.

Imogen didn't let her mother prepare another assault. She sent a lightning bolt at Liliana, which struck her square in the chest and sent her flying. In a blur of purple, brown and red, she crashed into the ground multiple times before disappearing over a pile of rubble.

Between ragged, aching breaths, Imogen focused her vision regardless of the wild storm bombarding her senses. She'd almost lowered herself to the ground when movement caught her attention.

A silhouette stood from a sea of fire, and Liliana materialized in the dim light, lavender hair blackened, Ruby Vanguard coat on fire, and power sparking.

The world around Imogen seemed to slow. She couldn't tear her gaze from the menacing scene before her.

Unfazed by the flames licking her neck, Liliana stared into Imogen's soul as she used her good hand to remove the coat and tossed it into the wind. Her eyes blazed with dark fire. "No more pullin' punches."

Imogen's blood pounded in her ears, and her heart raced at those words—at the sickening comprehension she wasn't really holding her own against her mother. Liliana had been toying with her.

Fuck me runnin'.

Liliana spread her hands wide, broken arm trembling, and a red and purple lightning storm, savage and explosive, manifested instantaneously. Even in the air, the violent shockwave caught Imogen. Ribbons of lightning wrapped like vines up her arms, leaving scorching pain in their wake. Imogen wrenched against the restraints, but instead of breaking free, the lightning chains retracted and yanked her out of the sky where she crashed into the red rock.

A cry escaped her lips as her broken thigh bone shifted upon impact. Imogen had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming. New burns appeared over her scars, and the heat nearly suffocated her. Her skin had become slick with sweat, and red dust stuck to her, to the fresh burns, and her open wounds.

Through watering eyes, Imogen glanced up at Liliana who approached with outstretched arms. She couldn't move, couldn't escape the pulses of lightning damage she continued to take. Little by little, Imogen's strength waned.

"You have little chance of escapin'," Liliana said. Despite the fire in her eyes, nothing but ice remained in her expression.

But she still had a chance.

Imogen wrenched her right leg under her and attempted a save. The first failed and more lightning damage course through her. She gritted her teeth against the pain and force and tried again. Another wave of scorching damage. Imogen gasped, shaky breaths wracking her chest.

"Give in, Imogen."

Otohan's voice pierced her memories. *You don't just give in. You let go when the time is right*.

Imogen dug into the depths of her core to where her power resided. She muttered through clenched teeth, "Never." With a primal scream, Imogen battled to her feet, ripping her charred arms from the grasp of the lightning chains.

She was free, but the effort had sapped any remaining strength from her muscles. Wind whipped Imogen's hair, dust stung her eyes, and the roaring of their power deafened the space between mother and daughter.

They'd each created a storm around them—twin storms equal in intensity and size.

Liliana was only a few feet away, and once she reached her, Imogen wouldn't stand a chance. Imogen had so little power left. She'd used the spells which took the most energy already, and at this point, she wasn't sure she'd be able to perform a cantrip. Yet she had to find a way to end this.

Imogen knew she had little chance of success when she reached out a hand and Commanded, "STOP."

Liliana paused. Her body shook and muscles twitched, but a breath later, she powered through the Command and the spell's effects fell away.

Fuck, Imogen cursed. *Shit*.

Imogen dove into the well of her power to scoop out anything else, but scraped the bottom. Dread began to work itself into her gut, and some part of her knew she most likely wouldn't walk away from this alive. She stumbled back a step, nearly twisting her ankle on a chunk of stone.

Liliana cocked her head. "I'm stronger than you, Imogen. Don't try childish tricks with me." She lowered her chin and glared from beneath her brows. "Now KNEEL."

Imogen gritted her teeth, sending all her mental shields up to ignore the Command, but found her legs moving without her permission. One knee collapsed to the rock and she bit back a gasp as pain radiated up her broken thigh. A beat later, her other knee slammed into the ground.

As if a Mage Hand grasped her shoulders, Imogen's knees were ground into the earth as an invisible weight slowly increased, fixing her to the spot. Fire spread through her legs, and her burning lungs ached from the inhalation of dust and the heat of electricity.

Liliana approached, an unbalanced yet confident swagger to her gait. She loomed over Imogen who had to crane her neck back to stare her mother in the eyes. Liliana tilted Imogen's chin higher, baring her throat to the sky. "I do love you, Imogen," she whispered. "I'm sorry it had to come to this."

"It doesn't," Imogen gasped. Her muscles ached from straining against the spell immobilizing her. "You can still walk away."

Renewed anger flashed in her red eyes. "I can't have you standin' in our way. Like you said, this is bigger than us. This could mean a new, safe world for all Ruidusborn." She clicked her tongue and sighed. "You could have been free."

"Or we'd all just be slaves under Ludinus and Predathos," Imogen spat.

"You can't escape once you give in, but you needn't fear that," Liliana said, her voice light and almost melodic. "You're safe with Predathos."

Imogen sneered and hissed, "Fuck that."

Liliana's stare hardened. "This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution." Black gathered at the tips of Liliana's fingers and spread up her red scars like ink in a fountain pen.

NO.

Imogen couldn't escape her touch, and the effects of necrotic damage were immediate. The tendrils of death magic spread up her arms, over her chest, and into her soul. Like leeches, the magic sucked Imogen's life force from her, leaving her fighting to stay conscious. Black ichor leaked from her eyes and parts of her vision went dark.

Liliana released her, and Imogen swayed on her knees once the weight holding her upright vanished. Her mother's lips moved, but no sound reached her ears—only the pulsing of her slowing heartbeat.

The inky black consumed her sight entirely, and in a last-ditch effort, Imogen tore her mental walls down and threw her thoughts into the space between.

Laudna...she breathed, and then darkness devoured her.

The moment Imogen shunted her from their mental connection, Laudna wanted to drop Evoroa on the ground and fight through the chaos back to her girl.

Yet she didn't.

Because she knew what was at stake. Because this—everything they'd done and would do—was bigger than her or her love for Imogen. She *hated* to even admit such a thing, but it was true. Everything was so much bigger than them.

Laudna firmly believed the events which had come to pass and still would, were setting a stage for Imogen to be the savior of Exandria.

Panic and dread leaked like ichor within her gut.

Imogen wouldn't be saving anyone, let alone all of Exandria, if Liliana killed her daughter. Laudna's fingers itched to pull at her hair, but instead, she attempted to call out to Imogen, if only to occupy her mind.

Imogen. Laudna sent her thoughts forward, but they hit a wall of adamantium.

She kept trying anyway. *Imogen, please answer. Imogen, don't do this. Imogen, please. Please. Please, please, please.*

Each word was like a fist pounding against an iron door, but no matter how hard Laudna struck, Imogen did not open that door. The impact of her words against Imogen's mental walls echoed like thunder and her panic spiked.

"Motherfucker," Laudna hissed, and her sudden outburst had Chetney looking over his shoulder at her as they navigated through the endless winding catacombs.

They'd barely made it back to Volition headquarters before Laudna turned on her heel to go right back out into the fray. She'd hardly made it a few feet before a hand clamped around her wrist. She glanced over her shoulder and growled, "Let go, Ashton."

"What the fuck are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that Imogen is currently fighting her mother and I won't let her do that alone."

Ashton's expression softened, but he didn't release her. "We don't know how powerful she is."

"Neither does Imogen," Orym said, appearing at their side.

Laudna yanked out of Ashton's grip and stormed toward the door. "We're wasting time."

"You don't know what you're running into," Ashton said, hand out. "Please, Laudna. You can't—"

"Imogen is fighting her mother ALONE," Laudna yelled. "I don't care if it's a trap! I don't care if it's stupid and reckless to run in there blindly! I care that she's okay. I care about making sure my girlfriend is alive so when we're all safe, I can wring her neck for be so foolish!"

Because gods, Laudna would wish more than anything to be angry with Imogen than grieving and remembering a love which once was. If Launda was angry, then that meant Imogen had come out of the confrontation with her mother alive, and she could handle loving Imogen with all her heart while also fuming. But death…that changed everything.

Anything would be better than that.

Ashton raised both their hands in front of their chest. He said slowly, "I wasn't suggesting not going after her at all. We're going to fucking go get her. That's fucking obvious." He tilted his head, sharp eyes landing on Laudna. "But all of us are going, not just you."

Imogen, please answer. Imogen? Imogen, darling, please...

Laudna tore herself from her thoughts and focused on Ashton's words. She blinked. "Right. That's great." She shook her head and pointed toward the exit. "Alright, then what are we waiting for?"

"We need some semblance of a plan," Orym said, resting his hands on his hips.

We don't have time for a plan! We need to go! We need—I need to save her—

But Laudna didn't voice those concerns out loud; they wouldn't help anything at the moment.

Fearne's hooves clipped softly against the rock as she joined the group huddled in the doorway. "We're going to go help Imogen, right?" Her eyes flitted between each member. "We can't—we can't let her face Liliana alone."

Chetney stepped forward. "I'm with Fearne."

Fearne gave him a wink. "Of course you are, baby."

"Don't tease me now."

"Shut the fuck up, Chet," Laudna snapped.

Chetney raised his shoulders and shrunk back, teeth bared in a grimace.

FCG wheeled over then, their hands raised in a similar fashion to Ashton's. "Let's not start fighting. We need a plan to help Imogen, not quarrel amongst ourselves."

"We don't have *time*," Laudna said again. Her *form of dread* pulled and stretched underneath her skin as her emotions wavered. She forced the transformation down, and said, "Here's the plan: quit standing here and go find Imogen."

"Have you tried talking to her?" Chetney asked.

Laudna rolled her eyes. "Yes, Chetney." She huffed and folded her arms over her torso. "She shut me out."

Fearne put a hand on Laudna's shoulder. "She shut me out too."

Orym shrugged. "There's got to be a reason for that."

She shut me out. She shut me out. She shut me out.

She can't expect to shut me out like I'll forget about her and leave her to die.

Leave her to die.

Imogen couldn't die. Laudna had just found her reason to live; she couldn't lose her.

She shut me out.

Laudna couldn't believe Imogen would do something like that—prevent her from helping. Prohibit her from protecting the one she loved.

You're not a burden, Laudna. Imogen's voice from the night before floated to Laudna on a memory smelling of lilac and leather. *If you let go of me, I'm gone*.

Laudna clenched her hands into fists. Like hell she'd let go. Not now. Not ever.

She glanced at the group. Chetney and Orym were still invisible. They could use that to their advantage. Then she looked at Ashton. His sheer power of force might be the one thing to get Liliana to back off. And of course, if Imogen wasn't...alright, then FCG and Fearne would both be needed to heal her.

Laudna slapped Ashton in the chest and headed out. "Let's go. Walk and talk." The group followed, though Orym shot Chetney a concerned look.

"Orym, Chetney, you use whatever time you have left of your invisibility to try and get stealth attacks on Liliana. FCG and Fearne, stay out of range of her spells. And Ashton—" Laudna looked at the genasi Titan and gave them a wicked grin, "fuck her shit up."

Ashton swung his hammer over the back of his shoulders and grinned. "It'll be my fucking pleasure."

As Bells Hells made their way out of the lower sections of Kreviris and up to the space which held the most ruination, Laudna's thoughts wandered, and she found herself moving faster, increasing her speed until she was nearly running.

Visions of Imogen bombarded her—her smile, her laugh, the way she blushed or tucked her hair behind her ears. She saw snippets of her floating, purple lightning wreathed along her arms, scars glowing. Laudna saw her power, her ferocity, her gentleness, and heart.

As though a blade sliced across her vision, flashes of a very different Imogen sparked through Laudna's head. Terrible cries of pain escaped Imogen's mouth, wounds marred her beautiful skin, and then—her bloodied, cold form.

She'll be okay. She's very capable.

She'll be okay.

She'll be okay.

She'll be—

Time seemed to move in half speed as a voice slipped into her mind like an echo.

Laudna...

Her drawling accent was nothing more than air, and Laudna's name faded on her lips like music on the wind.

Laudna barked an exclamation which had the rest of the group turning. So many words crowded her mind, yet she only managed a desperate, "Imogen."

"What?" Fearne asked, eyes wide. "What about Imogen?"

Laudna ignored Fearne's question and attempted to send her own words back. *Imogen?*

A beat passed. Nothing.

Imogen.

Another breathless moment. Nothing.

IMOGEN.

No response.

IMOGEN.

No, no, no, no, no.

NO.

"We've gotta go. Now. RIGHT NOW," Laudna yelled, picking up the hem of her dress and breaking into a frantic run.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, but nothing good." Laudna released a growl of frustration. "Fuck!"

Dodging giant cracks in the streets and leaping over piles of rubble and debris, Laudna and the rest of Bells Hells hurtled through the devastation which had barraged the highest underground portions of Kreviris.

They didn't have to hunt for long.

As they entered a familiar open space, Laudna halted. Her heart dropped as she beheld the destruction before her. Rubble littered the clearing, stones were black with electrical burns, and a storm continued to blow wind and dust through the air.

Then her gaze settled on the two figures at the heart of that storm. One stood, lavender hair whipping in the wind—

Imogen?

Flashes of red sparked around their figure, ribbons of lightning wreathing their arms and chest, while the other figure appeared prone—

Laudna wanted to vomit.

Imogen.

Her dirty, burned, and bloody form sprawled on the ground had Laudna struggling to catch her breath. She could barely make out the purple hair which spilled across red stone and the sheer chiffon dress that danced with the wind over lightning-marked legs.

And gods—she wasn't *moving*.

Laudna couldn't even tell if she was breathing.

Imogen. She tried again, but where Imogen's mind normally would be, emptiness greeted her. Where usually the soft hum of life and the distant pulse of her essence resided, Laudna felt…nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Nothing but a cold gulf tethered them together.

An ancient, primal fury began to build within Laudna, and her black eyes honed in on Liliana Temult. Delilah lay dormant; this rage belonged to Laudna and Laudna alone, and she would tear Liliana to bloody fucking pieces.

With little more than a thought, Laudna's limbs lengthened, her skin transformed, and her jaw widened into a maw that dripped ichor as her *form of dread* took over. Like a creature from the depths of hell, clawed fingers dripping black, Laudna stalked toward the Temult women.

The sight of Liliana standing over an unmoving Imogen, red lightning pulsing like a frantic heartbeat filled Laudna with an all-consuming preternatural fury.

A bestial snarl exited Laudna as she shouted, "GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HER."

Liliana whirled, red eyes wide. In the next moment, her stare narrowed. "What the hell are you?"

"Your motherfucking nightmare, bitch."

Laudna didn't care that Liliana was Imogen's mother—that they were blood. She'd done *that* to her daughter. Right now, the idea of Liliana did not exist beyond a *thing*—a creature which Laudna craved to tear into bloody ribbons for harming her girl.

There were no logical thoughts in Laudna's head—only get to Imogen and kill anyone who'd stand in her way of protecting her.

The next few seconds happened so quick Laudna barely registered them.

Before she could attack, a flash of crystal lanced through the air and a giant multi-colored hammer hit Liliana in the chest. The force sent her flying back into the nearest pile of rubble, and Ashton, still mid-air from the leap, arm outstretched from the throw, landed with a force that shook the ground. Without any hesitation, they clamped a hand over Laudna's wrist and launched her into the air in Imogen's direction.

Using Feather Fall, Laudna landed softly and immediately crouched over Imogen, her *form of dread* rippling with movement as her bones cracked and flesh contorted.

A blast of energy drew Laudna's attention to where Liliana waved a hand and tossed Ashton's hammer to the side. Instead of standing with power and ease, though, she struggled to her feet. Her left arm appeared immobile, and her movements seemed slowed, pained.

From the thirty-foot distance, Liliana's gaze met Laudna's who perched like a rabid dog over Imogen. She took one step as if in a daze. Then another.

From either side of Liliana, an invisible Orym adjusted his grip on the hilt of Seedling, and Chetney had chunks of skin in his fists, ready to transform.

Fearne whispered in Mister's ear, her eyes bright with his flames, while FCG huddled behind a large chunk of stone.

Laudna merely ground her claws into the rock and didn't relinquish her death-promising glare.

Liliana blinked, head tilted. She did not look away from Imogen's direction. Then, as if some thread snapped within her, the red from her eyes vanished and she reeled back. She stumbled like she'd been struck, gaze appearing to frantically take in everything around her. Liliana cast one last glance before she turned and took off into the air.

Time caught up with Laudna, and she didn't realize she was moving until everything around her blurred as if it all passed by much quicker than she was capable of traveling.

Too fast. It all moved too fast now—including her panic.

Laudna relinquished her *form of dread* and collapsed to her knees at Imogen's side. "Imogen?"

The young woman didn't stir.

She's not moving. She's not moving. She's not MOVING.

"FCG!" Laudna yelled, voice breaking.

Black ichor ran in streams from Imogen's eyes and mingled with blood from a gash in her forehead. Burns covered whole facets of her body, her dress lay in tatters with sections of it burned and bloodied, and her scars were inflamed and oozing blood.

"Oh, gods," Laudna breathed as her own black tears streamed down her cheeks. She pulled Imogen so very carefully onto her lap and cradled her head as though it were precious amethyst. "Imogen? Imogen, I'm here. I'm here, darling."

She placed her ear over Imogen's mouth, but no warm breath kissed her cool skin.

No.

No, no, no.

"Imogen," she panted, nearly breathless. "Darling?" Launda pressed two black-tipped fingers to the soft part under Imogen's jaw and waited.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Not even the faintest thump beneath the pads of her fingers.

The contrast between her pounding heart and the utter lack of Imogen's felt like a knife between her ribs. "*No*," Laudna muttered. "Fuck—gods—Imogen—"

She couldn't finish a single thought because the only thing she could comprehend was that Imogen was dead.

Imogen is dead. Imogen is dead. Imogen is DEAD.

No, no, NO.

Laudna held Imogen's head then turned her own to the underground sky and let out a broken, soul-wrenching roar. "NO!" She glanced over her shoulder and bellowed, "FCG!"

But Fearne had already collapsed in a cloud of red dust next to Laudna, sea foam green hair blowing in the wind and tears welling in her eyes.

"She's dead, Fearne," Laudna choked out. "She's dead. She's *dead*."

Fearne sniffed, nodding her head. "Okay, okay, okay."

"*Please*, Fearne."

"She won't be for long, Laudna. I promise."

Laudna brushed her thumb over Imogen's mouth, and part of her believed she'd feel her inhale at any moment, but the small gap between Imogen's lips contained only emptiness.

Now visible, Orym crouched down, resting an elbow over a knee. He said softly, "How long has she been gone?"

"*I don't know*," Laudna muttered, "but it couldn't have been long. I just heard her voice in my head. She just reached out."

It can't be too late.

It can't be.

Fearne rubbed her hands together, placed them on Imogen's chest, and cast Revivify.

Laudna could only hear her heartbeat in her ears.

One beat.

A second beat.

A third slow beat.

Laudna waited breathlessly. "Please, please, please," she whispered.

The warm glow of the Revivify spell faded and Fearne removed her hands from Imogen's body to press a palm to her mouth.

Nothing.

Please.

Another sluggish pulse from Laudna's chest.

Then, a weak, flickering breath rattled in Imogen's lungs, and it was the most beautiful thing Laudna had ever heard.

A collective release of breath went through the group.

Laudna draped a hand across Fearne's outstretched arm as her entire body shook with unreleased sobs.

Several more moments passed before ichor-filled eyes opened to reveal hazy purple irises. They were dazed and distant, but Imogen's eyes were open.

She was *alive*.

She's alive. She's alive. She's alive.

Laudna took in her freckles, the small scar on her chin, the different shades of purple in her eyes, and held them close to her heart. She marked them to memory all over again as if it was the first time she had laid eyes on Imogen.

Because it had almost been the last.

Laudna shoved that terrible, awful thought from her head and instead focused on reality. Imogen, her love, her heart, her soul—was alive.

“Imogen, darling,” she whispered, voice strained as she stroked her thumbs along Imogen’s black and red stained cheeks.

Imogen’s gaze flitted along the red rock ceiling past Laudna’s shoulder, unfocused and confused. After a beat, her eyes found Laudna’s, and the latter nearly collapsed into inconsolable, bone-rattling tears. Her cracked and bleeding lips opened just enough for air to pass through. “Laudna.”

Hearing her name on Imogen’s tongue loosed something in Laudna and a tension-filled chuckle released a wave of relief through her chest. A hiccupped sob clawed its way up her throat, and Laudna couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. She rested her forehead on Imogen’s chest, nearly suffocating the latter with her torso and staining her dress with black tears, but she didn’t care. She needed to breathe her in, feel her heartbeat against her face, feel the solidity of her clothes scratching her nose.

“Oh my fucking gods,” Laudna whispered between heaving sobs. She clutched Imogen’s chiffon sleeves as if that would ensure she didn’t float away—that she wouldn’t go where Laudna couldn’t follow.

A trembling, tentative hand caressed her face, and Laudna wanted nothing more than to melt into the touch.

She sat up so she could look at Imogen but didn’t pull away from her hand. Imogen’s dirty, lightning-flecked fingers were gentler than a soft summer breeze. She drew light circles along Laudna’s cheeks, warmth following her fingertip’s path.

After minutes of just staring into her eyes, Laudna wrapped her slim fingers around Imogen’s hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. Her skin, though broken and dirty, still smelled of open fields, lilac, leather, and almonds.

Laudna breathed her in. She let another kiss linger over her skin, over the indented scars that climbed Imogen’s fingers.

Another breath which reminded her of home. Her home. Her Imogen.

That warm, strong tether which anchored them—that purple essence which represented Imogen’s soul—permeated Laudna’s head, and the emptiness which had previously taken over, was filled with Imogen’s luring, slow drawl. *I’m not dead*.

Laudna buried her anger at Imogen for doing something so stupid and reckless. They’d talk once Imogen was fully on the other side of this. For now, Laudna worshipped the fact Imogen was alive.

She’s alive. She’s alive. She’s alive.

Not anymore. She closed her eyes and exhaled. *Thanks to Fearne.*

Images of Imogen’s body sprawled on the ground flashed through Laudna’s head. She wiped them away before they could sit in her mind long enough to induce another wave of terror.

Upside down in Laudna’s lap, Imogen’s eyes trained upward, and the ghost of a smile appeared at her lips. *I’ll ask about that later*. She traced a finger along Launda’s lips, soft electricity dancing along the surface of her fingertips.

She’s alive. She’s alive. She’s alive.

Imogen's gaze flitted to the side where Fearne still knelt. The faun smiled. "There's our superhero."

Orym placed a small hand on Imogen's hip. "Glad to have you back, Temult."

Ashton had begun pacing and Laudna thought they might have muttered something about giving them a "fucking heart attack."

Chetney clutched one of his woodworking tools in a hand but made no move to actually use it. "Are you alright, Imogen?"

Imogen closed her eyes and gave a slow, stiff nod. After a moment, she glanced up at Laudna, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. Despite the pain and exhaustion visible, she smirked and wiggled an index finger which pulled Laudna in. Her right hand caressed the side of Laudna's face, the tenderest of connections drawing her closer until their lips met.

The contact awoke something in Laudna, and though she sat bent over Imogen, the latter's head still pillowed in her lap, she affirmed the gentle kiss with a furor of her own.

She didn't care if their friends looked on, didn't care if they were out in the open after two Imperium buildings had been bombed—the only one who mattered was Imogen.

Her smirk spread into a smile, and Imogen's fingers curled in Laudna's hair as she responded with equal passion. *I love you, Laudna*.

Laudna caressed the sides of Imogen's dirty, bloody face, and didn't care about any of it. She only registered the feel of her lips on hers, her warm breath between kisses, and the steady beat of Imogen's heart against her hands. *I love you, Imogen,* she whispered back.

Imogen was alive, and those things proved it over and over again with each kiss, breath, and beat of her heart.

She's alive.

A light giggle, no more than an exhale through Imogen's nose, sounded like music to Laudna's ears and a balm on her heart which had been so close to shattering entirely.

She's alive.

A kiss. *I love you*.

I love you more than anythin', Laudna.

Another kiss—a pained gasp of air halted Laudna's movements. Her gaze sliced to Imogen, scanning her entire body. "What's wrong?" she breathed, the feel of Imogen's mouth tingling on her lips.

Imogen shook her head, though her eyes were squeezed shut. Her throat bobbed and her words were little more than a whisper. "Sorry, I—" Her chest shuddered and she grimaced. *I can't—I think my ribs are broken and my leg—she shattered it*.

Laudna glanced up at the rest of Bells Hells who had attempted to look preoccupied—except for Fearne who watched them with a sly grin.

"FCG," Laudna said, getting the Automaton's attention.

He whirled, voice too high, too chipper. "Yeah?"

"Do you have any sort of healing left?"

He shook his head. “Ashton and I barely made it out of that explosion. If we’d taken the full brunt of the force, we’d be dead.”

Fearne perked up. “I can Cure Wounds, Laudna. What does she need?”

Laudna laced her fingers through Imogen’s, steadying the shaking that had taken over.

Imogen grimaced but didn’t voice whatever pain she felt. “My—ribs,” she gasped. “I—I don’t know how many—broken.” Another fragile breath. She tapped weakly against her left leg. “It’s broken.”

Fearne nodded, brows pursed. “I can probably mend the bones, but that might be it for the moment. I don’t have that much power with Cure Wounds, but it’ll certainly be better than nothing.”

Imogen closed her eyes again and nodded. “Thank you, Fearne—for this, for bringin’ me back.”

“Of course, Imogen.” Fearne ran the back of her finger down Imogen’s cheek. “We all love you, friend.”

A low, soft groan exited Imogen’s lips, and her nose scrunched in a wince, but she showed no other sign of discomfort.

Laudna wished she could take away her pain—take any hurt and lay it upon herself. She’d do it in a heartbeat.

Don’t think that, Imogen said, eyes focused on Laudna as Fearne prepared the spell. *I made my choice and I’m dealin’ with the consequences.*

You did, Laudna replied, heart heavy. *We’re going to talk about that decision later*.

Imogen bit her lip but conceded with a slight nod.

“There.” Fearne sat back with a nod. “Better?”

Imogen wiggled a little in Laudna’s lap, stretching her torso and testing her limbs. Then, she nodded. “I can handle it.”

“Are you still in pain, darling?” Laudna whispered.

Imogen shook her head. “It’s alright. I can move. That’s what’s important.” She reached her hands up so Ashton and Fearne could ease her into a sitting position. She sat for a minute, breathing heavily.

Laudna eased to her feet and then offered her hands to Imogen who glanced up, eyes dazed with pain. She frowned. *Are you sure you’re alright, darling?*

I’m fine, she replied, though her face and body language said otherwise. *I can handle it. We need to get back before the rest of the Imperium comes knockin’ on the door*.

Please don’t lie to me.

Imogen took a breath as her upper body swayed despite still sitting on the ground. After a moment, she said, *I’m hurtin’, Laudna, but I can handle it*.

That’s all you need to say, darling. Laudna grasped Imogen’s hands and gently pulled her to her feet.

Imogen took a step on her left leg, seeming to test her weight on it. Her jaw muscles danced as she gritted her teeth.

After a moment, she turned to Ashton. She didn't even need to say anything. The barbarian nodded, a soft smile on his lips. Slowly and carefully, they scooped Imogen up and cradled her against their chest.

Imogen's eyes closed almost immediately, but not before reaching a hand out for Laudna to take. Laudna slid her fingers between Imogen's. The movement felt natural, comforting, and she brushed a thumb over the back of Imogen's hand, the temperature of her lightning scars warming Laudna's cool skin.

Ashton glanced down at the sorceress tucked against his chest and after a moment, Imogen nodded.

Laudna couldn't help the pang of jealousy that went through her at whatever silent conversation they were having, but she shoved that initial feeling away and continued to rub slow, soft circles with her thumb along Imogen's hand.

She's alive. She's alive. She's alive.

Laudna repeated those words over and over again as if stopping the chant would revoke reality and time would come undone.

Anger and frustration still plucked at her heart, but Laudna would deal with those emotions later. For now, she let the love she felt for Imogen spread down to her bones. Laudna didn't know if Imogen was awake, but she found that tether between them, tapped an immaterial finger against it, and whispered, *I love you. I love you. I love you*.

After a minute, Imogen's soft voice murmured, *I love you, Laud*.

The ghost of a smile picked at Laudna's mouth, and for the remainder of their journey back, those three words swam in her head. They were a song for Imogen and Imogen alone.

Laudna laced those words with the orchestra of her thoughts and created a melody with which she worshipped the one whom she loved.

Deep within Volition headquarters, away from the prying eyes of the Weave Mind, Otohan Thull, and Liliana Temult, Laudna sat in a corner against the stone wall with Imogen's head in her lap. She toyed with loose strands of lavender hair which were stained with blood, ichor, and dust. As she brushed gentle fingers through Imogen's hair, Laudna released small waves of prestidigitation which erased the remaining blemishes.

Laudna pressed a kiss to Imogen's warm forehead, lingering for a moment to soak in the contact. "I'm waiting for you, darling," she whispered against her hair and planted another kiss.

She'd hold off to properly clean her face; prestidigitation would just leave the feel of blood and ichor on Imogen's skin even if it removed its visibility.

She began to hum to herself in the quiet, and bits of the past appeared to join her. Days in the Parchwoods when she made dolls out of sticks and leaves, the little lullabies she'd sing—wordless, airy tunes which would break the endless silence—and the isolation and loneliness which would press in like shadow, now resurfaced along with another slumbering piece of her past.

Laudna, darling, Delilah whispered.

She shook her head. "What do you want?"

I just want to talk, dear.

"You never just want to talk," Laudna retorted. "You're quite good at talking and worming your way into my mind until I forget you're manipulating me at all."

Delilah tsked. *Sweet girl. I have never lied to you.*

"You don't need to lie to manipulate." Laudna glanced down at Imogen, eyes closed and face relaxed, and focused on her. Not the woman in her head—the woman who resided within her heart. She placed two fingers under Imogen's nose and exhaled when soft, warm breath kissed her hand. Gentle, steady, constant.

She's alive, she reminded herself. *She's alive. She's alive. She's alive.*

Laudna feared to touch any other part of her since cuts, bruises, and nasty burns marred so much of Imogen's skin. Her scars were inflamed and red, and her previously broken thigh had left behind a large, deep purple bruise the length of Imogen's femur. Gods, how she wished she could heal her. Fearne had done some, but it wasn't enough for Laudna's own comfort.

Delilah interrupted her train of thought. *You let Liliana Temult go,* she whispered.

"Is there a question attached to that statement?" Of course there was. There always was.

Delilah's eloquent, smooth voice whispered, *Why?*

Laudna tilted her head. "Because I had Imogen. Liliana couldn't touch her again. She's all I care about." She paused and then whispered, "She's safe."

She won't be for long and you know that. Liliana will return with an army to either destroy all of you or take Imogen from you. Delilah sighed. *Either way, you will lose her.*

"No," Laudna said with a shake of her head, "I won't."

Oh, sweet girl, but you already have.

"Fearne brought her back."

And what if she hadn't? What would you have done?

Laudna would have wreaked havoc on anyone close to her. She would have hunted Liliana down and torn her to shreds. She would have—

No, Laudna knew what she would have done.

She would have turned to Delilah. She would have turned to her patron and begged her to save Imogen—to save the one she loved most in this universe. Laudna would have *begged* her, and she would have given *anything* to Delilah if she'd—

"Would you have been able to save her?" she whispered, voice low, almost timid.

Delilah hummed thoughtfully. *I can only give out as much as you put in, dear.*

"But if I had given you the power, would you be able to bring her back?" She took a breath. "If something were to happen again—if she were to...die?"

Delilah exhaled, the sound filling Laudna's head. *I am only as strong as you are, my dear.*

Laudna thought back to their conversation just a few days ago. "You promised you'd give me everything I need to keep her safe. You promised."

An immaterial nod. *I did promise that, and I still mean it.*

"And yet she died."

That was not my fault, Laudna dear. She shut you out. I can't save her if she doesn't give us the opportunity to do so.

Laudna inhaled. "She shut me out," she breathed, hand stilling along Imogen's arm. That anger which had surfaced only a few hours ago, reappeared. She wanted to blame Imogen for being so reckless even though if the roles were reversed, she'd have shoved Imogen away to keep her safe. She would have done anything and everything in her power to protect Imogen.

Imogen had done the same, so why was Laudna so angry?

Delilah continued. *Yes, dear. She shut you out. How could someone you love do that? Doesn't she trust you?*

"She does trust me."

Yet Laudna replayed their too brief conversation in her head over and over again, followed by that mental adamantium wall slamming in her face. Imogen had dove headfirst into a lethal situation—had decided to face her mother alone—and had walled Laudna out.

She shut you out.

She shut you out.

She shut you out.

Laudna shook her head.

Then, Imogen's words from the night before echoed in her head. *I will not let you go*.

She promised—they'd both promised.

Yet Imogen had shoved Laudna from her mind and that tether between them had severed.

Perhaps that's true. Delilah almost seemed to shrug. *We all do irrational things for those we love.*

Laudna nodded, though she only partly comprehended Delilah's words. "You broke the world for Sylas," she said distantly.

I did. And I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"That's why you want power."

Delilah repeated her words from their last conversation. *Power is to protect those you love. The one you love.*

After a few moments of silence, Laudna said, her words a near hiss, "Then I need more power because I was rendered helpless in the face of her death. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't help her. I couldn't save her. I could only plead and beg as I lost her."

Losing those one you love is heart-rending, dear. I know.

"I did too, at least for a moment."

Delilah seemed to pause and take Laudna in. She felt those invisible eyes scan her up and down and then peer into her soul. *I've found that that feeling is worse than the pain of death. I'd suffer a thousand more deaths than choose to endure the loss of my Sylas again. I'll give you everything you need to keep your love safe because you shouldn't have to endure that pain again.*

A deep, aching hunger began to grow within her. That same hunger which drove her to suck the life from Bor'dor. Then again with Willmaster Edmuda. It was an all-consuming, enticing famine which spread like poison through her.

Laudna glanced down at Imogen and shoved that feeling aside. “I’d do anything for her,” she whispered.

Would you destroy the world for her?

“Yes,” Laudna said. “But I’d also fight for the world—for humanity—for her. I’d spare Liliana if that’s what she wished.” She took a breath as she drew lazy swirls along Imogen’s cheek with a finger. “I’d do anything she wished.”

And if what she wished broke your heart?

Laudna swallowed, but deep in her heart, she knew that answer too. After a moment, she whispered, “I’d do anything she wished.”

And if she wished for us to be severed?

“I’d do anything she wished.”

Even if severing our connection left you powerless and unable to protect her?

She’d already been unable to protect her love, and Laudna felt like her connection with Delilah had only grown since Bor’dor—since *Hunger of the Shadows*. Since she gave in. What would happen if they figured out a way to get rid of Delilah and Laudna’s power disappeared with her patron’s demise? Imogen was very capable, but Laudna didn’t want her to have to fight for both of them. She wanted to have the ability to fight for Imogen.

She had that ability now, and Imogen had shut her out. She’d taken away her choice to fight for them. After over thirty years of being manipulated by Delilah, Imogen had shoved her back down, told her to stay. Demanded Laudna sit by while she threw herself headfirst into peril.

Power is to protect those you love.

Imogen had power, and she’d used it to try and protect Laudna—whether she’d asked for it or not. Laudna hadn’t been able to do *anything* to save her.

She glanced at Imogen once more and saw flashes of her cold, lifeless face. Laudna recalled how she’d held her dead girlfriend and begged her friends to save her.

She hadn’t thought to call upon Delilah. She’d been too overcome with her own anger and grief to consider taking on someone else’s dark emotions.

Laudna had relied on her friends and Imogen had died. They’d taken too long to reach her. If it had just been her and Delilah...

A shiver crawled down Laudna’s spine like a spider beneath her skin.

Perhaps they wouldn’t have been too late.

Perhaps they would have been able to save her.

Laudna clenched a fist as resolve settled into her bones.

Not again. Never again.

Never again would she be helpless when it came to Imogen’s life.

Power is to protect those you love.

Never again.

Power is to protect those you love.

Never again.

Power is to protect those you love.

“The one I love,” Laudna mumbled.

Together, Delilah purred, *we can protect the one you love.*

Without fully realizing the word had been spoken, Laudna breathed, “Together.”

Imogen’s voice, barely audible and shaking, caused Laudna to jump. The darkness of Delilah pushed back from her periphery and reality zoomed into focus, bringing with it the dim lights of the cave.

Imogen—twitched in Laudna’s lap, and her breaths had become more ragged, more panicked.

Laudna placed a hand against Imogen’s chest, against the racing heartbeat which thumped steadily.

“Imogen,” she whispered, voice almost melodic. “Imogen, darling, can you hear me?”

No answer.

Whatever dream she was trapped in, Laudna held no power from outside. She cupped Imogen’s face with her cool hands and thought, *I am here. You are not alone.*

Imogen groaned, air hardly escaping through her clenched teeth.

I am here, darling. You are not alone.

As Laudna held her, more flashes of Imogen’s dead body appeared. Bloodied, bruised, burned, cold, lifeless—

She’d relied on her friends and Imogen had died.

She’d relied on her friends and Imogen had died.

She’d relied on her friends and Imogen had died.

Laudna shook her head.

She’d shut her out.

She’d shut her out.

She’d shut her out.

Imogen needed her now. Even though Laudna couldn’t break into her mind and protect her, she could be here when Imogen woke up. She could hold her and coax her through the storm raging within her mind.

I don’t know if you can hear me, darling, but I’m here. You’re dreaming. I am holding you. You’re safe.

Together, Delilah’s voice echoed in her head, a phantom promise on a dull breeze.

Imogen’s fingers curled into a fist against the rock floor. Her scars began to glow, and any closed wounds started to bleed again.

Laudna took Imogen’s hand in hers and squeezed. “Imogen,” she muttered. “Imogen.”

We can protect the one you love.

Laudna had relied on her friends and Imogen had died. They’d taken too long to reach her. If it had just been her and Delilah...

She’d relied on her friends and Imogen had died.

She’d relied on her friends and Imogen had died.

She’d relied on her friends and Imogen had died.

She'd relied on her friends and Imogen—

Had come back.

Ashton, Fearne, Orym, Chetney, FCG—they'd all dropped everything to save Imogen. They'd risked what could have been a bloody battle against Liliana Temult to save their friend. Because of them, they'd stood a chance against Liliana and Imogen hadn't been lost forever. Laudna had relied on her friends and now she and Imogen had a second chance together.

Power is to protect those you love.

Perhaps that power didn't need to come from a single source—an individual. Bells Hells all possessed power of some kind, and each one of them used it to protect those they loved. Outside of blood, they each fought for each other—a different but just as important version of family. Family found and formed through the ups and downs, the times of mourning and celebration, and in the face of life and death.

They'd experienced it all in just a few short months.

Delilah's voice echoed in her head. *Together.*

"Together," Laudna mumbled, but this time, her thoughts were on Bells Hells. She nodded fervently. "Together."

Laudna held onto Imogen and whispered, *I'm here, Imogen.* She sent images of their friends down that bond which connected them. *We're all here. You are not alone.*

...

The scent of fallen leaves, orchids, and persimmons wedged its way into Imogen's subconscious. It was a scent of home and comfort that eased her anxieties and grounded her.

Laudna.

She could exist here, breathing her in and feeling her essence like an embrace for eternity.

Laudna, Imogen whispered.

No response.

Laudna?

Red dust and wind shattered that feeling of peace, and bits of the past flashed through Imogen's mind.

Otohan, blade shoved up through Laudna's chest, holding her aloft like a trophy, the black blood pooling along her front, and Thull's vicious words: *Is she your favorite?*

No. This couldn't be happening. Laudna was alive. They'd saved her months ago.

Anger, desperation, and sorrow whirled in a tornado of emotions within Imogen's chest. She tried to reach Laudna, tried to use any of her power to save her, yet the same scenario came to pass.

I give in! I'll go with you. Don't hurt her.

A flash.

A sickening squelch, black blood staining the blade as Otohan wrenched her sword from Laudna. Then the ensuing thump of Laudna's body hitting the dusty ground.

Another flash.

Laudna's corpse, stiff and much colder than usual, eyes vacant.

Laudna!

No. Please.

Her sight was dragged to another time, another place—to Liliana.

Mama?

Her mother's eyes blazed crimson, and her figure replaced Otohan's as she held Laudna aloft by the throat, red lightning adorning her limbs like jewelry. Liliana's gaze zeroed in on Imogen, and with a malicious grin, snapped Laudna's neck.

NO.

LAUDNA!

Imogen couldn't breathe, couldn't stop trembling.

Laudna!

Laudna, no.

Please come back.

Please don't leave me.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

Laudna's name was a prayer in her head, one which Imogen chanted like a spell.

Imogen.

Imogen collapsed to her knees, a hand to her chest as she sobbed. *Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—*

I am here, darling. You are not alone.

The red storm raged around her, whipping her hair into her eyes, and suffocating her sobs.

Imogen.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't stop trembling.

You're dreaming. I am holding you. You're safe.

Amidst the storm, a pair of boots appeared in her vision. Imogen glanced up, eyes watering from the wind and dust, and scrambled back.

Liliana, glowing like she'd been when Imogen found her in her dream the night before, looked angry and panicked. *Wake up, Imogen. Get out.*

You killed me, Imogen managed. Her scars began to glow as her fury rose.

Liliana shook her head. *I had to. They're always watchin'.*

Imogen shook her head as anger and fear flared. *That's bullshit, Mama.*

Liliana glanced over her shoulder. *The Weave Mind was on their way to you. If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured, and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead.* She clenched her fingers into fists. *I had to step in and I had to make it believable.* The muscles in her jaw feathered. *I had to make it true.*

Her words echoed in Imogen's head, but through the tempest of emotions and the raging wind, Imogen couldn't fully comprehend their meaning.

Then, that tug appeared, like a serpent slithering along Imogen's skin—smooth, gentle, almost indiscernible.

Predathos.

As if Liliana felt it too, her head jerked up and she whipped around. Then, she faced Imogen once more, voice more panicked than a moment ago. *Wake up, Imogen! Get out!*

Imogen wanted nothing more than to sink into that immaterial embrace. It was as if she was being held by Laudna; it was familiar, comforting, peaceful.

Without meaning to, she began to delve. That embrace tightened.

Imogen.

A different voice—Laudna? Then, sparks of memories—FCG with their little backpack, Chetney flirting with Lady Vex'ahlia, Fearne talking to Donny Boy, Ashton's gentle words to her as they carried her, Orym's smile as he reunited with his mother, and Laudna—so many memories of Laudna.

We're all here. You are not alone.

Bells Hells—

This is a dream, Imogen told herself. *It's a dream, it's a dream, it's a dream.*

Liliana called again, *Wake up, Imogen! Get out!*

Imogen opened her eyes and reeled back, attempting to pull away. No, no, no. She didn't want this.

Imogen.

Laudna? Laudna!

With all her might, Imogen pulled from Predathos' grasp and tumbled back through a torrent of red and swirling wind. Something yanked Imogen's mind from the darkness of her grief and fear and into an existence where she sensed her body, felt something firm beneath her, and smelled...fallen leaves.

Imogen gasped as reality pressed in on her and the truth of the present suddenly became clear. She inhaled—too deeply and hissed at the aching pain that shot through her chest.

A cool hand cupped her warm cheek, and that scent of home washed over her. "Imogen."

At last, Imogen opened her eyes to dim light. It took a minute for her to fully comprehend where she was, but as she scanned the small cave room, she realized they were somewhere within Volition headquarters.

Gentle fingers tucked strands of hair behind her ear, and that smooth voice said again, "Imogen."

She glanced up and relief flooded her at the sight of pale skin, black and white streaked hair, gold-cuffed ears, and beautiful dark eyes. "Laudna."

"I'm here," she whispered, stroking a thumb along Imogen's flushed cheek. "I heard you calling."

Her entire body felt like a furnace. Her scars throbbed with her pounding heartbeat, and they radiated an intense heat that had Imogen sweating. She shifted slightly and bit back a groan when her body protested.

Mirroring earlier events when Imogen had opened her eyes from death, her head lay in Laudna's lap, and her girlfriend peered down at her, concern glistening in her eyes. Imogen raised a hand and ran feather-light fingertips down Laudna's cheek. "You're alive."

Laudna pressed her hand over Imogen's, pinning her fingers against her cheek. "Were you dreaming of my death again?" she said softly.

Imogen nodded as the threat of tears burned behind her eyes. "Gods, it was awful, Laudna." She pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. "This time, it was my mother who killed you."

"It took longer than usual to talk you out of that one."

Imogen closed her eyes and breathed carefully. "How long was I asleep?"

"About three hours, though pretty fitfully for the last hour or so."

No wonder dull, searing pain still emanated through her torso and down her left leg. Her head throbbed—Imogen touched three fingers to her forehead and hissed at the gash she poked. "Oh, gods," she groaned.

"How's your head?"

"It feels like I got hit with a fuckin' rock." The memory of Liliana's attack and the barrage of debris she'd hurtled at Imogen shot through her mind. Pain radiated down her femur as if in response to the recollection. "Several of them," she muttered.

Liliana's voice echoed in her head. *Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true.*

All that fury, all that hatred—had it really been a ruse? Had it merely been Liliana's best option to keep her from Ludinus—killing her?

Imogen's head pounded too much to continue down that path of thought, but not thinking of Liliana only focused her attention on the pain. Now that she could comprehend her surroundings and feel her body, everything screamed at her. Imogen scanned her figure. Lightning burns covered a majority of showing skin, her dress had been burned through in the side, cuts and scrapes littered her knees and elbows, and dust, ichor, and blood stained nearly every inch of her.

"Oh, I'm gettin' your dress dirty," she said, and attempted to push up, but dizziness made her vision swim. She collapsed back onto Laudna's lap, her index finger and thumb pressed to either temple.

"Darling, I don't care about my dress," Laudna whispered. "I care about you. I care that you're alright." She ran her thumb over a streak of dried blood crusted to Imogen's jaw. "Do you feel as bad as you look?"

"From what I can see of myself, I would say yeah, probably."

Laudna's nose scrunched. "And I don't mean that you don't look beautiful, darling, but you are covered in bruises, blood, burns—"

Imogen placed a finger against Laudna's lips, shushing her. "I know what you meant. I don't need to hear your thoughts to know that."

Laudna reached for her wrist but stopped a hairs breadth away. Her fingers curled slightly and she retracted her hand.

Imogen almost whined at the rejection of contact despite the fact the burns and her scars pulsed painfully. She shifted her connection of the finger placed against Laudna's lips and rotated her entire hand so her palm cupped her jaw. "I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"No, I mean here—alive." Imogen nodded her head against Laudna's thigh. "Relivin' the day you died almost every night is…tormentin'."

Laudna shifted ever so slightly away from Imogen's touch. "Your dreams almost became my reality today," she whispered.

Imogen withdrew her hand and fought to sit up. Wincing, Imogen managed to get into a seated position leaning heavily on the wall, and turned so she could look at Laudna's face.

"Actually," Laudna continued, her gaze distant, "it had become my reality for about a minute. But that minute felt like eternity." Those dark eyes, brimming with hurt and sorrow, turned to Imogen. "You were dead, Imogen. I held your lifeless body in my arms, and there was nothing I could do to save you."

Imogen had just had a nightmare about that exact experience, except it had been Laudna dead in her own arms. She knew that feeling—that utter devastation and helplessness, and she'd put Laudna through that. She placed a hand over Laudna's and ignored the sting of pain that shot up her scars into her arm. "I'm sorry, Laudna."

Silence filled the small space.

After a moment, Laudna whispered, "Let's get you cleaned up," and stood. "I'll fetch some warm water and a cloth."

Imogen clutched her wrist. "Laudna."

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes filled with love, sorrow, and subdued anger. "We'll talk once you're clean and mended."

Imogen blinked, tempted to say something—anything else, but instead she merely shut her mouth and nodded, letting Laudna pull out of her grasp.

After Laudna had disappeared around the corner, Imogen let herself relax, let her mask fall. It felt wrong to seek comfort from Laudna when she was hurting—when Imogen was the reason for her anger.

She wanted nothing more than to stop being strong. Gods, it was so *exhausting* being strong. Imogen shut her eyes, wrapped an arm around her torso, and focused on breathing through the throbbing aches.

In and out, in and out, in and out...

A cool touch extricated Imogen from darkness and pulled her to consciousness. She inhaled sharply, blinking. "Laudna—" Her lungs quickly lost that sharp breath of air as the pain in her ribs rejected the expansion, leaving Imogen gasping for breath.

“Imogen.” Black-tipped, slender fingers curled over her cheeks, drawing Imogen’s gaze. “It’s alright, darling. I’m here.”

She fought to catch her breath, but the sight of Laudna’s face helped her focus.

“It’s alright. You’re safe,” Laudna whispered, voice ever gentle. She took Imogen’s hand in hers and pressed the palm against her chest. “Focus on me. Listen to me, darling.” Laudna inhaled slowly, held the breath, and then exhaled. She repeated it, and Imogen attempted to match rhythm. “Good girl,” Laudna said softly, love and concern glistening in her eyes. “In and out. Slowly.”

Imogen hooked her hand around the back of Laudna’s neck, anchoring herself to reality with the solidity of her presence. When she could manage words, she muttered, “I’m sorry, Laudna. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t—I don’t mean to—”

Laudna seemed to somehow read her mind. “We’ll discuss my feelings in a minute. How I’m feeling right now does not eliminate your availability for feelings and emotions, darling. You went through hell a few hours ago. That’s going to take a toll on you—mentally and physically.” She rubbed slow circles with her thumb on the back of Imogen’s hand which was still pressed against her chest. “Breathe, darling. You’re not somehow taking up space with your emotions like it will suffocate mine. Trust me, I still have plenty.”

Imogen almost managed a smile. She pulled Laudna’s forehead to hers and then nodded as her panic slowly subsided. Eventually, Laudna’s slow, steady breathing brought Imogen down from the edge and she released her girlfriend.

Laudna’s brows scrunched. “Better?”

Imogen nodded. “I’m fine.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Laudna said with a shake of her head. “I asked if you were better, not fine. I know you’re not fine because I’m not fine.” She cast Imogen a glance. “Are you doing better or is there more I can do to help?”

Her throat bobbed, but she nodded. “Much. Thank you, Laudna.”

Laudna nodded and shifted her focus to the small bowl of water and cloth she’d placed on the floor at her side. She wet the cloth and then motioned at Imogen with a finger. “Come closer, darling.”

“Yes ma’am,” Imogen whispered. She winced as she leaned forward, using Laudna’s thighs for balance as the latter sat on her heels before her.

As if she were something precious and delicate, Laudna tenderly pressed the warm cloth to Imogen’s cheek and began wiping away the dirt and grime. Laudna continued the pattern—wet the cloth, clean Imogen’s skin ever so gently, rinse, and repeat—for several minutes, and as they sat in silence, Laudna focused on her work while Imogen focused on Laudna.

Trust me, I still have plenty.

So many different thoughts and emotions were crowded behind those beautiful dark eyes, and Imogen couldn’t hear a single one. She could only watch from the outside and hope Laudna

eventually released all that suppressed tension into words so they could comb through every thought together.

Still they sat, and still Laudna remained quiet and pensive.

At last, Imogen couldn't take the silence any longer. She touched her wrist, halting Laudna's methodic work. "It's your turn to have the space for your emotions. Talk to me. Please." Laudna's jaw muscles feathered. Imogen tilted her head, trying to search her eyes. "You're angry."

Laudna blinked several times, brows furrowed.

Imogen nodded. "Say it."

"Yes," she breathed, "I'm angry."

"Because of what I did?"

"That's partly the source of my anger, yes." She lowered the cloth and fiddled with a loose thread, head lowered. Laudna was quiet for a moment before she whispered, "What were you thinking?" The words were clipped—a calm form of harsh that was rare for her.

Imogen didn't dance around the truth. She took Laudna's hands in hers which halted the fidgeting. "I was thinkin' about you." When Laudna didn't answer, Imogen continued. "Liliana thought I was the reason the Volition knew where she was. She was convinced I had a hand in the bombs that killed the Ruidusborn."

Still silence from Laudna.

Imogen plowed forward. "She was lookin' for retribution. If she knew about you, she would have used you against me just as Otohan did." She blinked away tears. "I lost you once. I couldn't lose you again, especially not like…that." Imogen's unsteady breaths rattled in her chest. "I had the best chance of survivin' Liliana's wrath more than any of you."

At last, Laudna looked up. "Were you thinking about me when you shut me out and made the decision to enter a fight which would most likely kill you? Alone?" That anger lay just beneath the surface now. "Did you think about how reckless and idiotic that decision was? Did you think about how your death would destroy me?" Imogen blinked but stayed quiet as Laudna continued on. "It's not you wanting to fight for me or protect me that I'm angry about. I'm angry you shut me out. I'm angry you didn't give me the chance to fight for you. You took that choice from me and forced me away."

Pieces of their brief conversation before everything went to hell flashed through Imogen's mind.

You don't get to make that decision for me. I get to choose to fight for you, too.

I'm sorry, Laudna.

Don't you fucking dare. Imogen—

She grimaced.

Imogen's own words resurfaced, practically yelling at her for being a hypocrite. *That choice is yours now, Laudna...No one gets to control you anymore, alright?*

In trying to protect the woman she loved, she'd broken the one promise she'd made to Laudna.

After a few moments with her thoughts, Imogen whispered, “I’m sorry. You’re right, Laudna. I made an extremely selfish decision. I was only thinking about losin’ you and not about the fact you could lose me.” She exhaled. “I’m also sorry I took that choice from you. I shouldn’t have shut you out like I did.”

Laudna started wiping away the blood from some of Imogen’s scars which had split open. Still gentle, still soft. “I’m sorry for my outburst,” she said.

Imogen tilted her head. “No, I deserve that.” She placed a hand over Laudna’s. “And don’t apologize for your feelings. They’re valid and you have every right to them. I’m sorry I was the cause for it.”

Laudna continued cleaning, but after a few more silent swipes with the damp cloth, she whispered, “Imogen?”

Imogen tilted her head, fingers fidgeting with the material of Laudna’s skirt. “Yeah?”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yes. I know that.”

“Me being angry with you doesn’t change that. You know that, right?”

Imogen gave Laudna a small smile that she didn’t see. Despite the throbbing through her skin, she took both of Laudna’s hands in hers, halting her work. At last, Laudna met her gaze. “I love you, Laudna. I love you. I know you love me. That’s why I did what I did and part of the reason for your anger—because we love each other.”

More bits of their whirlwind conversation slammed into the back of Imogen’s mind.

What the fuck do you think you’re doing?

Keeping her away from you.

No. Don’t you dare. We can fight her together.

I won’t let her take you away from me.

And I won’t stand by and let her take you *from* me.

“I ignored you,” Imogen whispered. “I shut you out. I’m so sorry. I wanted to protect you because I love you, but at the same time, I was reckless and thoughtless.” A beat passed. “I took that choice from you.”

“Yes,” Laudna breathed.

Fuck—Imogen. You promised “I will not let you go.” You promised—you PROMISED. Don’t fucking let go of me because I promised I wouldn’t let go either.

“I’m angry because I was helpless in the face of your death. You shut me out. You didn’t give me that choice to fight for your life, Imogen. I’m angry because I love you and I lost you. I understand you wanting to protect me, but if you have the agency to choose, then so do I.”

Imogen swallowed, nodding. “You’re right.”

“I’ve spent my whole life feeling like someone else’s marionette,” Laudna said. She took Imogen’s hands. “When you cut me off, when you let me go, it felt like those strings came back and I was prevented from acting on my own wishes, my desperation. I was trapped behind glass while you fought for your life.”

Imogen's heart hurt. She'd caused the woman she loved so much pain in her attempts to keep her safe. She'd succeeded physically, but emotionally, she'd put Laudna through hell. Imogen bit her lip. "It wasn't my intention, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Laudna."

"I told Orym before that the worst thing to ever happen to me has already happened, but hearing your last words, holding your cold, dead body—" Laudna's fingers twitched. "I've never experienced anything worse."

"Oh, Laudna," Imogen gasped, lacing her fingers through her girlfriend's.

Laudna wiped a tear from Imogen's cheek with her thumb. "I would rather die by your side than be shoved out, pushed away, and left alive to find your corpse."

Laudna's dead body flashed through Imogen's mind.

She turned her face, but Laudna pulled her attention back with a gentle tug. "I would rather die by your side, Imogen. I could not bear something like that again."

Imogen nodded. "I understand."

"I know you do. You understand exactly how I'm feeling because you endured the same thing. You were able to fight for me then, and I didn't have that chance today."

"Because of me," Imogen muttered.

"Partially, but also partially because of the circumstances." Laudna hooked a finger under Imogen's chin and tilted her face up. "All I ask is for the choice to fight for you, to fight for my love."

Imogen wrapped her arms around Laudna's neck. "Always, my love. Always. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I took that choice from you. I never meant to do such a thing—make you feel imprisoned."

Laudna's long, slender arms enveloped Imogen carefully. "I know, darling. I understand why you did what you did, but I still had feelings about it. I just needed you to hear me out." She pulled away, took Imogen's face in her hands, and pressed a kiss to her lips.

Imogen laced her fingers through Laudna's hair, inhaling as she reciprocated the contact. Each kiss was an apology and a declaration of love, and in the moment, no other creature on Ruidus existed except them. Laudna's music swelled with her increasing pulse, and Imogen swam in her melody as it bathed her with comforting coolness.

I love you, Imogen thought, sending ribbons of her power into Laudna's mind, mixing her essence with the music.

Laudna smiled against her lips as she met them for another passionate kiss. *I love you, my darling Imogen.*

Imogen ignored the pain streaking along her skin as Laudna's hands roamed, searching for purchase until they settled around her waist. She leaned into her touch because Imogen just wanted to *feel* her. Her body ached with dull fire, but her skin thrummed with the feel of Laudna—her soothing touch, gentle hands, soft lips—and Imogen couldn't get enough.

After being lost, untethered from this life, Laudna grounded her and made her feel *alive*.

I love you, I love you, I love you, Imogen breathed in between kisses.

I am bound to you, body and soul, Laudna whispered.

Imogen leaned into Laudna and smiled against her mouth. *My tether.*

She grinned back. *Together, darling.*

Imogen pulled away enough to lean her forehead against Laudna's. She placed her hand across her chest and said softly, "Tethered hearts."

Her love whispered back, "Tethered souls."

Imogen's body ached, and dried blood still clung to her skin and clothes, though Laudna had wiped most of the grime from her face while they talked. Pieces of their conversation swirled around her brain, and like a hand grasping for a leaf floating on the water's surface, Imogen attempted to hold onto Laudna's words.

Don't fucking let go of me because I promised I wouldn't let go either—

I told Orym before that the worst thing to ever happen to me has already happened, but hearing your last words, holding your cold, dead body—I've never experienced anything worse—

All I ask is for the choice to fight for you, to fight for my love—

I love you, my darling Imogen.

The utter pain and love in Laudna's words had carved through Imogen's chest down to her heart.

I am bound to you, body and soul.

Together, darling.

Imogen lifted weary eyes to the floor-length mirror in front of her where she stood in the bathing chamber adjacent their little room within Volition headquarters. Gods, she looked ghastly. She somehow looked closer to death than gaunt, pale Laudna. Beautiful, perfect Laudna.

Imogen's scars were angry and inflamed, her eyes were bruised, temple split open, body marred, and clothes in tatters.

Through her tumultuous thoughts, Imogen made a mental note to ask Laudna to Mend her dress, but she quickly forgot when exhaustion surrounded her with a vice-like grip.

After so much chaos, after betrayal and pain and death, Imogen felt like collapsing.

A sharp breath entered her sore lungs when Liliana's eyes flashed in her mind, those angry red irises filled with vitriol.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

I would have saved us—

You've chosen your path—

This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution—

Imogen clutched at her head as her mother's voice bombarded her.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

I would have saved us—

You've chosen your path—

This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution—

Over and over her words rattled in her head until she couldn't take it any longer and her legs gave out. Her knees crashed into the floor, sending vibrations up her legs and into her teeth.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

I would have saved us—

You've chosen your path—

This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution—

Liliana had killed—

Imogen shut her eyes, both hands grasping at her hair now.

Her mother had killed—

Are you prepared to take my life?

Her own words echoed in the midst of the chaos.

Are you prepared to take my life?

Imogen had gotten her answer. Not only had Liliana been prepared, but the hatred which poured from her had been tangible.

She'd killed—she'd killed—Liliana had *killed* her.

Imogen sucked in a painful breath that didn't fill her lungs.

She'd killed Imogen, her own daughter.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true.

Her mother had killed her.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true.

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured, and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead.

Her *mother* had *killed* her.

Not only had she killed her, but Liliana had looked Imogen in the eyes as she sent those tendrils of necrotic power toward her heart.

Imogen attempted another breath when the reality of that fact tilted her world. "Oh, gods," she sobbed, the words broken and wet with building tears.

She placed a hand against the floor to keep her upright, and a hiss of air escaped her lips as her once broken ribs throbbed at the movement.

Burns, cuts, bruises, and the phantom pain of broken bones echoed through her body. She was so…tired. Tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of being strong throughout it all.

Imogen just wanted peace. She wanted a life with Laudna away from all this. But she couldn't have that because unless they succeeded, there wouldn't be an Exandria to have a life in.

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured, and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead.

She attempted a calm breath as her mother's words wafted through the fog in her mind. Imogen knew she should think about those words, comprehend their meaning, but she didn't

have the energy or willpower. She knew what her mother said was important, but she couldn't concentrate past the aching, throbbing pain in her mind and body.

Imogen took another slow, labored breath and pushed off the floor. She slipped out of her sheer dress and then unceremoniously half collapsed against the rim of the tub. She meticulously unlaced her boots, dirty fingers trembling at the effort. Once that was accomplished, she sat up, closed her eyes, and breathed.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Until the world stopped wavering.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Until her pulse stopped racing.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Until her chest didn't hurt with the effort to keep body-racking sobs contained.

Then Imogen stood and began fumbling with the buckles of her leather straps and buttons of her body suit. Each movement took energy—energy which she didn't have to expend—and by the time Imogen had barely managed one buckle, she had to clutch the edge of the tub to keep from collapsing.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true—

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true—

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured, and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead—

"Stop," she whimpered through clenched teeth, one hand clutching at her head. "Stop."

Stop, stop, stop.

The circlet couldn't block these voices because they weren't entering her mind; they were her mind.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true—

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured, and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead—

Stop, stop, stop.

Imogen couldn't get them to stop. She needed—

Laudna.

Her love's name shattered her concentration.

Laudna.

Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—

In and out, in and out, in and out—

A sharp pain radiated up and down Imogen's left thigh, and she fell against the wood floor, breathing hard.

Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—

She squeezed her eyes shut and hissed through gritted teeth.

Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—

"Darling?" That gentle, melodious voice floated to her and pulled away the curtain of her hazy, pain-filled thoughts.

Imogen managed to open her eyes for only a breath. "Laudna," she breathed.

Cool hands met bare skin, her lightning marks radiating warmth between them. Though her voice remained soft, concern edged her words. "I heard you," she said softly. "I heard you, darling."

Heard?

Imogen shook her head. "I didn't mean to—"

"What happened?" Laudna whispered as she caressed Imogen's warm face. Her fingers brushed the thin metal loop which graced Imogen's brow. "The circlet is on. Is it a headache?" Her tone sounded as if she frowned. "Talk to me, darling."

Imogen felt like a fool. Though she wanted to brush it off, she couldn't even get herself to shake her head or conjure a lie. She swallowed another wave of pulsing pain which washed over her and whispered, "I can't." She half-heartedly tugged at the straps of her bodysuit and her voice broke. "I can't get it off."

Laudna cupped her cheeks, and Imogen opened her eyes to see love and worry in Laudna's gaze. She tilted her head, the ghost of a smile on her thin lips. "There you are, darling." Her thumbs caressed Imogen's skin. "Are you just getting undressed?"

Imogen shook her head. "I wanted to bathe, but…" She swallowed her pride and instead leaned on Laudna. She glanced up at her girlfriend and huffed a humorless laugh. "I'm exhausted, Laud."

Laudna's eyes roamed Imogen's body, seeming to take in the dozens of burns, cuts, and bruises littering her lightning-marked skin. "Gods, I can imagine." She nodded and said softly, "Let me get a bath running and then I'll help you get that off."

Imogen's fingers curled around Laudna's thin wrist, but as the other woman pulled away, she let her hand fall to the side.

After a few minutes, the bathing chamber began to fill with steam and the smell of earthy soap. The tub warmed her back, and in less than a minute, Imogen had begun to fade as exhaustion pushed her toward sleep.

Then Laudna was at her side again, her scent of fallen leaves weaving its way between Imogen's consciousness and whatever dreams awaited her.

Imogen looked up, blinking. "Hi, baby," she whispered, the words barely audible.

Laudna tucked lavender hair behind Imogen's ear and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Once we get you in the tub, you can rest, my love." She wiggled under Imogen's arm and draped it

across her shoulders, holding tight. “Up we go.” With a grunt, Laudna managed to pull Imogen to unsteady feet, and when the floor tilted underneath her, she clung to Laudna.

“Can you stand on your own?” When Imogen hesitated, Laudna clarified, “Just for a moment?”

Imogen nodded.

Laudna’s form disappeared, leaving Imogen swaying in a void of space. But then her hands were at her back, moving around her figure, and cool, spindly fingers pulled the bodysuit down around her shoulders.

Imogen hissed when broken skin caught against the material, and Laudna instantly whispered an apology. Laudna’s movements slowed, and within a few more ragged breaths, Imogen let the bodysuit drop to the floor around her feet, back bare to the steamy air.

A small sound exited Laudna.

Imogen knew what she saw—knew the vicious shades of black, purple, and yellow her bruised skin had become. She knew cuts and scrapes littered her shoulders blades, down her arms and legs, and dried red spider-webbed along the lightning marks which had broken open and bled.

Imogen knew she looked as bad as she felt—broken and fragile.

She was so tired of being strong.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Her shoulders hunched forward as Imogen curled in on herself. Flashes of the fight returned, slamming into Imogen like the rock which had shattered her thigh. Red lightning, dust, wind, and waves of undiluted rage hit her. Her hand found her thigh and began rubbing at it, but the pain persisted.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

She’d killed her.

Her mother had killed her.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Just as her breaths turned ragged and sobs had begun to build, cool arms carefully enveloped Imogen. Laudna faced her and pulled her closer, tucking Imogen into her chest.

Imogen buried her face in Laudna’s shoulder as she held her arms in front of her chest, pressed between bare skin and Laudna’s black undergarments. A broken sob escaped. “Laudna…”

“Shh,” Laudna cooed as she caressed Imogen’s head, carding her fingers through her filthy hair. “I’m here, darling.”

Imogen couldn’t even find words to describe the thunderous emotions ravaging her psyche. Instead, she focused on the slow, steady beat of Laudna’s heart.

In and out, in and out, in and out.

Everything within her—her mental walls, her emotional barricades, her willpower—crumbled along with Imogen’s physical strength. She sagged against Laudna as her knees buckled.

“Imogen,” Laudna exhaled, worry lacing her voice. “Darling?”

Laudna, so thin and frail appearing, had endless strength and patience when Imogen had none left to give. Though her bones cracked and popped, the warlock caught Imogen before she could fall and very carefully lifted her into the warm tub.

The hot water was like a breath of fresh air and a balm on Imogen’s aching body. Though the heat stung her open wounds, her muscles relaxed. Imogen leaned her head back against the rim of the tub and didn’t succeed at opening her eyes.

Cool, thin fingers brushed stray strands of hair out of Imogen’s face. *Darling, can you hear me?*

Yes, Imogen breathed.

An exhale. *You scared me for a moment.*

She released a pained breath of air from between her teeth. *I’m sorry.*

No need to apologize. I just needed to know you were...okay.

Imogen’s throat bobbed as she swallowed back the tears which burned behind her closed eyes. *I’m not.*

I know, darling. I know. Laudna carded her fingers through the ends of steam-damp lavender hair. Material brushed against Imogen’s cheek, and then wood softly scraped against wood. Lavender, sage, and rosemary soaps and shampoos wafted around her.

Imogen took a deep breath, and when she exhaled, she released all the chaos in her mind until nothing remained but Laudna’s music. Beautiful, eerie, haunting, yet gentle. It was cool shadow and blue morning light wrapped in tangible melody. Imogen relented a hand to the air and grazed wet fingertips down Laudna’s cheek which rested behind her head.

Laudna’s fingers curled around Imogen’s and her music crescendoed. She squeezed that lightning-marked hand; steady, powerful, unwavering.

Within that grasp, Imogen allowed herself to fall apart. A violent sob broke from her as she clutched Laudna’s hand, and all the unshed tears she’d bottled up loosed themselves with a vengeance.

Laudna wrapped spindly arms around Imogen, covering her chest and enveloping her in a cool embrace from behind. She rested her chin on Imogen’s shoulder which just poked out of the soapy bath water, and simply held her.

“She killed me,” Imogen muttered through broken sobs. Tears burned her eyes and stained her cheeks. “My own mother *killed* me, Laudna.” Her chin trembled. “She killed—she *killed* me.”

After a beat, Laudna whispered with anger and love in her tone, “Yes, she did.”

Are you prepared to take my life?

You’ve chosen your path—

This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution—

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true—

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured, and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead—

Imogen clung to Laudna so strongly her nails began to break skin, yet Laudna did not shy away. Instead, she leaned closer, pressing her cheek to Imogen's.

"I was ready to tear her apart," Laudna said, quiet venom in her words. "When I saw you at her feet, when I saw what she had done to you, I wanted to shred her into bloody ribbons."

Something like pride swelled through Imogen, but that didn't stop the anxiety and panic which coursed through her.

I'm really protective of you, and I don't want to come across as harsh towards your mother.

I will never let you go.

"I know what I said last night," Laudna whispered as if she somehow heard Imogen's thoughts, "but that was before she harmed you. Before I had to crawl over your body. Before she ripped my heart out of my chest and left half of my soul searching for its partner." Laudna's limbs almost seemed to stretch ever so slightly. "I can't promise I'll have full control if we ever come in contact with her again."

Imogen heard Laudna's words, but they washed off her like rain on a tin roof.

I will never let you go.

Her mother abandoned her when she was practically a baby. She left her—left them. Imogen shook her head. No, *they* left her. Liliana left without warning, and although Relvin never physically left, he isolated himself from her years later.

At the time, it felt like it bettered his reputation if I wasn't a part of his life as much anymore.

Her father was *right there*, yet emotionally, he might as well have been on another continent.

Everyone Imogen had ever loved, she had lost at some point. Her mother as a baby, Relvin as a teenager, each one of Bells Hells at some point in their few months together, and of course, Laudna.

Through every loss or death, Imogen had survived it all.

Until today.

Red dust, angry wind, crackling lightning, and Liliana's hard gaze flashed in her mind. Imogen turned her face as if that would prevent the memories from affecting her, but the violence of that confrontation lashed at her.

Until today when her mother looked Imogen in the eyes and became her undoing.

Another full-bodied sob broke from Imogen and Laudna simply squeezed harder. She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong.

Laudna's hands grasped at Imogen, and the contact grounded her. Pieces of their conversation from the night before resurfaced.

I will never let you go.

She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong—

I will never let you go.

She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong—

Imogen covered her eyes with a hand as she cried, and for long moments she couldn't conjure words through the heaving sobs. Then, she gasped, "I'm so—*tired*."

Laudna kissed her hair. "I know," she said softly, simply.

She did know. Laudna knew better than anyone the weight of loss and perseverance and *life*. Choosing to live when sometimes accepting death was far easier. Choosing to live in a flawed world shaped by flawed deities who viewed Exandrians as children—children who did not have the ability to *understand*.

Imogen believed Exandrians might understand the plight of life more than the gods could ever comprehend because the cycle of life walked with them every step of the way. From birth until death, life held their mortal hands and reminded them of the temporary. It reminded them of pain, sorrow, loss, happiness, and love.

To the gods, their lives were a single thread in the existence of the eternal, but for them, it was everything; it was all mortals had—one life.

And for many, their one life was filled with nothing but pain and loss and sorrow.

Laudna had thirty years of it.

She had been dragged away from her family, her parents were killed, she was hung on a tree and displayed as a warning symbol, resurrected only to be outcast by the only home she'd ever known, discovered her murderer attached her soul to Laudna's, and then lived in fear and isolation from people with only the voice of her patron and manipulator as her guide for thirty years.

Thirty *years*.

Laudna had lived that kind of existence longer than Imogen had been alive.

Imogen stroked Laudna's arm with a thumb as she clutched her and pressed a shaky kiss to her now soaked sleeve.

Then, Laudna kissed the top of Imogen's head and whispered into her hair, "Let's get you cleaned up."

Imogen sighed even as her love pulled away and stood. "Laudna—"

Hands caressed her shoulders and another kiss met her hair. "Let me, darling," Laudna breathed. "Please."

She nodded, too exhausted to fuss about Laudna fussing over her.

After only a few moments alone, gentle fingers began to work cool shampoo onto Imogen's scalp, and as Laudna massaged and suds were created, she whispered, "This reminds me of the night we met."

Imogen chuckled through her nose and almost managed a smile. "You've been takin' care of me for quite a while."

Laudna's voice was gentle darkness. "We've been taking care of each other."

Imogen closed her eyes as warm water washed away the suds. She took a breath as she recalled that night over two years ago when Laudna saved her life in more than one way. “I never told you this,” she began slowly, “but you saved my life.”

Laudna hummed an “Oh?”

“If you hadn’t come into town when you did, I don’t know how long I would have lasted.”

“You were a frightful mess, darling. I couldn’t leave you like that.”

For a while afterward, the horrific thoughts of those men—what they planned to do to her—haunted Imogen’s sleeping and waking hours. She touched an index finger to the scar on her chin which she carried with her as a reminder of that night—the good and bad.

Imogen blinked and shook her head. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Well, whatever do you mean?”

Imogen shook her head. “The tapestry of my soul had become threadbare, and after eight years of...misery, I was clutchin’ for dear life to those last few threads.” She sighed. “My mind was an amalgamation of every horrid thought and every negative emotion because those were the things I couldn’t block out. They had such strong energy that it was like tryin’ to haul up a straw wall against the strike of a war hammer.” Imogen tilted her head back to stare up at Laudna and she murmured, “I couldn’t take it much longer.”

The implication seemed to dawn on Laudna and her dark eyes became shadowed. “Oh,” she breathed.

“I could only be so strong for so long.”

Laudna nodded, her gold-cuffed ear brushing against Imogen’s. “Like water against stone, even the strongest are eventually worn away.”

Imogen’s thumb brushed up and down Laudna’s jaw. “But you, Laudna, my love, were a respite from the rain. After so much noise and pain and chaos, you were...not. Your thoughts weren’t painful.” She shrugged. “They’re musical. They’re beautiful and gentle and cool like silk against my skin.” She shifted her hand to caress Laudna’s cheek with soapy fingertips. “You saved me. You tethered me here—to this world, to this life.” She curled her fingers and slowly pulled Laudna’s lips to hers. Against her lips, Imogen whispered, “I told you last night that if you let go of me, I’ll be gone. That’s been true since day one. You’re my tether, Laudna. I need you.”

I will never let you go.

Laudna reciprocated the kiss and breathed, “I love you, Imogen, and I promise I will never let you go.”

I can’t take your pain, her thoughts echoed, *but I can help you carry it.*

Imogen kissed her again as she shook her head. *You bein’ here is enough.* Imogen turned around in the tub so she could take Laudna’s face in her hands. *You bein’ here will always be enough.* She grasped Laudna tighter as if that would prevent her from every losing her again. “If you weren’t here, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“If I didn’t have you, darling, I would have been lost a long time ago,” Laudna breathed.

“Oh, gods,” Imogen exhaled, “and all the fuckin’ shit you’ve been through…”

“I’ve had thirty years to learn to carry it.”

Imogen pressed a kiss to Laudna’s nose and whispered, “Even the strongest are eventually worn away.”

Laudna chuckled softly and then shrugged. “I wouldn’t change any of it.”

Imogen twirled a few strands of Laudna’s hair around a finger as she took in her dark, beautiful eyes. “Any of it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Laudna grinned, wrapping her hands around the back of Imogen’s waist and pulling her against the edge of the tub between them, “every thread of fate that is interwoven in our lives has pulled me toward you.”

“Maybe one of those few threads I was grasping when I was so desperate and barely hanging on,” Imogen said, finally managing a small smile, “was you.”

I will never let you go.

Even then, that sentiment rang true.

I will never let you go.

Imogen attempted to get out of the tub because she just wanted to feel Laudna’s body against hers and not the metal of the damn tub, but both her body and also Laudna protested.

She held up a hand. “You are not getting into our bed still filthy, darling.”

Though exhaustion still tugged at her, Imogen raised a brow. “Are you willin’ to give me a hand?” she said with a sly smile.

Laudna seemed to completely miss her tone because she said earnestly, “Of course, darling. Anything.”

Imogen barked a laugh—a real laugh—and curled her arms around Laudna’s shoulders. She intertwined her fingers behind Laudna’s head and pulled closer. “You’re so damn cute, baby.”

Laudna’s eyes widened. “Why? What did I do?”

Another light laugh. “Nothin’.” Imogen shook her head. “There is one spot in particular I might need your help with,” she whispered smoothly.

Laudna’s voice turned heavy. “Where?”

Imogen closed the gap between them until their lips were a hair’s breadth apart. “Here,” she breathed and kissed her.

“That,” Laudna said when they parted for a breath, “I can certainly help you with.”

I will never let you go.

Imogen tilted her head as a small smile appeared. “I love you, Laud.”

“I love you, my darling Imogen.”

Though the storm of memories within her mind had ceased for the moment, Imogen felt as though her dreams would be plagued with nightmares. She chewed on her lip and found her fingers had been fiddling with the material of Laudna’s dress.

Laudna tucked two fingers under Imogen's chin and turned her face toward hers. "Whatever comes, we will face it together." She nodded, brows raised. "I will never let you go, darling."

Imogen nodded and stood, eyeing the bed as fatigue from the day, the wounds she'd acquired, and the tears she'd shed caught up to her.

She tugged at Laudna's hand but the latter placed a cool hand against her stomach. Imogen glanced down and then back up, head tilted.

"I love you darling," Laudna chuckled softly, "but I meant it about being filthy."

Imogen's soft laugh echoed through the bathing chamber, mixing with Laudna's orchestra of thoughts which whispered endless love set on an intangible breeze of praise.

Otohan brandished her swords, Ishta and Scream Needle, the sharp whistle of metal on metal dulled by Bells Hells' blood staining the blades.

Imogen held a hand against the bleeding, gaping wound Ishta had carved across her chest. Her body was littered with precise slices—a map conveying where Otohan had laid waste to her flesh. At this point, her clothes were more red than the beautiful sheer blues and purples. Imogen stumbled forward and the gash in her thigh muscle screamed at her as more blood oozed from the wound.

Despite the pain radiating through her, Imogen's mind wasn't focused on that—couldn't be focused on anything but the *fury* pulsing within. Imogen widened her stance and attempted to stand tall. She relinquished her hold against the wound and formed her hands into half-curled claws as she spread her arms wide. Purple lightning crackled to life, dancing around her fingers and up her arms. As power coursed through her like a storm swirling above a raging sea, Imogen met Otohan's hard gaze.

Then Thull lunged.

Otohan's first strike arced across Imogen's body in a slice of gleaming metal. Using her power, Imogen created a cushion between her palm and the weapon and guided the blade harmlessly to the side. She hardly had time to breathe before Otohan had Scream Needle aimed for her torso. With another swipe of her purple lightning laced hand, Imogen caught the end of the blade in a small pocket of power, the tip only inches from piercing her palm. She grunted as Otohan shoved Ishta forward, but Imogen caught that blade too.

Now, both women stood in a stalemate, Otohan's blades primed to kill, and Imogen barely holding them back. Her arms shook and her legs screamed, but she held strong.

With a yell, Imogen used every muscle in her back and core to push forward, shoving Otohan back ten feet. Her marks glowed brightly, the beginnings of red tinging the purple. Imogen panted, sweat beaded along her arms mingling with the blood.

Otohan glanced up and grinned. "Is that all you've got?"

Imogen grimaced. *Kind of.*

The psionic warrior cocked her head, snarled, *"Catch this,"* and leapt toward Imogen.

As though Imogen were tossing bolts, her hands moved with lightning speed as Otohan's two blades blurred through the air in a frenzy, and the sorceress barely caught and dodged each slice with her telekinesis. Metal whirled and purple lightning sparked in the deadly dance between them.

With a grunt, Otohan kicked off the wall, arm aimed for a heart strike, but Imogen slanted her shoulder back just enough to only get nicked. She hissed as Ishta easily carved through the flesh of her shoulder, and some of her blood spattered onto the rock behind her.

She didn't react fast enough to avoid the backhand slash.

Scream Needle tore through the right sleeve of her jacket, and the path of the blade barely missed slicing into Imogen's face. She gasped and turned her head in time to prevent being blinded by millimeters.

Imogen was nearly pulled off her feet when a force spun her around and away from Otohan as a blur of green and brown armor switched places with her. Orym, she realized, had yanked her back.

The halfling descended into a flurry of slices against Otohan with Seedling.

The clang of metal blades rang through the cave like a choreographed symphony of lethality as Otohan parried Orym's attacks, though he managed to shell out precise damage more than once.

Orym surged forward, shield raised and Seedling smeared with Otohan's blood. The blade glinted in the dim light as he brought it down upon the warrior and sundered her flesh.

Otohan snarled, blades whirling, and caught the outside of Orym's forearm even as her own arms bled.

Red spattered across the cave floor, and Imogen stumbled back a few steps when her boot slipped on rock—

A slender hand caught her by the small of her back as Laudna rushed forward, mangy black hell hound at her side. She snapped her fingers and with one word, Caviar halted in front of Imogen, teeth bared at Otohan.

Laudna—

Things were moving too quickly even for mental communication because Laudna was already throwing multiple Eldritch Blasts at Otohan. To Imogen's amazement, every single blast hit, and within a few seconds, Laudna had pushed Otohan back several feet and signs of necrotic damage became visible.

Laudna snarled something Imogen couldn't decipher.

Otohan cocked her head and wiped blood from her jaw. That wicked grin came back as she hissed, "You're next."

Oh, Laudna said as her thoughts reached Imogen, *I shall immediately retract my shit-talking.*

Imogen tried to sidestep Caviar, but the hound backed into her, keeping her at bay. *Laudna, get out of there.*

I can't move. She can get me wherever I fucking go.

They were all far too close together; all three of them were still within Otohan's melee range.

Laudna—

Otohan lunged and missed striking Imogen by inches.

Caviar snarled, but Otohan's red eyes were focused solely on Imogen. Their gazes met, and the psionic warrior released a roar whilst her blades came barreling down on Imogen.

Though Imogen managed to bring her arms up to protect her, the force of the blow threw her to the ground. She hissed at the gouges carved into both of her forearms despite the psychic shield that took most of the damage. Imogen's gaze flitted past her bloody sleeves; Otohan moved again.

Ishta sliced toward her—

A small figure pounced in front and a shield absorbed the blow.

Orym!

I've got you, Temult.

The warrior was twice his size though, and with what seemed to be little more than a thought, Orym was thrown sideways into the wall, leaving Imogen exposed.

Caviar pounced, but Otohan merely threw the hound off; her stare did not break.

Hatred, fury, merciless rage—all were visible within Thull's eyes.

Imogen raised a hand, lightning ribboning around her fingers—

Otohan buried Ishta into her shoulder.

Imogen gasped as screaming pain shot through her. Blood pounded in her ears, and her skin seemed to throb to her slowing heartbeat.

She reached a hand for the blade piercing just below her collarbone, but Otohan twisted the blade and wrenched a cry from Imogen.

"I should have finished the job when we last met," Thull growled, and with one more push, shoved Ishta completely through Imogen's shoulder until the tip of the blade met wet stone.

White exploded in Imogen's vision—

Searing pain—

Hot blood—

Burning marks—

"Get up!"

Imogen's eyes snapped open and an unreleased groan escaped. Chet stood over her with an empty healing potion bottle in his little hand. Imogen wiped her mouth, the remnants of that sickly sweet taste coating her tongue.

"Get up, Imogen!" Chet said again, reaching out his hand. "Otohan's tearing through us. We need everyone while we can."

Though the world wavered, Imogen managed to get to her feet only to find Fearne in her Titan form raining fire damage down on Otohan. None of which seemed to be making a dent. Most of the smaller cuts on Imogen's body had healed thanks to Chetney, but that didn't prevent the current gashes from hindering. She took a halting, rattling breath, and mentally readied herself for more pain, more loss.

Laudna.

Her girlfriend's name never left her mind; her tongue was always a breath away from muttering it.

Laudna.

She turned in a circle as her frantic gaze soaked in her surroundings.

Where, where, where?

Laudna!

Imogen halted. Across the cave interior, utter mayhem ensued.

Half the party struggled to remain standing, and Otohan hardly looked any worse for wear.

Laudna—

Her love, dripping ichor in her *form of dread*, was sprawled across cold rock, but was conscious.

That dread which usually snaked through Imogen's stomach whenever Laudna mentioned Delilah, settled into her.

Laudna's eyes glowed green, and as she reached a black-tipped, ichor dripping hand toward Otohan, the warrior actually stepped back, eyes wide with...fear?

Imogen knew what Laudna attempted to do, and she hated it, but anything that would decrease Otohan's power was a gods-send at the moment.

Laudna reached—and failed. Though power seemed to coalesce from within and gather like tendrils of shadow around her spindly fingers, Otohan simply...stepped away.

Imogen moved, ignoring how her torn skin and bleeding wounds stretched and pulled. She willed lightning to gather in her palms, and with heavy determination, launched over Ruidian rock toward Laudna.

Her pounding heart faltered.

Otohan readied her blades for Laudna, eyes brimming with malintent.

But another sight drew Imogen's eye. Ashton, who stood near the tunnel exit, opened their arms wide and their whole body seemed to vibrate as the space around them shifted. With Otohan's attempted strike pending toward Laudna, she began to move but was jerked away from her target and closer to Ashton.

She whirled, teeth bared at the barbarian. "You are thorns in my side," she growled, "and I will remove you with ease." Then, her short gray hair began to lift, and the red power which surrounded her brightened.

Imogen's stomach dropped—Exultant Fury.

Otohan released a cry which shook the tunnels, both of her blades slick with blood, and charged at Ashton.

Ashton curled his hands around the hilt of his hammer, head glittering and sparking, and muttered, "Let's go, motherfucker."

They swung and Otohan barely managed to duck to the side, but Ashton came back around for a second strike and connected with a burst of flame and arcane energy.

Otohan reeled from the impact and faltered in her furious charge. Slowly, she turned to Ashton, her eyes nothing more than white-hot coals. Her being seemed to vibrate with the intense energy which emanated from her, and the space around her shifted and rumbled. It was almost as if her body glitched within reality. She bared her teeth and burst forward.

Thull was powerful and swift, but thank the gods Ashton was sturdy. Though they tried to block, Otohan's blades sliced into him. Like a razor scraping across glass.

Attack after attack Otohan dealt damage to Ashton, and they absorbed each one until they just barely pulled their torso to the side and punched their hammer into Otohan's chest. The force rocketed her across the space where she slammed into the adjacent wall.

Why won't you fucking die? Ashton said through the telepathic bond.

Otohan stepped down from the body-shaped crater she'd made, seemingly unharmed. She cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders.

Imogen opened her mouth to yell, but Otohan's furious white gaze turned to her.

Ashton held a hand over his chest where Ishta had carved through his rocky skin. Time seemed to slow as his gaze met Imogen's.

He glanced at Otohan and then back at her and was still reaching for his hammer by the time Otohan appeared in front of Imogen.

She cursed and barely pulled her torso to the side; Ishta stabbed where Imogen had been a split-second prior. Instead of slicing diagonally, Otohan pulled back and suddenly halted. Imogen panted, unsure how to react. Otohan's red eyes rolled sidelong—

Toward Laudna.

No.

Imogen was closer, but Otohan had more power.

The warrior grinned and twirled her swords, head cocked. "Familiar?"

Visions of the past bombarded her. Bassuras, red dust and wind, bloody blades, purple lightning crackling like embers—

Is she your favorite?

Laudna's dying breath. *Imogen…*

NO.

Imogen rushed forward, but Otohan moved with supernatural speed. The scene before her moved in slow motion, Ishta primed for Laudna's chest in imagery which evoked the past.

"NO!" Imogen roared, shooting through the air. "LAUDNA!"

Laudna turned and her eyes widened. She released an Eldritch Blast which knocked Otohan's first strike aside, but like a dancer completing a compound movement, her other hand bearing Scream Needle came up in swift succession.

Imogen forced herself between Laudna and the blade, lightning sparking around her, and attempted to catch the blade barreling for her with telekinesis—

Scream Needle pierced Imogen's sternum.

All air evaporated from her lungs as razor sharp metal tore through flesh, muscle, and bone. Imogen couldn't breathe, couldn't move; the pain seemed to paralyze.

From behind her, Laudna gasped, "Imogen," her voice breaking on her name.

Run, she thought. *Run. Please.*

I won't be able to escape her. None of us can.

Being so close to Otohan from the attack, Imogen grabbed both her shoulders and pulled the warrior closer, dragging herself farther onto the blade. A groan escaped her lips, but Imogen dug her fingers into Otohan's cloak and used her power to anchor herself to the warrior.

Otohan's gaze shot to hers as she seemed to feel Imogen's power surrounding her, immobilizing her. Ishta gleamed in her right hand, but the blade no more than twitched.

Run, Imogen gasped once more. *I can only hold this for a few seconds.*

You're going to die, Laudna said, voice breaking.

Fearne has Revivify.

Imogen—

Do it NOW. Already, Imogen's strength and power wavered as more of her life drained away. She glanced at the blade imbedded in her chest and at the blood dribbling down her torso. Her hands shook and she panted trying to catch her breath. *Get to the group, stay alive, and end this bitch.* Imogen wished she could look at Laudna one last time, but she couldn't move. *If you try and fight Otohan here, you will die. Please, Laudna. Run.*

Laudna skimmed her fingers across the small of Imogen's back as she fled, and her broken voice whispered, *I love you.*

Otohan growled as her red eyes followed Laudna to her left, but still she could not move.

I love you, Imogen breathed. *Hopefully I'll see you again.*

It was a miracle Imogen had overpowered Otohan in the first place; it was only a matter of time before she broke free.

"You little *bitch*," Otohan spat as though the words were venom.

Black edged Imogen's vision. She had one more powerful spell left, and she'd only have a split second to use it once the hold on Otohan vanished.

Otohan glared at her. Then, that hate-filled grin returned. "Once you're dead, little Exultant, she'll be the first one I kill."

Imogen's eyes blazed. "You're not fuckin'—leavin' here—alive." Her chest heaved, but no air met her lungs. The ground shifted beneath her as black edged her wavering vision.

Imogen's gaze collapsed inward to her chest where Otohan had buried her blade and tried to inhale, but she couldn't breathe.

She couldn't breathe, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't breathe—

Like a candle being snuffed out, her power faded, Otohan became mobile again, and only Imogen's weak grip on the warrior kept her upright.

Otohan pulled her closer and Imogen whimpered. Hot breath kissed her ear as Thull whispered, "You're not going to be able to stop me." She placed a hand on Imogen's chest and yanked Scream Needle from the latter's torso, spraying the ground with blood.

Imogen's knees buckled and she collapsed onto the tunnel floor in a heap. Any attempts at taking a breath were merely met with soft, wet squeaks through the gaping hole in her chest.

Laudna had barely reached Chetney's side before that humming in the back of her mind—that space where Imogen's essence resided—went cold and quiet. She glanced over her shoulder to where Imogen lay in a bloody, tattered heap, her body cradled by broken rocks.

Imogen.

She was down.

Dead? Laudna couldn't be sure, but gods, she wasn't moving. The absolute stillness of her body sent aching pain through Laudna's heart.

Despite what the scene before her conveyed, Laudna attempted to reach out anyway. Her mind searched for Imogen's, those spindly, immaterial fingers reaching for that lavender aura, but it was as if Imogen's mind had collapsed and all that remained were echoing plumes of purple dust which floated at the end of that tether between them.

Laudna tried to grasp those remnants, but those mental tendrils merely carded through the debris of Imogen's thoughts.

Oh, gods.

Please be alright, she whispered.

A growl jerked Laudna from that barren tether, grounding her focus. Otohan stood tall, red eyes sparking with white embers, and her teeth bared in a savage grin. Thull wiped her blades across her thighs, smearing Imogen's blood over her pants.

Imogen's blood.

Imogen's blood.

Imogen's blood—

Dozens of memories from just a day prior unburdened within her mind like a stampede of Avodan.

Imogen's motionless body—

Burns, ichor, blood—

Red dust and wind—

Gashes, bruises—

A flash—

Murky red-brown bath water—

Imogen's tears—

Racking sobs—

Another flash—

Imogen's pale, lifeless face—

The feel of her rapidly cooling skin against her hands—

Another flash—

Imogen suddenly before her, Thull's bloody blade only inches from her own chest as it protruded from Imogen's back—

The sound of her voice rattling in her ears—

Imogen—

Flash—

That same blade jutting from Laudna's chest—

Flash—

Matilda—

Delilah—

Darkness—

Shadow—

Flash—

Laudna—

Laudna yanked away as Imogen's voice hit her like a blow to the head. Her eyes focused on the body of her love, which remained motionless.

Gods, she wasn't *moving*.

First Liliana and now Otohan. That same fury—that dark, ancient, primal fury which she'd wielding only hours before, awakened within Laudna again. Even if she died in this cave, she would become that *bitch's* motherfucking nightmare before she fell. Though terror pulled at Laudna, her wrath took her own fear by the throat and shoved it into a little box within her chest.

Then, her gaze turned to Otohan Thull.

The warrior glanced at Laudna and laughed, and then leapt through the air, closing the distance between them in seconds.

Her first strike caught Chetney down the torso, and with a reverse grip on Scream Needle, she sliced diagonally across the gnome. In a tornado of metal and blood, Chetney dropped.

Laudna couldn't even react before Otohan was moving, a blur of red and brown against gray stone. Metal clanked against metal as Ishta scraped across FCG's yellow chest plate. The automaton shrieked and attempted to move, but another strike landed.

"Get the fuck away from my smiley buddy," Ashton growled as their hammer smashed Otohan in the chest. She went flying back, and Ashton followed up with a streak of cold damage, freezing the exterior of the warrior's armor.

Despite her palpable anger, Laudna's heart plummeted. *Gods, we're not getting out of this.*

No, we can't, Fearne replied.

FCG shrieked again, but said, *We've got two people down!*

At that moment, Ashton, breathing hard, and arm still extended, said, *It's your job to get them up, Letters.* They straightened and then cursed when Otohan simply shrugged off the ice damage as if it were practically nothing. *It's like she's not even taking the fucking damage we're dealing.*

Otohan's gaze flicked toward FCG.

"I think the fuck not," Ashton growled. He planted his feet, breaking rock with the force, and then glanced at Laudna, Fearne, and Orym. *I'm going to push her towards you guys and then I'll crowd in. Hopefully keep her occupied.*

Fearne nodded, her fiery Titan form flickering.

Orym cleaned the flat of Seedling with his arm gauntlets. His face was taut and worn, but his eyes determined. *I'm almost out of shit, Ash, but I can flank.*

Get ready—

But Otohan was already moving, and before anything could be done, her blade made contact with FCG's chest plate. The scrape of metal against metal echoed through the chamber, and Laudna winced at the horrific sound.

Are you still up, Letters?

Though their voice shook, FCG replied, *Uh-huh.*

Fearne pushed past Laudna, Titan form burning with heat and rage. She gathered up energy and shoved Scorching Rays at Otohan. The first hit, catching Otohan off guard. Her face scrunched, wrinkles deepening with fury.

Fearne didn't let her catch her breath as more rays left her hands. It was a dance of fire and shadow and red-hot fury, and it wasn't long before Otohan took the lead. Cape smoldering, Thull snapped the material to the side and then stepped forward, flurrying her blades as if the damage Fearne had dealt wasn't even enough to bat an eye.

How cool, Fearne muttered, inching closer but toward cover, *I'm fucking useless.*

She must be resistant, Laudna offered.

No shit, Ashton mumbled.

Although Fearne had been the one who just attacked, Otohan turned her attention yet again to FCG.

Ashton let out another growl. *For fuck's sake. She must know they're the healer.*

Laudna lunged. *FCG—*

Everything happened too fast.

So many conversations within seconds, and then a whirlwind of red energy and metallic sparks—FCG's blue eyes flickered. Otohan was relentless; she struck between the automaton's plates, hitting soft leather and wires, and with a final slice, Letters tipped over, eyes dark.

Laudna didn't know what to do. Her thoughts flew hundreds of miles a minute, and yet everything she thought of had less and less of a chance having any affect on the Exultant Warrior.

A small whine drew her attention.

Caviar.

She turned to where the shadow hound hunkered over Imogen's body and Laudna's heart shattered all over again.

She's not moving, she's not moving, she's not moving—

Laudna clamped down on the end of that panicked, rambling thought and instead called Caviar forward. She pointed a black-tipped finger at Otohan and growled, "*Rip her apart.*"

The shadow hound's eyes glowed and he snarled, fangs dripping saliva-like ichor, and charged.

Caviar didn't need to do damage because as long as he was near Thull, they could flank and hopefully gain a modicum of advantage over her.

Yet her hound was tossed to the side as easily as before, and Otohan remained dominant, lethal, and vibrating with red energy and sparking fury.

Laudna gathered tendrils of necrotic power around her fingers, preparing to unleash anything and everything she had—

An intangible, immaterial breeze seemed to whisper in her ear.

Time slowed and the world around her—filled with the scream of metal slicing through flesh, stone cracking, labored breaths, and frantic telepathic conversations—muffled as if submerged underwater.

Laudna paused as the cognizance within the interior of her mind sharpened, clarifying so suddenly it contrasted the muted chaos beyond. It was as if a warm hand caressed Laudna's face, gently drawing her mind, telling her to listen.

That lavender essence intertwined with Laudna's soul...seemed to inhale.

•••

Darkness didn't scare Imogen.

Pure darkness brought peace and comfort. Darkness was Laudna; safe, secure, serene.

She'd grown to fear the red storm.

Red screamed danger. Red was alarming and isolating and *cold*.

When the blanket of black, inky darkness fell away to reveal whirling dust and wind and violent red skies, Imogen's stomach dropped through the ground.

No.

Not here. Not now.

This was too dangerous, left her too vulnerable to the Sleeping One.

Imogen circled, eyes scanning for an escape, a single word on her tongue: Mama.

She halted.

She'd usually call for Liliana, for the person whom she sought solace in, but—

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

Red eyes filled with vitriol—

Hatred—

I would have saved us—

You've chosen your path—

This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution—

Imogen stumbled away, heart pounding.

She'd died by Liliana's hand—her *mother's* hand.

Imogen shook her head. No.

Instead, another name, one which her heart whispered with the rising and setting of the sun, left her mouth. “Laudna?”

Imogen.

“Laudna? Laudna!”

“Imogen?”

She stilled as panic coursed through her. That voice didn’t belong to Laudna. That voice held none of her smooth darkness or haunting melody. She turned—and wished she hadn’t.

Liliana, lavender braid blowing in the wind, stepped into view. She raised her hands and the raging storm and violent wind settled. Though the horizon still glowed red, a tense calm washed over the landscape. It was too quiet and her mother’s words became deafening.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

I would have saved us—

You’ve chosen your path—

This is for the children you killed; this is your retribution—

Liliana reached out a hand. “Imogen.” Her eyes were soft and filled with an unspoken pain. She cocked her head. “Somethin’ is wrong.”

Imogen’s voice shook as she whispered, “What are you doin’ here?”

Ignoring her question, Liliana said gently, “Your light—it’s dimmin’.”

Imogen shook her head and took another step back. “Get away.”

“I meant what I said—I had no choice.”

I’m doin’ this because I didn’t have a choice.

“Of course you did,” Imogen spat. “You chose to kill me, your own *daughter*, just as you chose to leave twenty-five years ago.” The corner of her lip picked up in a faint snarl. “You’ve not been without your own volition, mother.”

“Imogen, you don’t understand—”

“What’s there to understand? You took my face in your hands and ended my life.” She gave a far too stiff shrug to be casual. “Seems pretty straightforward.”

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true.

Liliana started to reach for Imogen again but hesitated and then shrunk back. “The Weave Mind is always watchin’. I told you I have influence, but it’s on shaky ground at best. I spoke true when I told you bein’ so close to this, I feel like I can guide this the best way it can be.”

Liliana took a deep breath. “The Weave Mind was analyzin’ my every move. In that moment, I had to decide how important my presence was within the Vanguard. Like I said before, I’ve pulled Ludinus from the edge. I have some sway in how things happen.”

I feel like I can guide this the best way it can be.

Bits of her last dream crashed within Imogen’s mind.

The red storm raged around her, whipping her hair into her eyes, and suffocating her sobs.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't stop trembling.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true.

Imogen could only recall pieces of Liliana's frantic explanation.

Wake up, Imogen—get out—I had to—the Weave Mind was on their way to you—I had to make it true.

Imogen shook her head, but Liliana continued. "I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself for what I did, but it was *necessary*. Like you said, Imogen, this is bigger than both of us."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive you," Imogen muttered. She clenched and unclenched her hands to dispel the fury of her building magic.

Though Liliana's eyes were sad and tender, Imogen couldn't help but still see her face contorted in red lightning-streaked wrath. Her emotions had been so *real*.

"Was—" She paused and gathered her strength. "Was it real at all, or were you...pretendin' the whole time?" Imogen wasn't sure which answer would cause her less pain.

Liliana took a breath, sighing through her nose. "My sorrow for those lives lost was real. My anger—to a certain extent—was real. But my anger at you?" She shook her head. "Never."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Perhaps you've missed your callin' in the theater because that performance was immaculate."

Liliana opened her mouth twice before words came out. "It had to be. For your sake."

"For my sake? For my sake, Mama?" Imogen's chin trembled. "You crossed a line that can't be uncrossed."

Liliana nodded. "I understand that. I know it sounds contradictive when I say I did those awful things to save you from a far worse fate." She inhaled shakily. "The Weave Mind was comin'. If they'd gotten to you before I did, you wouldn't have stood a chance."

"Oh, so I should thank you?" She couldn't keep the bite out of her tone.

"No. Never. I don't expect your forgiveness or your love, just...hope for your understandin'. If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead."

Imogen stilled as the weight of those words hit her. Those words—the broken sentence Imogen could only recall pieces of—Liliana had said it before.

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead.

It had been a warning.

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead.

If I hadn't stepped in, you would have been captured and then Ludinus would have made you the vessel instead—

The last two words gripped Imogen's attention.

Vessel.

Instead.

She glanced at Liliana. "What do you mean 'instead'?" Her mother turned her face. "Are—are *you* the vessel?"

A hesitant nod.

"The vessel for *Predathos*? For the *God Eater*?"

Her words were nothing more than air. "There's a reason Ludinus keeps me so close."

Imogen blinked, mouth ajar. "I'm—I'm a possible vessel?"

After a moment, Liliana at last met Imogen's gaze. "I couldn't let that happen."

I failed at protectin' you, so now that I have a second chance, I'm goin' to take it—

Part of me just wants to run away from it all, but I know I can't. It's too late—

You know I love you, right?

I love you and I'm so sorry—

Imogen shook her head, wiping away her mother's words.

Liliana clasped her hands in front of her chest. "There was so much I promised to save you from, and I failed. I have failed in every aspect to protect you, but this—this was somethin' I *had* to do—somethin' I was *able* to do to save you." Her eyes wrinkled in what Imogen saw as desperation. "I know it was awful. It broke my heart to go through with...with what I did." Her purple eyes met Imogen's. "But death is an easier end."

"Death actually fuckin' sucks," Imogen countered, "especially when it's your own mother who kills you."

Liliana stepped closer, and her eyes glinted with desperation. "Imogen, if I wanted to keep you from Ludinus, from the Weave Mind, then it had to be that way. I couldn't jeopardize my position within Ludinus' ranks because my presence here is too important to walk away. I know you've said before that I could just leave, but it's not that simple."

I feel like I can guide this the best way it can be.

Whatever the hell that meant in her mother's mind. At this point, Imogen had no idea what cause Liliana was fighting for, and she sure as hell didn't trust her.

But she wanted to.

And though what Liliana had done terrified her, a part of Imogen still loved her. That emotion was laced with sorrow, anger, and trepidation, but it existed nonetheless.

Liliana continued, and though her tone still held an urgency and desperation, it was softer. "I had to go to a really dark place in order for the Weave Mind to believe my actions and emotions, but I need you to know how essential it was for me to keep you away from them. I could not let them have you." Tears brimmed in her violet eyes. "The only way you're of no use to them is if you're dead. It was my only option."

"Why couldn't you have just let me go?"

She shook her head. "They knew I'd found you. You're not powerful enough to beat me, so if you left that encounter unscathed, my loyalty would have been called into question."

Liliana's gaze hardened, but that unspoken sorrow still lingered beneath. "There was no other option which would ultimately keep you out of their grasp."

Imogen tilted her head and said softly, "So you're claimin' death by your hand was the lesser of the two evils?"

A nod.

"To keep me safe?"

Another nod. "It's all I've ever wanted—to keep you away from all of this."

Imogen inhaled shakily and then released a trembling chuckle—humorless, dull. "That—" she bit her lip. "That broke somethin' in me." She turned watering eyes to Liliana as her scars thrummed. "I don't know if I can ever trust you again."

Liliana's face fell, but she nodded. "I really don't expect anythin' different." She sniffed and lowered her head, still keeping eye contact with Imogen. "No matter what, I love you, Imogen."

Her throat bobbed. After a moment of silence, Imogen nodded. "I know you believe that."

Liliana's words were hardly more than a breath of air. "Do you believe that?"

Did she? Did Imogen believe that her mother loved her? Maybe. What kind of love could that be, though? What kind of mother willingly murdered their own child? All to safeguard their position of power in a war beyond both their control?

According to Liliana, her actions were to save Imogen from something worse, yet Imogen couldn't imagine anything worse than what she'd done. The Weave Mind could tear her mind to shreds, torture her for information, and peel away the layers of her psyche like ripping out pages in a book, and even that wouldn't be as painful as what her mother had done. Because at least suffering at the Weave Mind's hands wouldn't be personal; they weren't someone Imogen loved.

Imogen would have done anything—*anything*—but lay a hand on Laudna. She would have figured something out—

But what if there was no other choice?

Imogen knew the answer. She wouldn't have the strength to kill Laudna. Not even if their plans, the gods, Exandria—depended on it.

Imogen would gladly step up in her place, though. She knew Laudna felt the same. They were made to protect one another. They were bound, heart and soul, and Imogen would never willingly sever that tether.

Liliana's words echoed in her head. *Do you believe that?*

"I'm not sure you know what love is," Imogen breathed.

Her mother nodded and shifted away ever so slightly. "Perhaps I don't. I haven't been a mother in a while." She turned sad eyes to Imogen. "I do know, though, that I need you to stay away and I need you safe."

Run, Imogen.

I'm not runnin' anymore.

A dull chuckle shook Imogen's chest. "I'm at the center of it all, Mama. There's no turnin' back, no runnin' away from this thing."

Liliana tilted her head and said almost like an afterthought, as though she were half present, "Your light is dim, Imogen." She blinked and reeled as though something within her mind had snapped. "Your light is dim," she whispered. "Your light is dim." Her mother gasped as her last sentence seemed to click into place. "That's why you're here—why we're here."

Imogen glanced down at her hands which gave off a faint red energy. "You're not makin' sense," she said slowly, wariness clawing at her.

"You're not dreamin', Imogen," Liliana said in a rush of breath. "You're in danger. Go, Imogen. Wake up."

Wake up, Imogen—get out—

Wake up, Imogen—get out—

Wake up, Imogen—get out—

Liliana's hand passed through Imogen's chest and violent visions assaulted her.

NO, LAUDNA—

The glint of a blade—

Paralyzing pain—

Drowning in her own blood—

Please, Laudna. Run.

Imogen grasped claw-like fingers over her sternum as the present came crashing down upon her.

The tunnels, Otohan—

Wake up, Imogen—get out—

Wake up, Imogen—get out—

Wake up, Imogen—get out—

A tinnitus extrapolated Imogen from a cold embrace, the scent of warm iron floating around her as the hard stone beneath cradling her form seemed to materialize with her returning consciousness.

She became aware of the blood soaking her clothes and sticking to her skin, slicking the rock underneath.

A deep, throbbing pain carved through her chest as if her ribs had been severed—

Imogen sucked in a wet, rattling breath.

Ch. 3

Imogen.

Laudna glanced across the cavern at the bloodied body of Imogen as that lavender essence intertwined with her soul seemed to breathe.

Time slowed to the speed of her heartbeat before—

I'm here.

Laudna loosed a trembling breath, tears of ichor burning behind her eyes. *I thought I lost you. Again.*

You almost did. Imogen's words were hardly more than phantom air which reached Laudna's mind. Another breath. *I can't let her know I'm alive yet.*

Are you—

I can barely breathe, Laud. Imogen sounded as if she closed her eyes. *I can't—I can't move. I need—I just need some time.*

Stay down, Imogen, Laudna breathed. *The longer Otohan thinks you're dead, the longer you'll remain alive.*

I won't leave y'all to fend her off—

Stay down. Laudna's tone didn't allow room for argument. *Stay alive.*

Orym pointed Seedling at Ashton, and a snap of vine yanked the halfling through the air where he landed by the barbarian in front of Caviar.

"Can anyone help Letters?" Ashton growled as they managed to deflect a quick parry of Otohan's blade.

Laudna glanced down at the dark eyes of FCG, at their body slashed and broken, and extended an ichor-laced hand. She grasped at Otohan's life force, curled spindly fingers around it, and *pulled*.

Like the stretching of a spider web, Otohan's very essence yanked from their body, from their soul, and entered Laudna who used herself as a conduit to pass on that life and shove it into FCG. FCG's eyes flickered to life with a burst of vibrant blue, and the automaton sat up. They nodded and shoved onto their wheel, turning to where Otohan had settled into a furious stance.

Dark, veiny shadows like withered vines, bloomed up her neck and along the bottom of her jaw. For just a moment, the warrior paused, chest twitching as though she struggled to breathe. Then, she craned her neck to the side and shook off the damage, looking hardly any worse for wear.

Then, her eyes flashed red, and with a growl, unleashed herself on Orym.

A voice groaned in the back of Laudna's mind, and for just a second, she glanced over her shoulder.

From across the cavern, Imogen's lightning-marked finger twitched. *Laudna?*

Gods, she was covered in so much blood. Even from where Laudna stood, she could just barely make out the blade-sized hole in Imogen's chest, and the blood from the wound stained her beautiful white, purple, and yellow outfit a dark, gnarly red.

Laudna? When Imogen's words reached her mind again, her name was laced with an intense fear and desperation. *I can't—are you alright? Are you alright? Laudna—*

Imogen's body trembled as if she used all her strength to try and get up, but that slightest bit of movement shook Laudna out of her stupor. *Yes, I'm alright. I'm sorry, my love.*

A slow, heavy exhale echoed through her mind. *I thought she might have—*

Not yet.

I have—I have a healing potion, Imogen whispered. *It won't do much, but hopefully it'll get me back on my feet.*

Don't rush, Imogen, Laudna said. *The longer Otohan thinks you're dead—*

The more she'll attack y'all. I won't allow y'all to fight alone when I still have fight left in me.

But for now, stay down, she hissed and focused back on the fight still ensuing just a few feet away. *Stay alive.*

You do the same.

Blood rained in an arc across the cave ceiling as Otohan sliced Ishta across Orym's chest—another gash added to the dozen already marring his armor and skin. They flipped the blade around and caught Orym's torso with a back-handed hit; more blood spattered.

Orym collapsed to a knee, and his soft, pained wheezes met Laudna's ears as the soldier struggled to stay upright. His small fingers clutched Seedling's hilt, but blood dribbled from between his lips and his chin slowly lowered to his chest.

While Orym declined, Otohan slipped their hand into the small satchel attached to her belt, and pulled out a vial.

Laudna's instincts blared. *HEALING POTION*, she cried to the group. *STOP HER.*

Ashton, Fearne, and FCG moved.

Orym merely lifted his head—slowly, weakly; another wet, labored inhale.

None of them were fast enough to keep Otohan from drinking the contents of the vial, and within seconds, most visible damage she'd sustained, vanished.

FUCK, Ashton yelled.

Fearne gathered fire in her hands, but her eyes were wide with fear. *What do we do?*

We don't stop fighting, Laudna growled. *Buckle up. We're in it for the long haul.*

We don't let this bitch leave, Ashton echoed and took a swift, heavy swing at Otohan's head.

She tilted her head and slanted her shoulder back just enough for the crystal hammer to only graze her armor, though the hit caused her to relent her fixed stance.

Her glowing eyes sliced to Ashton, and she lunged. With a feign of her left hand, Otohan ignored Ashton entirely and instead sunk Ishta into Orym's shoulder.

Fearne's voice squeaked out above the din of combat: "NO!"

Everything happened too fast; Otohan was too fast. She fought with a fury and a speed they couldn't match, and as she retracted her blade, Orym's little body collapsed to the blood-stained stone, possibly lifeless eyes still open.

Fuck, Laudna breathed. *We're not getting out of this.* That realization sank into her gut like lead. *We're not getting out of this.*

We've already lost three friends, Ashton growled, though their voice quivered.

Two, Laudna corrected.

Ashton's head snapped up. *Imogen's alive?*

The barest nod. *She has a potion. She just needs some time.*

Thank fuck. With a twirl of their hammer, Ashton reaffirmed their grip on the handle and glared at Othan. *I'll try and give her some time by fucking this bitch up.*

Ashton only landed three hits before Otohan retracted, their heavy pants echoing through the too-quiet cavern. Red energy and mist poured from the sides of their mouth, pooling beyond their bared teeth like hot dragon's breath. Just past the reaches of her high-neck armor, red lightning bolts crackled hot and bright like her fury.

She snorted a puff of mist from her nostrils, brandished her blades, and then rocketed towards Fearne.

...

The dark cavern ceiling above Imogen blurred in and out of focus and solid stone beneath her crumpled form roiled like an ocean where waves of vertigo lapped at her senses. The gaping hole in her sternum leaked blood, and at this point, it was a miracle Imogen wasn't dead or even unconscious. She felt like her chest had been rent in two; she swore loose ribs shifted with each shallow, wet breath.

Stay alive.

Stay alive, stay alive, stay alive.

It was both a command to herself and a prayer for Laudna.

Stay alive.

You need to stay alive.

Blood-slick fingers very slowly crept toward the leather pouch at her side. Another painful, labored breath. Her hand closed around a small glass vial and relief spread through her.

With a shaky hand, Imogen just managed to uncap the vial and then drink the contents. Less than remembering to play dead and more the fact she didn't have the strength to keep her arm up, she let her hand fall to the wayside as she swallowed the potion.

The hole in her sternum began to knit itself back together—not entirely, but just enough that her wheezing, shallow breaths became quieter and the puddle of blood beneath her stopped growing. Deep, burning pain—more muted than before, but still very much present—pulsed through Imogen as she lay fighting for strength.

The subdued, muffled sounds of combat striking through the chamber behind her head yanked her farther from unconsciousness. Each hit of metal on metal, the crack of Ashton's hammer slamming into rock and bone, and the hiss of fire spurred Imogen's adrenaline.

With as deep an inhale her shredded lungs would allow, Imogen attempted to flip onto her side, but the moment she moved, searing, piercing pain shot through her chest. The faintest whimper escaped her lips, but the rest she clamped down.

They weren't getting out of this.

Imogen could barely move, and one by one, her friends were being slain.

She willed purple lightning to materialize around her fingers, but even their spark seemed dulled and weak.

They weren't getting out of this.

Imogen squeezed her eyes shut in a grimace. *Fuck*.

They weren't getting out of this.

That red storm swirled at the edge of her consciousness, and that familiar voice echoed through the roaring wind, *Run, Imogen.*

She shook her head across the rock. *I'm tired of runnin'.*

Even if she died here, she would die with her friends, with her love.

I failed at protectin' you, so now that I have a second chance, I'm goin' to take it—

Part of me just wants to run away from it all, but I know I can't. It's too late—

You know I love you, right?

I love you and I'm so sorry—

Unless…

Imogen's eyes snapped open. Unless her mother could help—*if* she would help.

I failed at protectin' you, so now that I have a second chance, I'm goin' to take it—

Part of me just wants to run away from it all, but I know I can't. It's too late—

You know I love you, right?

I love you and I'm so sorry—

The thought terrified Imogen, but she didn't see another way. Her mother was powerful.

No matter what, I love you, Imogen.

I know you believe that.

If what she said was true and she only wanted Imogen safe, then perhaps…

With trembling fingers, she weakly slid the circlet off her head, the soft clink of metal on stone followed by the sudden rush of her friends' panicked thoughts. She ignored them and reached out, grasping the arcane laylines with what little strength she had left.

"Otohan has us in the tunnels," she breathed, lips motionless. "It's about to be over. If you love me, if you want me safe, please—please, Mama. Help."

Four slow heartbeats passed before Liliana's breathless, panicked voice filled her head. "I don't—I'll try to find you. I don't know how fast I can get there." A pause. "I'll try to find you."

Imogen's mind went silent as her mother's voice vanished, but that only lasted a split second before her friends' desperate thoughts bombarded her mind with an onslaught of agonized screams.

Fuck—

Behind you—

To your left—

She's got me cornered—

Chet's up—

Letters, look out—
Hold strong, guys—
Oh, shit—
ASHTON—
NO—
ASHTON—
THEY'RE DOWN—
HELP THEM—
FCG, HELP THEM—
I can't get to them—
An explosion of violence and then—
Silence.

Imogen's heart pounded and her mind searched for Laudna's. *Laudna? Laudna, please answer. Are you alright? Gods, please be okay—*

Not Laudna's voice, but Fearne's: *Imogen, she's coming your way!*

A burst of air ruffled Imogen's sheer dress and a crunch of boots against stone made her blood run cold. Though she could barely breathe as it was, she unfocused her eyes and did her best to seem like a corpse.

Otohan's heavy pants filled the space around her, and red mist seemed to drift off her, tendrils of Exultant energy floating past Imogen's eyes. Dirtied and bloodied black boots entered her field of vision and paused by her outstretched hand. Otohan lifted a foot and slowly pressed the sole into Imogen's hand.

Imogen did not move, did not dare make a sound even as the warrior crushed her partially curled fingers under their toe.

Otohan stepped back, relenting their footing, and tapped Ishta against the ground as though contemplating their next move.

She could only watch as Otohan plunged Ishta into her torso, shredding partially-healed flesh and muscle. Burning spread through Imogen, her eyes watered from keeping them open, and it took every bit of strength she had left not to make any sound as Otohan then ripped Ishta from her abdomen in another spray of blood.

A scoff sounded above her. "What wasted potential," Otohan whispered, their tone dull, uninterested.

More blood dripped from her torso in rivulets, and Imogen fought off the blackness edging her vision as the world around her sank into that muffled vacuum.

She could have sworn Laudna screamed her name.

…

Laudna fumbled with her dress, her slender fingers fiddling with the torn material which had left most of her chest exposed. Her joints ached, and black covered most of her skin—both her blood and the ichor which had dripped during her *form of dread*. Now, though, most of Laudna's magic had been spent. She'd attempted a simple Phantasmal Force to conjure an image of Liliana Temult after hearing Imogen's desperate Message to her mother, and she'd created nothing but mist.

Laudna's knees cracked as she pushed onto shaky legs, and her heart stopped.

Otohan stood over Imogen, and before Laudna could even consider crying out, the warrior plunged Ishta into Imogen's torso.

Her love's name tore from her throat in a broken cry. "IMOGEN!"

The sorceress did not move.

Imogen, Laudna breathed. *Imogen, answer me.*

No.

No, she couldn't be dead. Not now.

Imogen?

Only that cold emptiness greeted her.

Seeming satisfied, Otohan continued her walk around, sticking her blades into the other Hells who were down—Orym and Ashton. Sick squelches met Laudna's ears, and just like Imogen, the others stayed down.

NO.

NO, NO, NO.

IMOGEN.

IMOGEN, PLEASE.

Laudna stumbled forward toward Chet and Fearne who continued their attacks against Otohan, yet neither werewolf nor Titan could break down the warrior's defenses.

Another explosion of red, misty Exultant Fury threw Chetney and Fearne away from Otohan, slamming them against the cavern walls.

Laudna didn't even have time to process the fact that a blur of yellow raced toward Otohan, streaks of red trailing behind them as their eyes burned with rage.

…

Imogen hung on by a thread. Everything swirled around her as if she was being flung head over heels through a storm, and the only thing she could hear was her blood pulsing in her ears to the beat of her slowing heart.

Through her haze of pain and nearly overwhelming vertigo of black which edged her vision, a feeling radiated to Imogen, pricking her attention through the telepathic bond. No words, just a sudden, intense feeling of *rage*.

Letters.

Imogen tried to move, but a gasping whimper escaped and her body didn't cooperate. Instead, she craned her neck as far as she could and caught a glimpse of yellow.

FCG! she cried.

She tried to reach out, tried to counter the emotion, but her weak, immaterial hand hit a wall of metal. Their eyes burned that deep, angry red, and if they heard her plea, FCG made no motion to acknowledge it.

FCG, what are you doin'?

Their stress was astronomically high, and Imogen could practically feel the fuel pumping through his core like the blood in her veins.

Along this bond, an epiphany dawned on FCG, and for the first time, they realized they were made of metal and wires, but—

I am alive.

FCG's thoughts came tumbling across so quickly they were practically one thought.

I'm alive for the first time, and I am alive not because I was made by D or Dancer or even the Changebringer—

Imogen twitched a finger toward them. *FCG—*

His thoughts swirled toward Bells Hells—toward his friends.

A vision of Ashton laughing—

Chetney whittling a piece of wood, his tongue sticking out as he focused—

Orym, arms thrown around FCG's shoulders as he leaned on the automaton—

Fearne staring at them, eyes wide and a mischievous smile on her lips—

Laudna grinning as she puppeted Pâté, spindly fingers making him dance in the firelight—

And Imogen, curled in a ball staring at the little golden fingerprint locket in the palm of her hand—

A swell of happiness overwhelmed Imogen as FCG's emotions melded with hers.

I'm alive because they made me alive, FCG said, voice chipper despite the circumstances which brought them to this cave.

It's the connections I made with all of them.

Then, pure *joy* washed down the bond. It was warm and strong and unadulterated, and Imogen seemed to come to the same realization when FCG did.

He was happy to do this.

Do this?

Do what?

No, FCG. Do what—

FCG! Panic clawed at her. *Letters, please don't.*

I'm happy to do this because they saved my life and I'll save theirs.

Silent tears streamed down Imogen's face into her ears as the true intention of FCG's words dawned on her.

FCG. NO. PLEASE. PLEASE DON'T DO THIS—

She risked gathering all her strength to claw her way onto her side and she turned just in time to glimpse FCG wrap their little arms around Otohan's leg.

Imogen's pleas were cut short by visions of those whom FCG loved—Bertrand, Dorian, and FRIDA in their elegant emerald coat, smiling softly down at them.

Then, an amalgamation of scenes of Bells Hells and their time together—the good and the bad—passed by and FCG gazed upon them with fondness.

Some connections, they said softly to themself, *are made with wires, and some are made with blood, and some are made with bone, and some are made with wood, but they all matter.*

As Otohan tried to pry FCG's little hands off her, he seemed to take in the room, take in his friends, and smiled.

Even in this dark, dark cave, they make every day a smiley day.

NO! Imogen screamed, furious at herself for her body not moving as fast as her mind as she tried to do something—*anything*. *FCG!*

With a nod, as that heat in FCG's core built past his metal body's breaking point, Faithful Care Giver's red eyes faded to white, the thought of saving his family the last thing to cross the bond.

A beat of silence, and then—

An implosion of white-hot, vibrating heat vacuumed inward, shunting all sound into a void of nothingness before time seemed to reverse and that damaging nuclear energy exploded outward. A massive wave of crackling force slammed into the cavern, rending in on itself at the center and expanding like a tsunami crashing into a cliff.

The whole space shook, and for a moment, Imogen's hearing vanished into nothing but a high-pitched, muffled ringing.

That blinding, detonating light seemed to collapse inward, and in a split second, a final wave of pulsing force traveled the length of the room.

A deafening stillness overtook the atmosphere for just a moment before thousands of tiny pieces of metal rained down from the sky, sprinkling along the cavern floor.

It could have been seconds, it could have been minutes, it could have been hours that Imogen took to fight to her hands and knees.

When she managed to get upright, she had to stifle a gag at the sight before her. The air was heavy with heat and soot, and the cave center was blackened with ash, metal, and seared flesh. Pieces of Otohan were scattered along the blast radius, and FCG—

She pressed a hand to her mouth.

FCG's body had been demolished; only fragments remained.

It took Imogen three tries to get her feet under her and half-crawl, half-stumble toward their remains.

Imogen collapsed to her knees in the middle of the crater created by FCG's destruction, cheeks streaked with salt, and exhaled a shuddering breath. Burned and scarred rock beneath her

still radiated heat from the blast, and the impact of her knees on solid ground jostled more blood loose from her wounds, sprinkling black ash with red. Imogen sank back onto her heels as exhaustion tugged at her and grief threatened to pull her apart.

I'm alive.

FCG's last thoughts barreled into her like the punch of a wave.

I'm alive.

I'm alive because they made me alive.

I'm happy to do this.

I'm happy to do this because they saved my life and I'll save theirs.

I'm alive.

I'm alive.

I'm alive.

A sob wrenched itself up Imogen's throat, but she slammed her teeth down, stifling the sound. She couldn't stop the weakness in her core, and she collapsed forward, trembling arms barely catching herself from careening head-first into bits of burnt metal and charred flesh.

After a moment of allowing herself to cry, to grieve, Imogen took a shaky breath, lungs rattling within her chest, and lifted her chin.

She touched three fingers to her lips, kissed them, and then pressed them to the broken ground. "Thank you, Letters," she breathed, voice breaking on the words.

He saved them. He saved them all.

That intense feeling of sorrow and tragedy washed over Imogen, and it seemed to echo her thoughts back at her. The stakes were more real than they'd ever been, and this loss, this sacrifice couldn't be in vain.

She stifled another sob in the palm of her hand.

FCG's sacrifice couldn't be in vain.

A form knelt next to Imogen, and their gentle melody of thoughts swam past Imogen's lowered walls, filling her head with deep sorrow and love.

She glanced up, but the ringing in her ears didn't allow sound through, so as Laudna took her by the shoulders, mouth moving earnestly, urgently, Imogen could only stare.

A numbness had started to take over her system—that same numbness she'd allowed to overwhelm her when she needed to survive. When things outside became too much for her brain, she'd just…shut it all off.

Laudna continued wordlessly talking, and Imogen merely sank deeper into herself. She descended into that emotionless place, shoving her feelings down, down, down until that numbness was all that remained. Imogen wiped haphazardly at her cheeks, streaking her tears with the back of her hand, and sniffed. With a small shake of her head, she cleared her ears and sound gradually faded back into clarity.

Laudna tugged her forward, cool hands grasping hers. "We have to keep going, darling," she said softly. "Soldiers are coming; we can hear them in the tunnels."

Imogen nodded and allowed Laudna to pull her to her feet.

Laudna placed Imogen's arm across her shoulders and assisted her unsteady gait across the cave floor toward the light beckoning them into the nearest tunnel.

Numb and distracted, Imogen didn't even realize they'd reached the surface of Kreviris until wind and dust and *quiet* broke through the fog in her mind.

Yet she had enough wherewithal to notice the crackling purple energy of Liliana as she descended from the red sky.

Liliana Temult, Exultant General to Ludinus Da'leth, descended to Ruidus' red surface, and all Laudna felt was *rage*.

I was ready to tear her apart. When I saw you at her feet, when I saw what she had done to you, I wanted to shred her into bloody ribbons—

I know what I said last night, but that was before she harmed you. Before I had to crawl over your body. Before she ripped my heart out of my chest and left half of my soul searching for its partner—

I can't promise I'll have full control if we ever come in contact with her again—

Laudna's neck craned to the side as her *form of dread* stretched beneath her skin and that deep, burning anger threatened to burst forth.

Liliana had left their last encounter bloodied, burned, and broken, yet she returned like an unwanted savior; lavender hair spotless, skin unbroken, clothes clean and mended, and purple and red power radiating from her. The air around them seemed to shift, and Laudna had to blink several times to get her eyes to focus on the woman in front of them. Liliana's aura was magnetic, because even though Laudna had stopped, Imogen leaned forward as if drawn to her.

Her boots touched ground, and that palpable essence faded like fog evaporating in sunlight.

The rest of Bells Hells collectively stiffened, and the sudden tension which filled the air could be cut with a blade of grass.

Laudna clutched Imogen tighter.

Imogen hung from Laudna like a wet shirt over a clothesline. Her feet hardly left the ground as she stumbled forward, and her panted breaths were shallow and wheezing. A trembling hand hovered above her chest—above the partially healed blade wound in her sternum.

Her eyes were barely open as Imogen whispered, "Mama."

That word—that one word was filled with so much emotion, and it broke Laudna's heart. Even after what Liliana had done, Imogen's instinct was to call out to her, just like she did every night she dreamed. Even after Liliana had murdered her own daughter, Imogen still called her mother.

Laudna shifted her body in front of Imogen's as she clung to her.

Ashton stepped forward, slightly hunched, hammer almost dragging on the ground behind them. "What the *fuck* is she doing here?" he growled.

Imogen's soft, exhausted voice seemed to settle even the light breeze. "I—I called...her."

Fearne's face was streaked with tears as she glanced at Imogen. "Why would you do that?" she asked quietly.

"I didn't see...another...option," Imogen panted.

"A lot of good that did us," Orym muttered.

"I know she's your mother, Imogen," Chetney said slowly, "but there's a good chance she could just turn us in to Ludinus."

"You might have just signed away our lives," Orym added, a little more bite to his words.

Laudna glared at him.

Imogen merely glanced at her feet and took several more breaths before she breathed, "I'm sorry, y'all. I didn't mean—I don't think she's here to harm us."

"She killed you, Imogen," Fearne said. "What if she tries that again?"

Imogen's eyes fluttered shut for a moment. "It's a long...story. I just need y'all to...trust...me...please."

"We trust you," Chet said.

"We don't trust her," Orym added and inclined his chin at Liliana.

"I don't trust her...either," Imogen whispered, "but I believe her current intentions when it comes to...me."

"I don't like it either," Laudna said with a pointed glance at Orym, "but we need help."

Bells Hells had never been closer to death than just a few minutes ago, and FCG had saved them all. He'd performed the greatest sacrifice so the rest of them could live.

A vision of Imogen, bleeding, trembling, and crying over pieces of FCG wrenched at her heart. Her broken words echoed through Laudna's head. *Thank you, Letters*.

"We're not that desperate," Orym hissed.

"Yes, we are," Ashton countered, jaw set and tears glistening in their eyes. "If she can get us back to Exandria, then I can control the urge to hit her." He cracked his neck. "Because I want to hit a parent."

Imogen rested her head on Laudna's shoulder, one hand now clutched over her chest. "We're not...hitting my...mom," she whispered. "Yet."

"TBD," Chet added with a nod.

"I'd rather she help us," Imogen continued.

Laudna stared out at Liliana who had not approached and remained thirty feet away. Standing there alone, she looked so...human. The sorrow written in her eyes almost drowned out the calculation which absorbed every little detail about them.

That thrum of rage persisted within her.

A sliver of unknown power tapped on Laudna's mental walls and her gaze landed on Liliana who stared at her.

Stay the fuck out of my head, Laudna hissed.

Liliana's power withdrew, but her expression remained set. Not angry or cold, but powerful, confident.

You don't trust me.

Why the fuck would I trust you?

Because I'm here for my daughter.

Are you?

I'm her mother. Not really an answer.

Just because you're blood does not make you her mother. Anyone can be a parent, but a mother is someone who raises their child, who is there for them. She sneered. *And a mother doesn't murder their child.*

Liliana adjusted her jaw and her eyes softened. *I had to.*

No. There's always a choice.

Not this time.

Yes, this time. There's ALWAYS a choice. You just didn't want to make the hard choice. You didn't want to betray Ludinus.

I couldn't risk them findin' out—him findin' out—

If you're looking to bare yourself before the jury, then you have some talking to do. Until then, Laudna wrapped her arms tighter around Imogen and hissed, g*et out of my head*.

Hesitantly, Liliana at last withdrew, and for a moment, she simply stood before Bells Hells, brown coat flapping in the wind and eyes aimed at the ground.

Imogen lifted her head and amethyst eyes locked on Liliana. Laudna could only assume a silent conversation took place because after a few moments, Liliana nodded and took one step forward.

Bells Hells shifted as one, activated like an automaton to protect Imogen at the slightest bit of movement from Liliana.

Liliana paused.

Imogen raised a trembling hand, pacifying the group. "Sorry. That was me. I was talkin' to her." Then, she glanced up at Laudna. "I'm gonna talk to her."

Laudna adjusted her grip around Imogen's shoulders. "I'll come with you."

She shook her head. "Stay here."

"Imogen, I will not leave you—"

"You're not leavin' me." She nearly grinned. "I think she'll respond better if it's just me."

"No," Laudna said and Imogen blinked. "If she has something she wants to say, then she can say it in front of all of us. That might be the only way she can convince us not to kill her."

"Laudna..."

Laudna took Imogen's bloody face in her hands. "I am *angry*, Imogen. She *killed* you." Even now her *form of dread* scratched beneath the surface of her skin; a constant urge she continued to ignore.

Imogen's words were hardly more than air. "I know."

"But besides that, you can barely stand on your own; you nearly died *again*, darling."

Lightning-flecked fingers grasped at Laudna's wrists, gentle and trembling. Imogen's chin quivered and her next sentence was faltering and broken. "I love you...Laudna. I thought—I thought I was going...to lose...you."

Laudna rubbed her thumbs in soft circles along the crest of Imogen's cheeks. "I love you too, darling." She cocked her head. "Stop trying to change the subject."

Imogen huffed a dull laugh through her nose. "I don't have the energy...for that."

Laudna kissed the tip of Imogen's nose and whispered, "If you want us to trust her, Imogen, then she will talk to all of us. Because we do need help, but at this moment, I am not staring at your mother, I am staring at a murderer."

Imogen sniffed and bit her lip. After a moment, she nodded. "A murderer," she breathed, almost half-present.

Laudna glanced at Liliana who stood patiently still several feet away. All of that hatred and vitriol that had consumed her expression only several hours prior, no longer existed. Yet that did nothing to ease Laudna's rage or worry.

She glanced down at Imogen who still held her wrists with weak hands. "Do you really believe she loves you?"

Imogen did not meet her gaze, almost as if it took too much strength to lift her eyes. "I think she believes it." She shrugged, but her shoulders barely moved. "I think that's the best we're going to get."

Laudna glanced once more out at Liliana, at the power which still radiated from her despite having settled onto the moon's surface. She could practically taste the energy which permeated the air around her. She'd witnessed it more than once from Imogen.

For the first time, though, Laudna noticed streaks down Liliana's cheeks; tears of sadness or anger, she couldn't be sure. They'd dried, staining her face like the blood smeared along Imogen's lightning-marked skin.

After several moments of silence, Laudna nodded and whispered, "All right. All right. But she comes to us, not the other way around."

Imogen released a haggard breath and then nodded at her mother.

Liliana took a step—

Orym readied his blade, Ashton twisted their hammer in their hands, flame flickered around Fearne's fingers, Chetney growled—

Imogen raised that same hand, pacifying the group. "Let her come."

When Liliana neared, she reached out a hand, but Imogen slanted her shoulder away. "Don't touch me." Her words were soft, tired, but there was a subtle venom to them that bit.

What little hope there had been in Liliana's eyes, banked. She blinked and retracted. "'Course. I'm sorry."

Laudna barely held back a hiss as she pulled Imogen closer.

"Get talking," Ashton said firmly, "because we can't stay here." They placed their hammer on the ground next to them and then folded their arms over their chest. "The only reason you better be here is if you're going to be useful." He cocked a brow. "Are you useful?"

“Imogen called for me.” Liliana glanced around the group and stuttered over her next sentence. “I’m—I’m not sure what’s goin’ on.”

“Bullshit,” Orym hissed.

“It’s the truth.” She worried her bottom lip. “You don’t have to believe me—”

“Good. Because we don’t,” Orym added, an icy exterior to his already stony words.

“We can’t...stay...here,” Imogen muttered and readjusted her arm around Laudna’s bony shoulders.

Laudna cupped Imogen’s cheek with a cool palm and whispered ever so softly against her skin, “Are you holding on, darling?”

Imogen’s throat bobbed, but she nodded. “I think the only reason I’m...standin’ right now...is because of that healin’ potion.” After a pause, she added, “And FCG.”

“We’re all here because of them. And now we have to focus on getting out of here. I need you to stay with me, Imogen, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled.

Laudna grasped Imogen’s hand and promised, “I won’t let go.”

...

Imogen focused on Laudna, on her lifeline, and squeezed that cool hand with every ounce of strength she had. Exhaustion tugged at her bones, and her skin throbbed with deep, burning pain, but she remained upright. She closed her eyes for a breath and whispered, *I’ll never let you go*.

Liliana’s hesitant tone broke the quiet. “Imogen is right. Y’all can’t stay here. You’re going to have to—we can’t stay here.”

Imogen lifted her chin and focused amethyst irises on Liliana. “Are you stayin’?”

The weight of that question was palpable.

Liliana glanced away. “If I go, they’ll know.” She blinked several times before she whispered, “Everythin’ I’ve done up to this point will have been for nothin’. It’s hard enough gettin’ the rest of them to trust me.” She stared at Imogen, eyes glistening. “The horrid things I’ve done will have been for naught.”

Imogen shrugged and her words were practically emotionless. “I guess you’ll have to live with that, Mama.”

Liliana nodded.

“That bein’ said,” Imogen continued, “I don’t want you—” She took a breath. “You said you’re the vessel.”

A nod.

“You said I’m a vessel?”

At her side, Laudna gaped.

"That's why you had to keep me from him?"

Another nod.

Laudna's thoughts came barreling into Imogen's mind—

You killed my love—

That's no reason—

You don't kill your daughter—

That's your justification for murder—

How DARE YOU—

Laudna. Imogen placated her with a gentle hand on her forearm.

Her thoughts slowed, but that rage simmered between their bond like burning metal. *I'm angry, Imogen,* she said.

I know.

She killed you.

I know. I'm not sayin' don't be angry because I am too, but we do need her help. She might be our only chance of reachin' Exandria safely.

She's excusing her actions—

Because I think that's the only way she can live with them—live with herself. I'm not sayin' it's right and I'm certainly not remotely okay with anythin' she's done, but I think she can help.

The only reason she's standing is because I know she's powerful and I believe she'll help us even if it's just to help you.

I can't begin to understand what might be goin' through her mind, but I need to know why. Why me bein' a vessel is so essential to Ludinus' plans that she'd...kill me to prevent him from gettin' his hands on me.

Laudna shook her head and her dark eyes focused intensely on Imogen. *I don't think any answer could justify what she's done.*

Maybe not. But if might be one step closer to me possibly bein' okay around her again. Imogen shrugged weakly. *She's my mama*. She bit her bottom lip and added, *I don't want to lose another parent. Not again*.

Even after what she did? It was a genuine question, yet it still hurt.

Yes? Imogen shook her head. *I don't know. I don't want to lose her, but I fear I already have. Yet she's here. She's standin' a few feet away, so there's still hope. I'm terrified of her, but I still love her*. Imogen rested her temple on Laudna's shoulder and sighed. *It's complicated.*

Laudna kissed her forehead. *Well, I'm here for you no matter what.*

The ghost of a smile graced Imogen's lips. *I love you, Laud.*

I love you, darling.

When Imogen at last straightened and extricated herself from Laudna's mind, she realized Liliana had been talking to the group the whole time, and she'd missed the beginning.

"As far as I understand, in order to reawaken and get to this god eater, this Predathos, there are boundaries, shells, things that imprison it within itself, set up by the gods. I don't know

the specifics, but what I do know is that the Ruidusborn, we're part of pushin' through that. We're supposed to be what can break the final boundary."

Liliana glanced at Imogen and her violet eyes sparked. "We have somethin' within us, somethin' that the gods can't stop, and only we can truly reach him. From what Ludinus said, in order to get it beyond and back into our realm, it needs a vessel—somethin' to carry it past that threshold."

Imogen's throat bobbed. "He needs you to get to Predathos."

"And then to get Predathos off the moon. To Exandria," Laudna added quietly.

Liliana shot a pointed look at Imogen. "Except I'm not the only possible vessel here."

"Was Otohan a vessel?" Laudna asked thoughtfully. "Or was she just some sort of rabid dog?"

Liliana sniffed and ran a hand down her face. "She was a possible vessel that I don't think you have to worry about anymore."

"How many more Exultants are there? Possible vessels?" Imogen inquired quietly.

Her mother sighed. "Four maybe? Ludinus has been trying to Exult the ones with the most potential."

"And how do you do that?"

Liliana's stare softened slightly when her eyes met Imogen's. "Through turmoil. Through training."

Flashes of Bassuras—

Is she your favorite?

I'll go with you! I give in. Don't hurt her.

Otohan had known exactly what she was doing that day.

It's like she was tryin' to make me...break.

All of Bells Hells met Imogen's gaze; they understood.

Laudna squeezed Imogen's hand.

Imogen savored the cool smoothness of Laudna's palm against hers and said to Liliana, "But if you stay, then he'll use you, right?"

"Better me than you." Liliana shifted her weight. "Right now at least, Ludinus believes I am his best chance at a successful vessel; he believes you're dead." She shook her head. "I don't know how long he'll believe that."

"Then why are we still talking about this?" Ashton said. He glanced at Imogen with a wave of his hand. "You're out of the equation. Let's keep it that way and take this opportunity your mom's giving us and get the fuck off this moon."

Imogen projected into everyone's thoughts, barring out Liliana: *I don't want to throw her to the wolves.*

She's been with the wolves, Orym said. *She's been living with them, sleeping with them; she is one of them, whether you like it or not. Ludinus has been influencing her for decades.*

I don't think she's entirely lost, Imogen said. *Not when it comes to me, at least. If she continues to slow Ludinus down, focus what's happenin', even if it's just to keep me safe, then that's better than nothin'.*

And what about keeping my family safe? Orym bit back.

If we can get my mother to help us, then it'll be helpin' everyone—your family included.

Orym furrowed his brow and turned from Imogen to face Liliana. "If you're used as a vessel, there's no guarantee you'll be in control of yourself. What are you going to do against a god eater?"

Liliana tilted her head. "What is it you fear about this god eater?"

Orym crossed his arms over his chest but didn't relent the glare he shot at her. "The unknown. You can't guarantee Exandria's safety if this thing is unleashed because you don't know what will happen."

"I've talked with it."

Imogen shifted her weight against Laudna. "I know. It's tried to get me to join, to wake it."

"You've been resistant and rightly so. I've told you to do as much." Liliana fiddled with the cuff of her coat. "I've communed many times with it. I can feel it. I don't think it wants us—the Ruidusborn."

"I can't take your word on that, Ms. Temult," Orym said bluntly.

"I know."

Fearne stepped forward, looking far more tired than Imogen had ever seen. "What do you think it wants?"

"It wants to be free."

Those voices whispering to Imogen in her dreams echoed through her head.

Join us.

Wake us.

Laudna lifted her chin. "What makes you think apathy is any better than disdain concerning a god eater?"

Liliana glanced skyward, nose scrunched in thought. "It's hard to explain, but something feels...right about the path it wants. Ludinus—" Liliana sighed, hands flexing as she appeared to be struggling to gather her thoughts. "Ludinus is following this path set out by The One Who Sleeps and The One Who Sleeps merely sees him as part of its plan. It's hard to convey, hard to explain—"

"It's not hard to understand at all," Ashton growled. "I know self-delusion when I see it. Clearly, you're in and you're in deep. I would ask what you'd do when you hear the mental cries of your daughter when Ludinus finds out she's alive and decides to murder her, but you beat him to the fucking punch." They jabbed a finger in Liliana's face. "You murdered your own daughter all to protect yourself within Ludinus' ranks? Are you fucking *joking*?"

"I couldn't allow her to be used—"

“Nothing is more important than family,” Ashton countered. “And I would know because I didn’t have one for a long time.”

“And we just lost a part of ours,” Fearne added, fiddling with a scorched piece of yellow metal.

Ashton chuckled, but it was dull and blunt. “Are you surprised you had the ability to do such a thing to her?” he asked, inclining his chin at Imogen. “Being able to do something like that isn’t strength; that’s weakness. That’s being able to turn off a parent’s love, one of the strongest things in this world, and render your will *weak*.” They pointed at Imogen and slammed an index finger against their chest. “I carried her back after you *fucking killed her*. She was barely alive and in immense pain, but thanks to *us*, she’s alive.”

Liliana breathed, “I knew she’d be alright.”

Ashton merely scoffed and waved her away. “Fuck right off.”

Then, Laudna spoke up. “I held Imogen’s body in my arms. I wept over her.” Imogen curled her fingers around Laudna’s hand. It trembled, but not from grief—from rage. Laudna’s whole body shook with barely contained rage. “You are her *mother* and you *killed her*. You broke her body, her heart, her trust. You broke whatever tentative bond you may have had—actually, no, you *shattered* it.”

“I know,” Liliana said simply, sadly.

“I’ve been chased out of dozens of towns for how I look, but you’re the real monster here,” Laudna snapped.

Liliana sniffed and took a step back.

Imogen grimaced at the pain still throbbing along her skin and said into Bells Hells’ heads, *I know y’all are angry. I’ve said as much to her. But we need her help. Don’t push her away.*

“I am too deep in this to walk away,” Liliana muttered like a sad realization and agreement.

“We don’t have time to explore that,” Chetney cut in. “We need answers about Predathos. Does it want something other than god eating?”

She sighed and replied softly, “It’s tired and angry and hungry.”

“Oh, you’re not going to answer his question,” Fearne bit out. “For what? Hungry for what?”

Liliana gave them all a once-over but did not answer.

“Gods,” Chetney said. “It wants the gods.” He huffed. “Well, that’s really helpful.” Chet skittered back toward Fearne and Ashton. “Forget this. We need to get out of here.”

“We can’t go to the Bloody Bridge,” Laudna said.

“How else would you leave?” Liliana asked.

Imogen took a breath and pulled herself entirely upright. “We have to go to the Bloody Bridge. It’s the only way.” She shot a serious look at her mother. “Are you comin’ or stayin’?”

Chetney glanced at Imogen. “We’re giving her a choice?”

Laudna merely shook her head at Imogen’s suggestion.

Imogen looked back at her mother. “I need an answer.”

Liliana almost imperceptibly shifted away. “If I come with you, I can’t continue to tell you what’s happenin’ here. You won’t know what change has happened should you come back, how they’re changin’ things or preparin’. I wouldn’t be surprised if most of Exandria was readyin’ to release a hellish payload of the gods’ smite up here.” She gave a sad smile. “Besides, the Weave Mind doesn’t trust us Exultants. Our trust is rocky at best, but I think...what I did...to you,” Liliana said slowly to Imogen, “secured their faith in me...for the time bein’.”

“Then stay,” Imogen said simply, somberly.

Shadows reached Liliana’s eyes at Imogen’s blunt words, yet she nodded. “You don’t trust me—none of you trust me. I crossed a line that can’t be uncrossed. I think the easiest way is for me to be away from you. My distance will ensure your safety while keepin’ me close to the goings-on at the epicenter.” She slipped her hands into her coat pockets. “There’s nothin’ in this world more important to me than you.”

A cacophony of arguments burst from the others’ thoughts.

Yeah right—

What a load of bullshit—

You killed her—

What kind of mother—

Motherfucker—

Imogen scoffed, ignoring their silent fuming. “Obviously there’s somethin’ more important to you.” She gestured around them at the red, dusty surface of Kreviris. “This place, its people, its children.” She lowered her hand when it started shaking. “You’ve said you want to go home, that you miss it, but I see you. This is your home.”

Liliana’s gaze lowered to the dusty ground. “You spend enough time in a dark place, you forget what home looks like.” She glanced up at Imogen, violet eyes sorrowful. “But that doesn’t mean the yearning is gone, especially when it finds you again.”

Imogen nearly sneered, but she controlled herself. Instead, the words that came out were tired. “I think you made your choice, so don’t put that on me.” She shook her head. “I can’t guarantee there’s any sort of home for you back on Exandria, but if you believe your place is there, then come back. If you’ve found it here, then stay.”

“Imogen—”

She shook her head again, the movement heavy. “But whatever you choose, please, help us.”

“After what you did,” Laudna almost snapped, “I think what your daughter is asking is a very fair request.”

Heartbreak washed over Liliana’s expression, but she nodded. “I will. I’ll help.” She squared her shoulders, already looking more powerful than a moment ago. She extended her hands and said, “Give me your hands.”

An immediate rush of air swirled around them, and for a moment, Imogen couldn’t breathe. She tried to gasp, but there was nothing in her lungs to take. The red landscape around

bent inward—Imogen inhaled sharply as breath was forced into her lungs—then the atmosphere flexed back out as her boots hit hard ground.

Imogen glanced around to find them standing at the base of the Bloody Bridge.

Though they were surrounded by Ruby Vanguard, none of the soldiers reacted to their presence. And none of them seemed to be moving.

"What the fuck did you do?" Ashton said.

"Time Stop," Orym breathed, eyes wide.

Liliana's expression curled into one of concentration. "I can't hold this long." She gestured at the gate with her chin as blood seeped from her nose onto the bridge of her lips. "Go. Go!"

Laudna gathered Imogen to her when the latter nearly stumbled, but Imogen glanced over her shoulder at Liliana. Nothing was right. Nothing was good between them, but this was a start. She wasn't sure if she'd ever forgive her, if she'd ever be able to trust her mother again, but there was hope.

Even after all Liliana had done, Imogen didn't want to lose her again. She didn't want to lose anyone else. Everyone in her life had abandoned her—her mother, her father, kids she'd once called friends, the people of Gelvaan.

Even Delilah threatened to take her love from her.

Imogen grasped Laudna tighter as they ran, focusing on her touch, her musical thoughts as the echoing pain which struck through her aching body threatened to overwhelm her.

I'll never let you go.

I'll never let you go.

I'll never let you go.

Before they disappeared into the violent beam of red, Imogen looked over her shoulder at her mother.

Liliana's voice permeated her thoughts. *I'm sorry*, she whispered and then launched into the sky.

In the next breath, Imogen stood clinging to Laudna at the base of the Malleus Key.

Ch. 5

Bells Hells had hardly made it back to the Voice of the Tempest and the rest of the resistance before they were interrogated by present members of the Tal'Dorei Council.

As Keyleth talked, Laudna's eyes hadn't left Imogen's slumped figure draped over her. She tilted her head to try and see beyond the loose strands of lavender hair falling into her face, and she was met with an absent stare.

She glanced at Imogen's brow before remembering Imogen had taken the circlet off. Laudna pulled her closer and pressed a soft kiss to her temple.

Darling? she thought, figuring Imogen would probably hear it.

Instead of a response, Laudna felt that tether of control Imogen usually had on her power, snap. As if her one question had opened a floodgate, Imogen's dazed and panicked thoughts poured across their bond and bombarded Laudna.

Blood—

Screaming—

Biting metal—

Otohan's vitriolic gaze—

LAUDNA, NO—

Deep, burning pain—

Wet breaths—

Frantic shouts—

Mama—

Please—

Help—

FCG!

Imogen's blood-curdling scream caused Laudna to jerk, though her gentle embrace over the former did not break. When the flashing visions of FCG's final moments swept Imogen up in its whirlwind, Laudna merely held her tighter.

Then, bits and pieces of a conversation with her mother broke through.

Imogen—

That broke somethin' in me—

Death is an easier end—

There's nothin' in this world more important to me than you—

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

Mama—

LIAR—

Imogen—

I'm sorry—

Images and thoughts hit Laudna like a storm—a storm which ravaged Imogen's mind, threatening to rend her consciousness in two.

Over and over again, bits and pieces from the past two days assaulted Imogen's thoughts, and she couldn't help but project them onto Laudna—onto her tether.

Yet Laudna did not shy away.

I am here, darling, she whispered through the storm. *Give your pain to me. I can take it.*

Death is an easier end—

There's nothin' in this world more important to me than you—

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

Imogen—

I'm sorry—

The anger and *hatred* in Liliana's voice was like a knife in Laudna's ribs. To know that her love kept hearing her mother say such terrible things—to know such violence attacked her weakened mind made Laudna's blood boil.

Yet she whispered again, ever soft, ever gentle, *I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.* Laudna rubbed gentle circles into the back of Imogen's trembling hand with a thumb.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

This is your retribution—

I had to make it true—

You never have to face the storm alone.

Like a ray of sunlight parting the storm clouds, Laudna projected her thoughts into the chaos.

I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

This is your retribution—

I had to make it true—

I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

This is your retribution—

Even as Imogen spiraled, Laudna's care did not waver. She clutched Imogen's hand and continued her chant—like a song from her soul. *I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.*

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.

YOU—

I'm here, Imogen. You're not alone. You never have to face the storm alone.

That wrathful storm which had swept Imogen up, broke, revealing open fields, lemongrass, and a soft summer breeze which seemed to kiss Laudna's mind like her love's lips on her cheek.

Laudna cupped Imogen's flushed cheek with a palm, grazing her thumb along the warm skin. Though her mind had calmed, Imogen still seemed locked in a fugue state.

Can you hear me, darling?

No words materialized, but Imogen's bloodied and dirtied fingers curled loosely around Laudna's hand.

I'm still here, Laudna breathed. *I won't let go.*

She glanced up to find Keyleth staring at them, vibrant green eyes filled with concern and underlined with an old rage. A rage not directed at them, but something she seemed to carry with her like a grudge. No, not a grudge—a soul-deep wound.

The Voice looked from her to Imogen, brow furrowed and head tilted as though asking, *Is she alright?*

Laudna gave the barest shake of her head.

Keyleth straightened, cleared her throat, and announced, "I think that's enough interrogation, Council. Let Bells Hells rest."

Without paying attention to any of the Council's protests, Keyleth nodded at Laudna and held open the war tent flap and ushered Laudna and Imogen out into the night, affording Bells Hells some spaces of solitude within the camp.

For all the times Imogen had helped her during their years together, Laudna was happy to be that shoulder to lean on. It felt good to help, even though her heart ached to see Imogen in such a state.

When they arrived at their appointed tent, Laudna maneuvered them both under the cloth flap, clutching Imogen tighter as they ducked inside. The tent only contained two cots, blankets, a stack of towels, and a washing basin, but it was private. And quiet.

Laudna lowered Imogen onto the closest cot and then instinct took over as she moved, whispering quietly in Imogen's mind all the while.

I'm still here, Imogen. You're not alone.

I'm still here, Imogen. You're not alone.

I'm still here, Imogen. You're not alone.

She filled the metal basin with lukewarm water, scooped up a cloth, and brought the gathered materials over to the cot where Imogen sat unmoving.

Laudna placed the basin next to Imogen's hip, brushed her black and dark purple skirts to the side, and then knelt before her love. She rested a cool hand on top of Imogen's knee and said softly, "I'm going to undress you so I can wash your wounds, darling, all right?"

Imogen stared ahead, amethyst eyes distant and unfocused.

"Darling?" Laudna tried again. She grasped Imogen's hand in hers. "Imogen?"

Imogen blinked and glanced up at Laudna, but her movements were slow and stiff. Her eyes flitted between Laudna's hand and herself, and then she whispered hoarsely, "Alright."

Her eyes skimmed Imogen's body, taking in the dirtied, bloodied, and torn clothing. Her black-tipped fingers twitched in her lap. "Do you want help," she began slowly, "or would you like to do it yourself?"

Another long stretch of silence as Imogen simply stared. Then, stiff fingers began picking at her jacket and dress, not really grasping any material but half-heartedly pulling with weak hands.

Imogen tugged uselessly for several moments before she halted and looked at Laudna with tired, blood-shot eyes. "Please," was all she managed to croak out, voice breaking on the word.

Laudna nodded and placed a gentle hand over Imogen's. "I've got you," she whispered.

Though silence fell like fresh snow, that ever-present hum of Imogen's mind filled the space. Some words still broke through, but they were quieter, more distant, and instead of Liliana's voice, it was her own; it was Laudna's.

You killed my love—

I'm angry, Imogen—

She killed you—

Well, I'm here for you no matter what—

I love you, darling—

Imogen's steady trickle of thoughts stuttered at those four words, but after a moment, they seemed to dominate Imogen's mind because that sentence was all Laudna heard.

I love you, darling—

I love you, darling—

I love you, darling—

Laudna wasn't sure if her thoughts would be able to break through that barrier of memories which swirled around Imogen's mind, so she repeated the words out loud. "I'm here for you no matter what. I love you, darling."

Imogen didn't answer, but Laudna's voice echoed back at her as the words absorbed into Imogen's mind and permeated her thoughts. That lavender spirit seemed to swell with a deep, ever-present love which perpetually existed, although Imogen couldn't currently express it verbally. It wrapped its silky tendrils around Laudna's mind, and though no words were spoken, Laudna heard them nonetheless.

I love you, Laud, that soft summer breeze whispered.

The ghost of a smile picked at Laudna's mouth. She took a moment before assisting Imogen to press a kiss on the back of her hand. The texture of her scars felt familiar against Laudna's lips, and for a moment, she couldn't convince herself to let go. She breathed in Imogen's skin which smelled of blood, Ruidian dust, and that underlying essence of Gelvaan's open fields, and for a brief moment in time, Laudna was home again.

After being so terrified of losing Imogen forever at her mother's hand, after watching Otohan nearly kill the one she loved only hours after her resurrection, Laudna clutched Imogen's hand a little tighter as if her grip alone could prevent her home from slipping away again.

I would follow you anywhere.

Where are you going?
Wherever you're goin'.

I will not let you go.
I won't let go.

At last, Laudna released Imogen's hand and pushed to her feet, joints groaning in protest after being bent for so long. She motioned with two fingers and breathed, "Give me your hands, darling."

Imogen's gaze did not focus, nor did her eyes move from the ground, but her lightning-marked hands lifted several inches from where they lay in her lap and cool, thin fingertips curled around Laudna's palms.

Cool hands.

Cool hands?

Cool hands—

Cool hands, Laudna at last realized. Imogen's hands were no longer golden tan and filled with her usual warmth.

Once the discovery of the unusual temperature against Laudna's own cold flesh had settled in, Laudna nearly loosed a sympathetic breath, but she shoved that reaction down and instead whispered, "Good," and simply grasped Imogen's hands more firmly.

Laudna squeezed her fingers a little as she studied Imogen's hands. Her red lightning marks which gradually shifted into that familiar lavender, seemed dulled against the wanned tan skin. It was strange to not feel that familiar warmth in Imogen's hands—to know all that blood loss had sapped a lot of the color and life from her body.

She rubbed a thumb across the back of Imogen's knuckles, trying not to dwell on the strangeness of the too familiar hands, and cleared her throat. "Let's get you undressed."

Imogen merely nodded.

With careful, deft hands, Laudna unbuttoned Imogen's gray jacket. Then she silently moved to the back of the cot behind Imogen and gently slid one sleeve off, black nails grazing the surface of purple lightning. She held Imogen's opposite arm out, one hand bracing at her shoulder while the other pulled the material down.

A small gasp broke from Imogen.

Laudna froze, a fistful of jacket clutched in her fingers. She glanced at Imogen, an apology already forming on her tongue.

Imogen's shoulders slumped forward and she curled a hand over the bloody gash in her sternum, but she rasped, "Sorry."

Laudna cupped Imogen's cheek with a palm and shook her head. "Are you all right, darling?" Imogen gave the slightest nod. "That was my fault. I'm sorry." She carefully set the

jacket aside and began unbuttoning the front of Imogen's sheer, white blouse—now stained a dark, ugly red—and attempted to pry the blood-soaked material away from torn and broken skin.

Laudna situated herself between Imogen's knees, kneeling once again to get the best vantage of the ugly wound marring the latter's chest. And the wound was…awful. It had healed enough to stop the bleeding, but since it had been a through and through pierce, Laudna could still see bits of bloodied bone and shredded tissue and muscle. It was a blade-thin hole, but the entry was still deep enough Laudna could probably fit her hand inside Imogen's chest.

A shiver spider-crawled up her spine at the thought.

Also, in the silence, she could hear Imogen's wheezes again—that faint, sharp whistle of air that escaped through the slice in her ribcage. The sound was like a fist around Laudna's heart.

Surely she had some remnants of a healing potion in her discarded bag.

She glanced over her shoulder at the small pouch leaning against the little table where the basin of water had been. Washcloth still clutched in her hand, Laudna made to move away, but two sources of gentle pressure halted her. She glanced down to where Imogen's hands cupped the outside of Laudna's hips, gentle fingers absentmindedly squeezing and releasing the material of her skirt.

"Darling—"

"No," Imogen said suddenly as though the previous conversation had never ended, "I'm sorry I'm...strugglin'."

Laudna dropped the damp cloth and cradled Imogen's face between her hands. She tugged Imogen's chin up until amethyst eyes met hers—amethyst eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Don't do that," Laudna said sternly and softly with a shake of her head. "Don't you dare apologize for being a wreck. We're all a little bit of a mess right now and that's okay because we've all just been through hell." She kissed the tip of Imogen's nose. "You're allowed to fall apart. I'll be here to piece you back together again, darling."

Red-tipped, lightning-marked fingers crept toward Laudna's tattered blouse—toward the ichor and blood spatters which stained the beautiful black and deep purple material. Imogen's distant gaze locked onto Laudna's chest and she breathed, "Oh, Laudna..."

"I'm alright, darling," she whispered, gently grasping that outstretched hand.

Still, those piercing purple eyes seemed to fully drink in the damage Laudna had sustained—see and *comprehend* the wounds which littered her pale skin—and those unshed tears trailed down Imogen's cheeks. "Oh, gods—"

NO, LAUDNA—

The glint of a blade—

Otohan's red eyes—

Please, Laudna. Run—

Laudna prone—

Black-tipped fingers reaching—

Is she your favorite—

“Imogen.” Laudna squeezed Imogen’s hand, drawing her attention up and halting the images and memories that crossed their bond into Laudna’s mind. “I’m all right. I took some damage, but I fared far better than you today.” She quirked a brow. “You, on the other hand, have a *hole in your chest*, my love, so forgive me if I’m a little more concerned with your wellbeing at the moment.”

Imogen took a rattling, trembling breath and pressed her left hand to her chest. A grimace flashed across her face and a sob escaped in a burst of air through clenched teeth, but her hold on Laudna’s hand did not relent. She gripped Laudna’s spindly fingers with both shaking hands and then pressed them to her bloody chest, right over the blade wound. She curled forward and rested cracked lips against Laudna’s knuckles. Wetness trickled over the back of Laudna’s hand as Imogen’s tears mingled between her mouth and pale skin.

Imogen felt ready to come apart at the seams.

Her whole body shook with unreleased sobs, and the tentative tether on her mind unraveled once more as frantic thoughts poured into Laudna’s mind.

Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—

Don’t leave, don’t leave, don’t leave, don’t leave—

I can’t—

Please stay—

Don’t leave, don’t leave, don’t leave—

Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—

“Oh, Imogen,” Laudna breathed as her heart broke. She untangled her hand from Imogen’s death-grip, wrapped both arms around her, and tucked Imogen against her shoulder. She cradled the back of her head and pressed a kiss to the top of lavender hair. “I’m still here, Imogen,” she whispered in her ear. “You’re not alone.”

I’m here, darling. I will always be here.

Imogen, my darling, my love, you’re not alone.

Laudna let her wispy thoughts tangle within Imogen’s. She let her blue-dawn quiet settle among the cracks of Imogen’s consciousness like fog over water and tamper the panic that threatened to shatter her love completely.

I’m here, darling.

My thoughts sing for you, darling; listen.

My soul creates a melody only you can hear; listen.

Listen to me, my love.

I’m here.

Laudna rubbed gentle circles across Imogen’s back as she said the words again, voice soft as night.

I’m here, darling.

My thoughts sing for you, darling; listen.

My soul creates a melody only you can hear; listen.

Listen to me, my love.

I'm here.

She kissed Imogen's hair again.

I'm here, darling, and I will not leave.

Laudna repeated those words as she continued the soothing motions along Imogen's back. Near-hyperventilation melted to ragged breaths, and eventually, Imogen's first clear, purposeful thought whispered into Laudna's mind.

Thank you.

Imogen's arms tightened around Laudna's waist, fingers clenching and unclenching across the surface of her corset.

Has the storm dissipated?

Imogen's cheek bobbed against Laudna's shoulder as she nodded. *It almost swept me away, but you tethered me back down.* Imogen shifted and kissed Laudna's shoulder. *Thank you,* she breathed. *Thank you, Laudna.*

"Always," Laudna murmured as she pulled Imogen into her and inhaled her scent. "Always, my darling."

Time passed, but Laudna didn't care to measure how much. She simply held Imogen until her breaths had evened out and the silent tears had ceased.

Then, she pried herself away just enough so she could cradle Imogen's face between her hands and asked softly, "Do you know where you're at, darling?"

After a moment, and without even looking around, Imogen breathed, "No."

"We're back on Exandria. We're on the outskirts of Tishtan. You're safe."

Imogen grazed a hand over the hole in her sternum once more and whispered, "Everybody's safe?"

Laudna started to nod but stopped herself short. FCG's obliterated body flashed through her mind. Instead, she corrected her thoughts and said, "Everybody we returned from Ruidus with are safe."

Imogen tilted her head as her eyes grew distant again.

YOU—

YOU KNEW—

LIAR—

This is your retribution—

I had to make it true—

Laudna grimaced as Imogen's untethered thoughts slammed into her mind. She reached for Imogen's hand, but the latter whispered, "What about my mama?"

The question caught Laudna off guard. She sighed and clicked her tongue. "I—I don't know, Imogen. She stayed on Ruidus. I think she's safe for the moment. I'm sorry, darling. I—"

Imogen jerked as though she'd been shocked and her tired, distant eyes grew cold. A dull chuckle broke from her. "Right. I suppose that was a stupid question."

“That wasn’t a stupid question,” Laudna said softly. “Your mind’s a bit of a mess right now. I understand if”—Laudna waved her hands by her temples—“*things* are a little jumbled.”

Imogen glanced up at her, blinking. “My mind—” She touched three fingers to her brow, closed her eyes, and sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—I forgot I’d taken the circlet off.” Imogen grimaced and then said timidly, “You’ve been hearin’ all that shit in my head?”

Laudna wiped a thumb under Imogen’s eye, smearing dried salt and dirt. “It’s all right.” A shiver spasmed down her limbs. “I’d much rather hear the chaos than that *emptiness*.” Imogen opened her eyes and those beautiful amethyst irises were dull. “It’s a selfish thought,” Laudna muttered, “because you’re fighting that nightmarish storm and those awful memories, but the madness and pandemonium means you’re *alive*.”

Imogen tilted her head, love and sadness glistening in her eyes. She lifted a cool hand and placed it against Laudna’s cheek. “When you were...gone—dead,” Imogen whispered, “it was so *quiet*. Your absence was deafenin’.” She smeared the heel of her other palm across her cheek. “It’s so normal to have your thoughts and your music floatin’ around in my head, and when that vanished—” She shook her head. After a moment, Imogen took a deep breath. “I understand, is what I’m sayin’. Silence means you’re gone.” Imogen loosed a broken chuckle. “I wouldn’t have been bombardin’ you if I’d kept the damn circlet on.”

“You had to have it off so your mother could find you—us.”

Imogen scoffed, that spark of life coming back with an ignition of anger. “Lot of fuckin’ good that did.”

“Though I’m nowhere near okay with your mother or what she’s done, she did help us,” Laudna said, thin brows furrowing. “She got us back.”

Imogen pressed a hand over her mouth, half-stifling a sob. “I should hate her,” Imogen muttered, voice filled with exhaustion and grief, “but I *don’t*.” She gripped the top of her knees with tense hands and rocked slightly back and forth. “She’s a bad person who has done bad things for bad people. Ludinus has gotten inside her head and *twisted* it.” Another violent sob broke from her. “I’m tired, and I don’t trust her, and I’m fuckin’ done with the mind games, but I don’t hate her.”

“Imogen—”

“And I *want* to, Laudna,” Imogen said through tears and clenched teeth. “I *want* to hate her. She *deserves* my hate.” Imogen crossed an arm over her bare chest—over the wound Otohan had left. “But I don’t want to lose anyone else,” she hiccupped. “My whole life I thought my mama was dead, my dad’s been distancin’ himself for years, now FCG is *gone*—

Laudna curled up behind Imogen, wrapping her spindly arms around her love’s chest and pulled her close. She pressed a kiss to the back of her shoulder and whispered, “I’m furious with Liliana. I won’t hide that. But after what she said, what she’s done and shown, I’m reminded of FCG.” Laudna pressed a kiss to Imogen’s nape. “I brushed you off the other night when you compared me and your mother—how we both have another power pulling at us. And though I don’t excuse her actions in the slightest, I feel like I may understand her more. It’s reminiscent of something we all struggle with; feeling like we’re designed, controlled, and manipulated.”

Laudna grazed her nails up and down the outside of Imogen's arm. "We were privileged, I think, to have gone on a journey with FCG where we learned that perhaps we're more than what our creators intended for us. You're more than your dreams. You're more than this God Eater. You're more than the prejudice others put upon the name Ruidusborn. You're going to be more than a martyr."

That last sentence was as close to a prayer Laudna had ever come to sending to the gods.

Imogen grasped Laudna's hand and breathed, "You're more than Delilah's puppet."

Laudna nearly nodded. After a moment, she said, "I don't think your mom's had that—that...hope. And I think that's why a part of you doesn't want to give up on her."

A breathy chuckle burst from Imogen's nose. "I think you're givin' me more credit than I'm due."

"No," Laudna breathed. She leaned around Imogen's shoulder so she could look her in the eyes. "I know you, darling. I know your heart."

"I feel like I'm losin' myself," Imogen muttered.

"I didn't know who I was for almost thirty years," Laudna said. "There were times when even language was foreign to me. I became Laudna. I created her. But you, Imogen, helped shape me in a different way. You also reminded me of who I am—who Laudna is—and that who I am is not bad."

Laudna slipped her hand between Imogen's and her bloody chest. "It's okay to lose yourself for a little while. I'll remind you of who you are." She tilted her head and gave a small grin. "Because I know you, Imogen. You are kind and compassionate and gentle and forgiving. You have a beautiful soul. With all the shit you've heard from people's minds, it would have been so easy for you to become cynical and angry, but you didn't. You fought that urge and remained kind. I admire that."

Imogen glanced at her, tears brimming in her red eyes. "I could say that same for you, Laudna. You've been called a monster and shown countless years of violence. Yet you stayed gentle and optimistic." She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"You're doing the same with your mother, darling." Laudna inhaled, slow and deep. "It would be easy to write her off completely, but you haven't done that—not entirely anyway. It would be so easy to villainize her for the terrible things she's done—especially to you—but you see her, and to some extent, you understand her." She shrugged. "I suppose I understand her in some small way too, now."

"She's done terrible things," Imogen said quietly. *She killed me*, her voice whispered in Laudna's head.

I know, darling.

"What if—what if she betrays us?"

"Do you really believe she will?"

Imogen took a shuddering breath and then exhaled slowly. "It's a constant worry. I didn't trust her to come back with us. I know I technically gave her a choice, but—" She bit the end of her thumbnail and shook her head. "I don't think I would have let her come with us. If we

brought her here and she freaked out after learnin' our plans or after comin' face to face with how the world is after bein' isolated for so long, she could have destroyed this entire camp for all I know." Imogen shook her head again. "I couldn't risk that."

Laudna picked up the washcloth and started gently wiping away at the blood and grime covering Imogen's lightning-marked chest. Once the cloth was filled with blood and red Ruidian dirt, Laudna wrang it out in the basin of water and started her duty anew, clearing away the reminder of what they'd barely survived—what Imogen had barely survived.

Imogen's eyes drooped closed as Laudna's soft touch continued—steady, constant.

Once Laudna had cleaned the worst part around the blade wound, she moved onto smaller cuts and gashes and then down to the other stab wound Otohan had left in Imogen's torso. Little by little, the water erased the horrors.

"You love her," Laudna whispered, breaking the silence.

Imogen peered up at her. "Do I?" It was a sincere question—one Imogen seemed to be asking herself.

Laudna nodded. "I believe you do." She slanted her shoulder and used Mage Hand to float her pouch to her side. "I also believe," Laudna said as she rooted around for a small glass vial, "that Liliana loves you in whatever way she knows how." She retrieved the vial of red liquid, uncorked it, and handed it to Imogen. "Drink, darling."

Imogen obeyed and within moments, that awful looking blade wound closed just enough that only an angry red strip of flesh remained. Imogen inhaled, chest inflating. At last, her breaths did not wheeze.

A small victory.

Laudna placed a hand over the raw but closed wound. "There's no excuse for what she's done. I know that. You know that. And I am still furious at her, but I would agree with your instinct, Imogen; I do believe she loves you. I do believe she wants you safe." She sighed. "Which is pretty hypocritical considering she used your death as a means to an end."

"Gods," Imogen sighed, rubbing a hand down her face, "this is all so fuckin' complicated."

"I'm not telling you how to feel or how you should deal with your mother," Laudna said. "Whether you love her or not is only something you can decide. If mending your relationship with her—learning to trust her again is something you want, something you wish, then that's up to you." She gave another shrug. "You said you don't hate her. That's a start."

Imogen rested her forehead against Laudna's and exhaled through her nose. "I'm not ready to think about that yet, let alone decide what I want or how I feel."

Laudna nodded, forehead bobbing against Imogen's. "That's okay. I understand. Just know I'm always here."

Imogen gave a breathy chuckle—the closest thing she'd come to a laugh in a long while. "I'd be lost without you, Laudna."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Imogen."

For several moments, Laudna simply breathed Imogen in, taking in the subtle scent of open fields, leather, and almonds as her love's lavender essence wrapped around her mind.

"Laudna," Imogen breathed, "Are you doin' alright?"

Laudna's shoulders sagged as that question fully registered. She looked into Imogen's eyes and gave a small, sad smile. "I'm…okay. I don't think I've had the time or space to fully register everything that's happened in the last few hours." She sighed and placed her hands on the tops of Imogen's knees. "I don't think my grief has hit me yet."

Imogen nodded slowly. She swallowed, throat bobbing. "I'm not used to so much loss," she whispered. "Bertrand, Lord Eshteross, FCG…" She bit her lip. "You, for a short period."

"And you, very briefly," Laudna murmured as images of Imogen's corpse flashed through her mind. She shook those visions away and squeezed Imogen's hand while managing a smile. "But we're both here now."

The ghost of a smile picked at Imogen's lips. She leaned forward and pressed a slow, soft kiss to Laudna's lips. "I will not let you go," she whispered against her mouth.

Laudna kissed her again, savoring the feel of Imogen's lips. She echoed her promise from the other night as Imogen had. "I won't let go."

She tucked lavender hair behind Imogen's ear and said, "Let's get some rest, darling."

Imogen nodded, barely seeming to stifle a yawn.

Before Laudna could even consider grabbing the blankets across the tent, Imogen's fingers clasped around her wrist.

Tired amethyst eyes peered up at her. "Don't go," Imogen said, words wavering.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Laudna breathed, the words no more than air.

She crawled onto the cot and situated herself practically on top of Imogen, tucking her bony joints in the spaces where Imogen didn't exist so their bodies slotted together perfectly. As if Laudna had always been made to sleep with Imogen.

Imogen wrapped one arm under Laudna's body and across her waist while the other clasped her spindly hand to a lightning-marked chest. She rested the bottom of her chin against the top of Laudna's head and whispered, "I love you, Laudna."

Laudna listened to the steady rhythm of Imogen's heartbeat and noted the warmth of her once-cold hands. She closed her eyes, the barest smile lifting the corners of her mouth. "I love you, my darling Imogen."

"Whatever happens tomorrow—"

"We'll face it together," Laudna whispered, snuggling closer.

Laudna fell asleep to the beautiful rhythm of Imogen's heart—like a song beckoning her home.

Laudna hadn't touched Imogen since the roof—since she realized all she wanted was that cottage with Imogen. It wasn't until the possibility of that future being snuffed out that Laudna realized how closely she'd held that scenario to her heart.

I'm gonna miss our little cottage, though.

Laudna hadn't touched Imogen since the latter kissed her hand with such gentle love and sorrow that her heart broke.

Now, deep within Aeor, within the destroyed and abandoned layers of a once floating city, Imogen's voice drew Laudna out of her thoughts.

"Laudna?" Imogen took a step forward and Laudna instinctively reached for her.

Her fingers halted inches away from that lightning marked hand. "Imogen?" she whispered, voice raspy.

"Laudna, what are you doin'?" Imogen continued forward, head slightly tilted and eyes seemingly focused on something Laudna could not see.

"Imogen, I'm not—"

"Fuckin' shit," Imogen gasped, rushing forward. "Laudna—"

Laudna glanced at the group and then at Ashton. They met her gaze, glanced at Chetney, looked to Imogen, and then back at Laudna.

"Oh, *shit*," they hissed, waving their arm. "Laudna, get back."

Imogen had paused, but then she jerked as if she'd been electrocuted and stumbled, gasping. She whirled, purple lightning already materializing around her hands.

Essek looked stunned and slightly scared, but Laudna merely drew closer, hands up. "Imogen, what are you seeing, darling?"

It was a few moments of Imogen taking in her surroundings before she spoke. "This isn't real," she muttered. "This isn't real."

"You're right," Laudna said softly. "It's not real. Whatever it is, it's not real, darling." She reached for her, but Essek put a hand out. He shook his head.

Laudna wrenched from his touch. "I don't care if she hurts me. I'm not leaving her alone in whatever vision she's having." Laudna glided closer. "Imogen, darling? Can you hear me?"

Imogen continued to turn in a circle, eyes wide and hands crackling with energy. Her throat bobbed. "Laudna?" she whispered, her tone soft and scared.

"Imogen—"

"Laudna?" She shook her head, lightning wreathed hands close to grasping the sides of her head. "This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real…" Imogen paused, hands close to fiddling. Her gaze flitted around the group, but past them, as though they weren't there. "Where are y'all at?" she breathed. "I can't see y'all."

Laudna turned, gesturing at Imogen. "We can't let her think we abandoned her."

"We didn't abandon her," Dorian said, hands out in a half shrug.

"That's a fucking fantastic observation, Dorian," Laudna spat. "Why don't you try and tell Imogen that?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to help—"

"Well, you're not."

Fearne placed a gentle hand on Laudna's shoulder. She said softly, "We are going to do everything we can to help her get out, but we also need to be prepared for the worst." Fearne's brows scrunched. "We all love her, but the reality is that Imogen is very powerful—which is wonderful—but she could hurt us."

"Chetney has attacked us and we don't coddle him."

Fearne nodded slowly and grasped Laudna's hand. "Yes, that's true. Chetney needs to be held accountable, and he has. He's far better at maintaining control now. Imogen…" she tilted her head. "Imogen hasn't been out of control since Exulting."

Laudna took a breath. "Yes, I know. I know she's dangerous, but she would never mean to hurt us."

Orym pushed past Dorian. "We all know she would never intend to hurt us, but that doesn't mean it won't happen because of whatever Dominox is doing to her mind." He motioned to the claw marks Chetney had left. "Accident. Doesn't mean it doesn't still hurt. Doesn't mean it hasn't made a mark."

The events from the night before passed through Laudna's mind, but she shoved them away. Keeping distance from her friends, especially when they were trying to help the one she loved, wouldn't help anything—especially not Imogen.

"What would you suggest, Orym?" she said softly with as much respect as she could muster.

Orym shrugged. "I'm not sure, Laudna. We can try and talk her out of it, but—"

"I couldn't see you all when I was…under," Chetney said. "I was alone. I couldn't see or hear you. It could be different for everyone, but…"

"Or Ms. Temult could be a ticking time bomb waiting to go off," Essek said, face grim.

Fearne put up her hands. "Let's try the non-violent way first, okay?" She glanced at Laudna. "Does that sound okay?"

Laudna gave a stiff nod. "I guess everybody be prepared for the worst." It broke her heart to say such a thing.

Essek held his chin high. "If she becomes uncontrollable, I will not hesitate to…stop her."

"So kill her," Laudna snapped.

"Not if I can help it," Essek said, his tone just slightly softer. He glanced past Laudna's shoulder. With a little more empathy, he said, "Not if I can help it."

Laudna nodded. Then, she finally turned to Imogen whose eyes were still wide and filled with building panic. Very slowly, very gently, Laudna placed a hand on Imogen's shoulder.

Imogen reared away, lightning sparking, and *saw* Laudna. Her eyes widened, but a hidden fury seemed to lace her next words. "You're dead."

Laudna shook her head. "No, Imogen. I'm alive."

"No," Imogen said, fumbling back a few steps. "You're dead," she repeated. "FCG—they're dead and you're…*dead*."

Laudna took a breath. “You brought me back.” She placed a hand on Imogen’s arm, but the instant she made contact, Imogen jerked away as if her touch pained.

Imogen curled in on herself like a wounded puppy, purple eyes still skittering around. She glanced down at the floor, a hand clutched to her chest. *Laudna?* she said again, but this time her voice echoed in Laudna’s head.

Imogen, darling?

Laudna, please answer me.

I’m here, Imogen. I’m here. We’re all here.

Laudna. Her name again, but this time pointed, desperate. *Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—*

Imogen.

Laudna glanced behind her at Bells Hells, at her friends, who all looked concerned. Rightly so. While Imogen tended to be the most level-headed, that also made her the most unpredictable. She looked at Orym—Orym of all people—who gave her a sad shrug.

Imogen…

Laudna faced Imogen again only to find her staring at an empty space in the room. Tears welled in her eyes and her hands trembled. After several deep, ragged breaths, that trembling turned into a pulsing vibration as Imogen’s scars glowed, her hair lifted from her shoulders, and the small pebbles at her feet caught some invisible wind and floated into the air.

Oh, shit, Laudna hissed.

Imogen, hands clutched in front of her chest, released a scream that shook the cavern—a scream filled with such intense sorrow and fury that Laudna took several steps back.

“NO!”

The sorceress lunged forward, hand and fingers outstretched toward something only she could see—and then stopped. Kneeling on the rocky cavern floor, hands clenched into fists at her sides, Imogen dissolved before Laudna. That sweet, protective exterior turned into something dark and icy—something so cold it would burn whoever was in the path of her wrath.

Then, that peaking fury collapsed into a calm which rumbled the space with pulsing energy. It built like a tidal wave and Laudna knew it would crest at any second.

As though some outside force had control of Imogen’s limbs, she pressed off her knees into a standing position. Her scars which glowed purple began to shift tone to a bold crimson, and when Imogen glanced over her shoulder at the group with blazing eyes, she detonated.

…

Imogen hadn’t touched Laudna since that night—since she realized the woman she loved most in the world might have given up on fighting for her future—for *their* future. Despite the

possibility of losing Laudna, despite her closing herself off and trying to put space between them, Imogen had only clutched Laudna's hand tighter that night.

I just want her to want to fight it.

Imogen hadn't touched Laudna since she glanced over at the woman she loved, sleeping peacefully at dawn, and let go of her hand.

It wasn't final, she told herself. Releasing Laudna's hand did not mean she was giving up. It just meant Imogen needed time. They both needed time.

Imogen's heart had almost broken when Laudna mentioned FCG.

You know, when we finish this, and we have infinite free time, we should go back and find that coin.

When we finish this.

When we have infinite free time.

We.

We.

It was the closest Laudna had come to confirming her trying—trying to come out of this alive, trying to fight against Delilah and anything which would make a prophecy of her dead-end remark.

I just want her to want to fight it.

It wasn't concrete, but it was hope, which was better than nothing at all.

Imogen chewed on her thumbnail as her thoughts swam. She wanted nothing more than to be near Laudna—touch her shoulder, grasp her hand—

Movement broke Imogen out of her dissociation as Laudna ventured toward the doom door which had messed with Chetney's head.

What the hell?

"Laudna?" Imogen stepped forward. "Laudna, what are you doin'?"

Laudna placed a hand on the door.

"Fuckin' shit," Imogen gasped, rushing forward. "Laudna—"

Laudna was gone.

Imogen gasped and nearly tripped over her own feet as she stumbled back. She whirled, already delving into her power to bring it to the surface.

Imogen shook her head. "This isn't real," she mumbled. "This isn't real."

Yet Laudna was gone.

Imogen turned in another full circle as if that would cause Laudna to reappear. She clutched her hand and lighting sparked in tendrils around her fingers. "Laudna?" she whispered, voice breaking. "Laudna?"

She shook her head, lightning wreathed hands close to grasping the sides of her head. "This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real…"

Imogen paused. As the cavern filled with crackling purple energy, she looked to the rest of the group—and saw only an empty cavern filled with the decomposing bodies hanging from those chains.

She was alone.

Panic coursed through her.

"Where are y'all at?" she breathed.

Where, where, where?

They were just here.

This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real—

She was alone.

I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone—

She was *alone*.

I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone—

"I can't see y'all," she said, voice breaking.

I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone—

This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real—

I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone—

Alone.

Imogen was alone.

Just as she had always been—how it would always be. Her mother abandoned her, her father pulled away and isolated himself, and Laudna—it was only a matter of time before she lost her—

A hand touched her shoulder and Imogen raised her hands—She startled backward.

Otohan Thull, red eyes blazing with hatred and double blades stained with blood, grinned. "Hello, little Exultant."

No.

"You're dead," Imogen breathed.

"No, Imogen," Otohan chuckled. "I'm alive."

"No." Imogen shook her head and attempted to back up farther. "You're dead. FCG—they're dead and you're…*dead*."

"You brought me back," the warrior said, that wicked grin still plastered to her face. Otohan lunged and sliced Ishta across Imogen's forearm. Blood bloomed in the wake of the blade and Imogen hissed, yanking her hand away.

She glanced around frantically, still searching for any sign of Laudna. *Laudna?*

But Laudna was gone.

Laudna, please answer me.

She was *gone*.

Laudna.

Her love, her Laudna—*gone*.

Laudna, Laudna, Laudna, Laudna—

Imogen. That all too familiar broken way Laudna had said her name that day—the day she…Imogen replayed that moment over and over again. She dreamt about it almost every night, and now, that memory echoed through her.

Imogen.

The atmosphere shifted and suddenly Imogen stood before Otohan who had her sword through Laudna's chest.

Chetney's dead body flashed through her mind and the way Otohan had struck him down. *Familiar?*

"NO!" Imogen roared.

Otohan stared at Imogen as she grasped Laudna's shoulder with one hand and shoved Ishta farther through the chest cavity to the hilt.

Black blood trickled from Laudna's mouth, and as her dark eyes rolled toward Imogen, that spark of life faded to dull emptiness.

Otohan tossed Laudna's body to the ground just as she had before—hundreds of times before—and Imogen reached out a hand to stop the impact a breath too late.

Always too late.

The sickening *thump* echoed through the hollow cavern, paralleling the space Otohan had just carved in Imogen's heart with Laudna's last breath.

In the midst of her sorrow, an endless, all-consuming rage spread through her like wildfire. All sound vacuumed into silence save for the blood pounding in her ears like a war drum. As Imogen stood slowly, one foot at a time, her scars burned red-hot, and the power roiling inside her crashed against the walls she'd constructed. With little more than a thought, Imogen snapped that tether and exploded.

•••

Imogen's eyes blazed red and most of her marks burned the same hue—so hot she nearly glowed white. Her gaze settled on Dorian.

"Oh no," he squeaked.

Laudna had never seen such *rage* from Imogen. The space around her crackled with energy, the air seemed to shift as if it were made of broken glass, and her power vibrated with such an intensity it drew Laudna in. It was wild and primal and crackling with roaring fury.

Lightning flickered around Imogen's eyes. She lowered her chin and stared at Dorian from beneath her brows. A growl escaped her, echoing through the small cavern. "I'm goin' to fuckin' *destroy you*."

"Oh, shit," Chetney mumbled, reaching to tear off his skin.

In the next breath, Imogen rocketed through the air and damp rock imploded with the power of her projection. She latched both hands onto Dorian's shoulders and slammed him into the wall sixty feet up.

More stone cracked and toppled to the ground, which nearly hit Ashton in the head. “Hey, watch it!” he cried, sidestepping a large piece. “I know you can’t see or hear us right now, Imogen, but what the fuck?”

Laudna glared at him. “Shut up.”

Ashton bit his lip and waved a hand.

From above, Dorian raised his hands. “Imogen, stop. Laudna is waiting for you.”

“Imogen, stop,” Otohan sneered, hands raised in front of her chest in a mocking manner. She tilted her head and that malicious grin spread. “Laudna is waiting for you.”

Imogen’s scars flared. “Do not mock me with her death,” she growled and cast Shocking Grasp on Otohan. The warrior cried out as the lightning damage took hold. Imogen glared at her, her breath hot with fury. “Otohan Thull,” she hissed, breath quivering, “I will *end you* for what you’ve taken from me.”

A Psychic Lance carved into Otohan, and without missing a beat, Imogen whipped lighting around her neck and threw the psionic warrior through the air.

“Uh, guys?!” Dorian yelled from above as he righted himself from the wreath of lightning that had been wrapped around his neck. “Who the hell is Otohan Thull?”

Laudna’s stomach dropped through the floor.

She and Orym made eye contact. “Fuck,” they both gasped at the same time.

“What do you mean ‘fuck’?!” Dorian cried as he managed to blast Imogen with a golden lightning bolt, giving him some space. “Guys?! What do you mean ‘fuck’?!”

Laudna went to speak into Imogen’s head but forgot she couldn’t. Not with FCG…She shook her head and went with the old-fashioned way—yelled. “Imogen!”

Imogen righted herself from the bolt Otohan had thrown at her, and then paused. Otohan didn’t move. She merely floated in the air, that scowl on her face, but she did not attack. Imogen cocked her head.

Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone.

Those three words played in her head and spurred Imogen’s anger. She glared at Otohan as her lightning crackled crimson, ribboning up her arms and across her torso.

She gathered lightning in her palms—

Imogen!

Imogen glanced around her, searching for the source. “Laudna?”

“Laudna?” Imogen breathed from above.

“She heard you,” Orym muttered, patting Laudna’s arm.

The sorceress lowered her arms, letting the power between her hands fade, and turned, red eyes flitting along the walls. “Laudna?”

Laudna stepped forward so she was almost directly below Imogen. “Darling.”

Darling.

Laudna.

"Laudna!" Imogen yelled, a hand clutched to her chest. "Laudna, where are you?"

That voice creeped back into her head. *Laudna is gone.*

Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone.

No, she heard her. She *heard* her.

"Laudna!"

"Laudna!" Imogen yelled again. It nearly sounded like a plea.

Laudna didn't know if continuing to yell would help or not, but at the least, it was creating a distraction. She motioned at Dorian. With Imogen preoccupied, Dorian slowly lowered himself to the ground, though he kept his arms wide and gaze trained on her.

She looked at the group. "I'm going to keep talking to her. Anyone against that idea?"

Fearne shook her head. "She's hearing you. I think that's a good sign."

"Yeah, you're getting through to her at least, which is more than we had a few minutes ago," Chetney said.

Laudna glanced back at Essek who floated silently. Anything to keep him from getting involved.

She took a breath. "Imogen?"

Imogen?

She whirled as her love's voice echoed around her.

Where, where, where?

"Laudna?"

Otohan—

She whirled and cursed at the space where Otohan had disappeared from.

Otohan was here. She killed Laudna.

She *killed* Laudna.

She ran Ishta up through her chest, and she laughed as she discarded Laudna's ripped body to the ground.

Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone.

A new wave of power coursed through Imogen as that fear and fury returned with a vengeance.

She was alone.

Alone, alone, alone.

Laudna was gone and she was *alone*.

"Imogen."

She stilled, save for the lightning which hummed along her skin. Imogen turned her head and met Otohan's red gaze. The bitch smiled—*smiled*—up at her. "Come on down, Imogen," she purred.

Imogen narrowed her gaze, lip curling into a savage snarl, and obliged.

Fearne let out a soft, "Oh, boy," when Imogen glanced down at them and bared her teeth.

Laudna knew what she saw—who she saw—and understood Imogen's fury, but that meant to her, any one of them could be Otohan, which meant all of them were in danger. She'd been getting through, so she wouldn't give up.

Laudna shook her head. She'd never give up on Imogen. Never.

I'm gonna miss our little cottage, though.

Never.

Laudna would not give up or Imogen or their life together. She needed her. She wanted her. Wanted nobody else but her.

As Imogen drifted closer, though, Laudna's thoughts were pulled from the future and back to the present. Back to the disaster which would most likely occur.

Imogen burned with power, and everyone close to her appeared to feel the weight of the energy she gave off. Laudna could feel it in her chest like a hand pressed against her heart.

As she neared, Laudna's skin thrummed with the power Imogen held around her. "It's me," she said.

Otohan smirked. "It's me."

"Of course it's fuckin' you," Imogen snarled and Otohan blinked. "It's you who killed my friends, it's you who killed Laudna *twice*, and I'm gonna to *sunder you.*"

Laudna grimaced. Twice? Dominox was showing Imogen her killer and creating a world in which Otohan had killed her again? Had Imogen been filled with this rage when she died all those months ago?

Laudna glanced up in time to see Imogen barreling toward her, lighting bolt building within her palm.

Before she could react, Chetney sloughed off his gnome skin and werewolf Chet emerged in time to grab Imogen by one hand while Ashton held their hammer out and clotheslined her.

The blunt side of Otohan's blades smashed Imogen in the throat, swiping her off her feet. She landed hard on the stone floor and the air knocked from her lungs. Imogen tried to get up, but Otohan reached out a hand and suddenly Imogen couldn't move. Some invisible force held her down.

The warrior loomed over her.

Imogen called upon her power, but Otohan merely stomped on Imogen's left hand and ground her knuckles into the rock with the sole of her boot.

Chetney held Imogen's left hand to the side while Ashton clicked the Immovable Rod into place, securing the handle of his hammer over Imogen's chest.

Her anger and power flared along with what seemed to be panic.

"Imogen," Laudna whispered, nearing her thrashing girlfriend. "Imogen, it'll be over soon, but you need to trust us. I know you heard me before. I need you to hear me now."

The cavern began to rumble as more of Imogen's wrath went unchecked. Her eyes still blazed red, and her scars seared so hot they scorched Chetney's fur. With her free right hand, Imogen slashed her arm diagonally and hit Laudna with psychic damage.

Laudna sucked in a breath, thankful the damage hadn't been too terrible.

"Laudna, please get back," Fearne whispered, her eyes sad and glistening.

"No. I won't abandon her." She drew closer even as Imogen glared up at her with all the hatred in the world.

Otohan knelt down, Ishta glinting in the dim light. "Listen to me," she purred, the cool edge of the blade pressed carefully against Imogen's exposed throat. "Fight."

"Who says I'm givin' up?" Imogen spat. "I won't stop until you're nothin' but smolderin' ashes on the ground. I won't stop fightin' until you're dead. I won't stop until I've gotten revenge for FCG and," she hissed through clenched teeth: "*for my Laudna.*"

My Laudna.

She stilled at that.

My Laudna.

She was Imogen's, Laudna realized. She never wanted to be anybody else's for as long as she lived.

She was Imogen's and Imogen was hers.

Laudna lowered a hand toward Imogen despite the violent power emanating from her. "My Imogen," she whispered. "My darling." Her fingers grazed the scars which crept up Imogen's jaw.

Otohan wrapped a hand around her throat—

Laudna cupped Imogen's face—gently, oh so gently—despite the way her skin burned and the energy bit into her flesh. "Imogen, darling," she breathed.

Otohan's grip increased and her face scrunched into a scowl. She opened her mouth to sneer—"Imogen, darling." Laudna's voice, soft and smooth, exited Otohan.

Imogen tried to wrench away. "Stop," she demanded—

“Stop,” Imogen growled, still trying to pull free of Chetney’s werewolf form and the Immovable Rod.

Laudna brushed her thumbs along Imogen’s freckles. “Darling, it’s me. It’s your Laudna.”

Otohan took Imogen by the face, half-clawed fingers digging into her cheeks as she lifted the sorceress into the air. Imogen expected another hiss, but instead, her heart broke when that musical voice said, “Darling, it’s me. It’s your Laudna.”

Your Laudna.

My Laudna.

My Laudna.

My Laudna.

Imogen reached a hand toward Otohan—

Imogen reached a hand toward Laudna—

“My Laudna…is dead.” Her fingers clamped around Otohan’s throat—

Imogen’s fingers clamped around Launda’s throat and Fearne lunged, but Laudna waved her away. Imogen hadn’t applied pressure yet—just grasped her. Laudna carefully touched Imogen’s scarred wrist. “Darling, I know who you’re seeing, but it’s not real.”

“It’s not real,” Otohan said—Laudna said—

Imogen shook her head. “Stop,” she said again, though this time more desperation perforated the anger.

Imogen tried to pull away. “Stop,” she breathed, voice close to breaking.

Laudna didn’t let her. She held her tight, even as her girlfriend’s hand burned finger marks around her throat like a collar. “It’s me, Imogen. It’s Laudna. I’m not Otohan. I’m Laudna. I’m Laudna and I’m alive and well.”

“I’m Laudna and I’m alive and well.”

It was torture to hear her love’s voice come from that *bitch’s* mouth. Imogen’s chest hurt, and her shoulder felt like it was on the verge of dislocation. “Stop,” she begged. “Please, *stop*.” She couldn’t keep hearing her voice—

Imogen squeezed her eyes shut, head thrashing on the rock as if their voices hurt.

Laudna nodded to Chet and Ashton. “Let her go.”

Ashton gaped. “I’m sorry, did I fucking hear you correctly?”

“Are you off your fucking rocker?” Chetney hissed. “You were dead at the time, but Imogen can level fucking *cities*. If we let go, she could—”

“Just do it, Chetney. NOW.”

Though he grumbled, Chetney released Imogen’s arm and Ashton unclicked the rod and lifted their hammer from across Imogen’s chest. Then they both backed away.

From her periphery, Essek moved forward, hands circling to create some form of arcane symbol. Laudna glared at him and he paused.

She shook her head. *Trust me,* she mouthed.

As the wind and lightning increased, she could barely make out Essek’s reply: a curt nod.

Laudna returned her attention to Imogen as her power grew. It enveloped them until it blocked everyone else out from the eye of the raging storm.

Laudna moved closer. Burns marred her skin and the heat sweltered, but she didn’t care. Getting Imogen back was all that mattered.

“Darling, please look at me.”

Still Imogen’s hand remained around Laudna’s throat, but still she did not apply pressure. Almost as if the contact anchored her.

Laudna hadn’t touched Imogen since the roof, and she certainly wouldn’t let go now. Imogen’s touch burned and Laudna’s skin started to slough off in places from the heat, but she welcomed it.

“Imogen,” she breathed, “you are my tether, my heart and soul, and my love. Listen to me now.”

Imogen stilled at Otohan’s words—at Laudna’s words—at *Laudna’s* words.

“I need you to listen to me, darling.”

She shut her eyes and focused on her voice. Laudna. Her Laudna.

“It’s me, darling. I’m here. We’re in Aeor. Dominox is messing with your mind.”

Dominox.

Dominox.

Yes, Dominox. The demon of loathing who feeds on insecurities, the demon engine, Aeor’s power source—all the information hit her like a swift punch to the gut.

It’s not real, it’s not real, it’s not real—

“You’re not alone, Imogen,” Laudna said. “We’re all here. *I’m* here.”

Not alone.

Not alone.

Not alone.

“I’m not alone, I’m not alone, I’m not alone,” Imogen breathed, eyes still tightly shut. “I’m not alone.”

Laudna caressed Imogen’s cheek, the pads of her fingers gliding over the grooves of her indented scars. “You’re not alone.”

The storm of raging wind and red lightning faltered—ever so slightly—but enough that Laudna gasped. She whispered, “That’s it. I’m here, darling. Come back to me.”

Laudna held her breath as that internal conflict continued to rage within Imogen, as she watched her love struggling to convince herself of a reality her brain didn’t want to believe. Yet Imogen fought nonetheless. She muttered Laudna’s name dozens of times along with two words: my tether.

“My tether,” Imogen breathed, the words no more than air. “My tether, my tether, my tether, my tether…”

“Come back to me,” Laudna whispered.

Slowly, Imogen’s scars dulled, the lightning licking her skin faded, and the wild bubble of wind and tangible power died down. The rest of Bells Hells reappeared around them, but Laudna did not tear her eyes from Imogen as she still swam to the surface.

At last, still muttering inaudible words to herself, Imogen’s eyes opened.

Imogen blinked several times as the world around her came into focus. A part of her expected to see Otohan glaring down at her, see her wicked grin as she threw Laudna’s death in her face once more.

Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone, Laudna is gone—

Laudna knelt before her.

Her dark eyes sparkled in the dim light, an expression of wariness yet love all too evident in her gaze. Her cool hands cupped Imogen’s face, her thumbs rotating in small, soft circles over her cheeks.

“Hello, darling,” Laudna whispered, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

Laudna.

Her Laudna.

Imogen shifted to touch her face, but her hand wouldn’t cooperate; her fingers were achy and stiff.

She just wanted to touch her—

Yet her hands wouldn’t *listen*—

Imogen’s eyes dropped down to where her fingers were wrapped around Laudna’s throat.

Her fingers—

Her fingers—

Imogen gasped and released her hold, hand instantly trembling as she pulled away. Tears welled behind her eyes, and her breaths turned ragged. “Laudna…” she breathed, pressing that same hand over her mouth.

A burn mark shaped like her hand adorned Laudna’s neck.

Imogen retreated further, collapsing in on herself, and through the hand still pressed to her mouth, she mumbled, “Oh, gods. Laudna…” She glanced at her other hand hovering in front of her chest—at the scars which still sizzled like hot irons—and the trembling turned almost

violent. “What did I do?” Imogen attempted to suck in a breath, but a sob worked its way up her throat. “What did I—what did I *do*?”

Laudna reached for her.

Imogen held both hands out—no, her hands would hurt her—

Don’t touch her—don’t hurt her—stay away—stay away—

Imogen retracted, faced her palms toward her, and looked away.

Don’t touch her—don’t hurt her—stay away—stay away—

Don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her—

That awful burn mark—the mark *she* had made—Imogen closed her eyes and pressed both shaking hands over her mouth.

I hurt her, I hurt her, I hurt her.

“Imogen,” Laudna said softly.

Always so soft, so gentle.

Cool fingers touched her knee and Imogen jumped. “Darling?”

“I’m sorry,” Imogen sobbed behind her hands. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Laudna. I didn’t—” Those all too familiar cool hands grasped her wrists, but Imogen pulled away, opening her palms away from her face. “Don’t. I don’t want to hurt you again.”

At last, Imogen met Laudna’s gaze, and the gentleness in her expression was like a knife to her heart.

Laudna shook her head. “Imogen, I know you would never mean to harm me.”

“But I did—”

“You were fighting someone else.” Laudna reached black-tipped fingers toward Imogen’s face, no sign of fear or trepidation within her. “Darling, I know about fighting invisible demons.”

A teary chuckle escaped Imogen. She shrugged, trying to conquer the overwhelming urge to sob all over again. “That’s true,” she breathed, sniffling. She wiped the back of her hand across her cheek and bumped Laudna’s forearm. She recoiled, wincing. “I’m sorry—”

“Imogen.” Laudna tilted Imogen’s chin up until it forced her to look in those dark eyes. Then, she wrapped both pale, slender hands around Imogen’s scarred ones. “You don’t hurt. The heat has calmed. I’m alright.”

A broken sob cracked from Imogen. “But you *weren’t*.” Her next breath caught in her lungs. “You weren’t alright. You were…*dead* and Otohan—”

“Wasn’t really here,” Laudna whispered. She squeezed Imogen’s hands tightly. “It was Dominox. Otohan was never here and I’m alive.” She pressed Imogen’s palm against her chest. The slow, steady beat of her heart pulsed faintly. Laudna pressed harder, solidifying the contact. “I’m alive, Imogen.”

Imogen nodded and sniffed again. Without wanting to, she glanced at the necklace-like burn around Laudna’s throat and whispered, “I’m sorry, Laud.”

Laudna caressed Imogen’s face, those cool, slender fingers tracing blissful tracks down her scars. She shook her head, a form of sorrowful love in her eyes. “It’s quite alright, darling. I

knew what I was doing when I got closer." She said softly, "I would not leave you in there alone."

Imogen bit her lip and tried not to stare at the hand mark, but she was a moth and it was a flame, and that horrid sight drew her in. She forced herself to glance away, but as she did, Laudna caught the side of her face with a palm.

She tugged her closer until their foreheads touched and whispered, "You did nothing wrong, darling."

Imogen dragged in a ragged breath, barely containing another sob. "I'm sorry, baby," she hiccupped quietly. "Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. You believed you were doing right by my memory and fighting my killer. Had you known it was us, you never would have lashed out."

"Well," Imogen managed a wet chuckled, "I might have still given Chetney a good ass whoopin'."

Laudna gave a breathy laugh. "He needs one every once in a while." She took Imogen's chin in her fingers and forced her to look up. Laudna's dark eyes shone. "I love you, Imogen."

Imogen nodded, sucking her lips between her teeth. She took a breath. "I love you, Laudna."

Silence fell around them, and after a bit, Laudna whispered, "I want that cottage, Imogen. I want that life with you at the end of all this."

Those words carved into Imogen's chest. Part of her wanted to cry with relief at the confession, but another part of her began to build that wall back up.

What else do I have to give except for myself?

Imogen wiped her nose on her sheet sleeve. "The other night you were talkin' like you didn't expect yourself to be alive at the end of all this."

Laudna stilled and her gaze grew distant. She rubbed her fingers over the back of Imogen's hand, and after a few moments of silence, she whispered, "I fear this mission—all this shit with Ludinus and Predathos and the gods—will require us to give everything in order to save Exandria." She took a breath and gave a weak shrug. "All I have left to give is myself."

What else do I have to give except for myself?

Imogen sniffed and adjusted her jaw. "For me, losin' you would be losin' everythin'." Laudna bit her lip, but Imogen continued. "I've lost you once already, I've lost you hundreds of times in my dreams, and once more just now. I am torn apart by my grief every single time," she said, emphasizing the last three words. "Every time I watch you die, a part of me dies with you, and only wakin' up next to you keeps me from shatterin' entirely." She nodded and muttered, "Hearin' you talk like you have a death wish is hearbreakin'."

Laudna leaned forward, brows raised. "I don't *want* to die, Imogen, but—"

"Then start fuckin' actin' like your life is worth somethin'," Imogen snapped.

Laudna blinked and released Imogen's hand. She stared wide-eyed for a moment before she retreated into herself slightly.

Imogen sighed and glanced away. Silence filled the space, and at the moment, she was grateful she couldn't hear Laudna's thoughts.

A black tear escaped, but Laudna wiped it away as soon as it fell.

Imogen removed her hand from Laudna's chest and cupped both sides of her face. "I'm sorry for how I said that." Laudna nodded, sniffling. "I am not sorry for what I said, though. You are worth love and peace and happiness, and you are *everythin'* to me. You are so beautiful, and it hurts my heart when all you see is yourself as a tool to be used and discarded."

"I don't want to lose you," Laudna whispered. "I meant what I said just now. I want a life with you."

"Do you—" Imogen exhaled loudly. "Do you want it more than you want to give Delilah power?"

"I want to protect you."

Imogen shook her head. With careful hands, she caressed the burn mark on the side of Laudna's throat. "You do not need Delilah for that. In fact," Imogen breathed, "I would hate it if you gave that lyin' bitch more of yourself tryin' to save me. I can take care of myself."

"She's powerful—"

"So are you."

Laudna lowered her head and got to her feet, pushing past the Hells who appeared to be attempting to look preoccupied with other things and not succeeding.

Imogen followed, throwing scolding glances at Chetney and Dorian as she went.

Near the back of the chamber, Laudna sat on a rock and pulled out an inanimate Pâté in her lap. She fiddled with his little bird skull and smoothed out his mangled wings.

Imogen approached slowly. She brushed her sheer celestial skirt to the side and knelt before Laudna. Her fingers twitched, and then she glanced up and held out her palm.

Laudna's gaze flitted between Imogen's hand and her eyes, but she didn't move.

Imogen chewed on her lip, brow scrunched before she whispered, "Please?" Laudna looked away. "Please, Laudna?"

Laudna's hand shifted away ever so slightly, but Imogen noticed. She noticed. Her throat bobbed.

"I don't deserve it," Laudna said softly.

Imogen shook her head. "Of course you do."

"Not just this—any of it," she breathed. "Them, this—you."

Imogen reached for Laudna but stopped herself. "Laudna, I love you. I'd do anythin' for you."

"I don't deserve it," Laudna said again.

"And what if I believe you do? Are you goin' to tell me I'm wrong?" She tilted her head. "Are you?"

Laudna curled in on herself but did not answer.

Imogen pointed a finger at Laudna's temple. "You're eager to pass you off as one and the same, but that bitch in your head is *not* you. And you are *not* her. However," she said more

gently, “I do know what it’s like—how hard it is—to fight somethin’ you know is bad yet feels...familiar.” She gave Laudna a small, sad smile. “I haven’t been fightin’ Predathos for over thirty years. I can’t imagine how tired you must be constantly tryin’ to ignore her poison, how murky the line between truth and lie must be for you, how difficult focusin’ on your own thoughts and makin’ the right choices must be.”

Laudna sighed, and the sound was broken, weary. “I’m tired, Imogen.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

Laudna’s fingers stretched above Pâté as though he were merely her puppet again, but all Imogen saw was Delilah’s toxic threads pulling at Laudna—at her heart, soul, and mind. Their conversation below Whitestone echoed through her head.

Imogen leaned forward. “I want you to make me a promise.”

Laudna’s hand fell. “Imogen—”

“No.” Imogen shook her head, attempting to keep her anger at a simmer. “I’m tryin’ to keep my promise that I will do everythin’ in my power to keep you from turnin’ into her fuckin’ *puppet*, and you’re workin’ against me, Laudna.”

Laudna blinked.

Imogen huffed a dull laugh. “Do you even remember that?”

“Of course I do.”

“You’re certainly not actin’ like it.”

“We promised we’d embrace whatever power necessary to fight this—”

“*Nothin’* is worth your life,” Imogen said sharply. “Nothin’. What would you do if I self-destructed before your eyes for Predathos? For the God Eater?”

Laudna took a breath and then whispered, “I would murder everyone around us if anything happened to you.”

“It’s the same for me. I was ready to *destroy* Otohan when she killed you again.” She winced. “Which turned out I was attackin’ my friends, so I’m sorry about that—” She waved a hand. “That’s not the point. I love you, Laudna, and I can keep tellin’ you that for the rest of my life, but if you don’t choose to believe it, then you’ll never beat her.” A new wave of tears burned. “And I want you to want to fight her, but I can’t force you to do that, no matter how much I love you.”

After fiddling with Pâté for a while longer, Laudna at last whispered, “I want a life with you, Imogen.”

“Do you want it more than her?”

Laudna’s throat bobbed, but she nodded. “I want it. I do. I want it—I want you.”

Imogen threw any hesitation to the wayside when she reached for Laudna a third time. She grasped her hand. “Then you need to *fight*, Laudna.” She cupped Laudna’s cheek. “It’s your turn. Promise me that if you really want a life without her, that you will fight. I still intend to keep my promise because no matter what, I’m not goin’ anywhere. Not as long as she still has her claws sunk into you.”

Imogen grasped both sides of Laudna's face and hissed, "Do you hear that you soul suckin' bitch? I'm not goin' *anywhere*. If you want Laudna, you'll have to go through me because as long as I'm breathin' you can't fuckin' have her."

The ghost of a smile graced Laudna's lips. She grasped Imogen's hands in hers. After a moment, she nodded. "I promise that I will fight. I don't know what that will look like, but I will try." Her beautiful dark eyes met Imogen's. "I will *try*, Imogen. I will give all of myself in fighting her because all I want is you, Imogen. I want you, that cottage, a quiet life." Laudna cradled Imogen's face and pulled her close until their lips barely touched; featherlight, tentative.

Imogen inhaled sharply and then returned the kiss—still gentle, but affirmative; an unspoken proclamation.

"I want you, my love, my darling," Laudna breathed against her lips, "but I can't do this alone."

Imogen shook her head and their foreheads brushed. "Never. You will never be alone again. I'm here, baby. Always."

"As am I," Laudna breathed. "You are not alone when you face those storms, when you fight Predathos, or when you feel like you'll float away. I am here to tether you, to anchor you, my love." She smiled. "I love you, Imogen. I promise I will try to fight. For me. For you. For us."

"That's all I can ever ask of you," Imogen breathed. "As long as our hearts and souls are tethered, I will fight for you, too. I love you, Laud."

Her Laudna.

Her love.

As they rested their foreheads against each other, Imogen placed her hand against Laudna's chest and let the faint, slow beat of her heart echo her words: *You're not alone.*

I am not alone, I am not alone, I am not alone.

They were not alone.

They had each other.

Soft, radiating warmth drew Laudna from sleep like a tender, beckoning kiss. The ephemeral feeling of floating between slumber and consciousness crept away from the edges of Laudna's mind as her body settled into the tangibleness of her surroundings.

Gentle, steady breathing brushed the underside of her jaw and the scent of open fields, leather, lilac, and almonds wreathed Laudna's senses like a summer breeze. The ghost of a smile crossed her lips as her heart swelled. She inhaled softly, and when she at last opened an eye, familiar, ethereal beauty greeted her.

Imogen's form entwined with hers, lightning-marked limbs sprawled across Laudna's hips and legs, and long hair draped across them like lavender chiffon. Imogen's lips—lips Laudna had spent delicious hours worshipping last night—were parted just enough for Laudna to glimpse the small gap between her front teeth.

Laudna twisted her head ever so slightly so she could fully take in Imogen's face whose expression had at last garnered peace in sleep. She drank in her darling's freckles, the small scar on her chin, the light purple lashes crowning her closed lids, and tucked them away within her heart. She pressed her lips to Imogen's hair, and after a moment of simply breathing her in, Laudna planted a soft kiss on her head.

Imogen inhaled deeply, slowly, but merely snuggled closer, drawing the arm across Laudna's torso tighter to her.

She'd never seen Imogen so at peace. In all their years together, Laudna had never once witnessed Imogen sleep through the night, and she certainly wouldn't ruin that now.

Light as a feather, Laudna traced the scars carved into Imogen's flesh with a fingertip. A cool trail soothed some of the heat radiating from the lightning marks as Laudna outlined a path along the amethyst ridges.

She'd worshipped every inch of Imogen but had taken special interest in feeling every scar, every stretch mark, every bit of warm, soft skin, and losing herself in Imogen's radiance.

For the first time, she'd had Imogen completely and entirely to herself.

Laudna glanced at the outline of her ribs illuminated by that faint purple glow within her chest.

She won't be watching us anymore.

The moment Imogen's lips captured hers, all of Laudna's fear and anxiety washed away. The moment Imogen's lips captured hers, hungry and passionate, the former's thoughts had come pouring across the bond, breathless and love-drunk.

I love you, Laudna—

I love you—

I love you so much—

Gods, I'm so thankful—

I love you—

You're in control now—

No one gets to control you anymore—

No one—

Laudna—

You're everythin' to me—

I love you—

I love you, I love you, I love you—

Laudna reciprocated, kissing away the tears which streaked Imogen's cheeks. Her hands curved around Imogen's face, fingers tangling in purple hair as she sent her own thoughts and emotions across the bond.

Thank you, she breathed.

Thank you, darling.

Thank you for not giving up on me—

Thank you for not letting me go—

I love you, Imogen—

I love you more than anything—

I love you, I love you, I love you—

Imogen laughed—truly *laughed*—as she clutched Laudna, eyes brimming with tears and endless amounts of love. "You did it," she whispered, touching her forehead to Laudna's.

Laudna swept Imogen's mouth to hers with an inhale, and between kisses, breathed, "We did it."

Despite their friends around them, despite the exhaustion weighing on Laudna's soul, despite the stranger's house they were in, Laudna greedily and eagerly trailed after Imogen, following that stream of lavender hair like a road which would always lead her back home.

She blinked as the wondrous memories from last night spread through her like a glowing ember being fanned to life—Imogen praising her, adoring her, wanting nothing but *Laudna Laudna Laudna*.

Laudna's chest warmed just thinking about the thoughts which had crashed into her, Imogen too enthralled to keep her mind anchored.

That intangible tether between their minds had been a storm of adoration—an ocean of love which sent waves of sensual worship and tender devotion colliding into each other's souls.

And Laudna welcomed it all.

She wanted everything—all of Imogen. Every thought, every wish, every desire, every ounce of fear and desperation and relief and unconditional, endless *love*.

Imogen was filled with love, and it was a love that never ran dry—a love which Imogen showered her with endlessly, absent of hesitation or remorse.

Laudna had always know of Imogen's love, had always felt it, but now, without Delilah, it was like a fog had been wiped away; everything seemed *clearer*. The intensity with which Laudna felt Imogen's emotions—felt them, drank them in, and clung to them—had almost frightened her. Might have frightened her if Imogen hadn't been there to placate Laudna's fears with soft, summer-warm love.

The weight of Delilah had been removed from her shoulders and soul, and Imogen's essence filled in the gaps. Where Laudna ended, Imogen began, and that lavender aura mended

the cracks Delilah had created until nothing but *Imogen* remained pressed into her soul like the baby fingerprint in Imogen's locket.

Laudna carded spindly fingers through lavender hair, brushing loose strands from Imogen's face.

Delilah was *hers*.

After thirty years of being puppeted, Laudna at last held the strings.

No one gets to control you anymore.

Delilah was *hers*.

I'm disgusted at the thought of Delilah lookin' at us all the time.

Delilah was *hers*.

She won't be watching us anymore.

Even now, in this room filled with Imogen's slow, soft breaths, they were truly alone. This moment to soak in and treasure was *Laudna's*.

Laudna laced her fingers with the hand Imogen had draped across her hip and brushed a thumb along the back of her lightning-marked skin. For countless peaceful minutes, Laudna rubbed gentle circles over the back of her hand, savoring the stillness within her mind.

Eventually, rays of the approaching dawn fell across their bodies, bathing them in golden morning light. Imogen's hair almost seemed to sparkle, and her purple scars practically glowed.

Laudna's caress along Imogen's hand paused when the latter's fingers twitched and then squeezed gently in response. She glanced down and met vibrant amethyst irises illuminated in the sun as golden light marked Imogen's face.

Laudna kissed Imogen's forehead and rested her lips against her skin for a moment while she soaked in her warmth. "Good morning, sweetheart," she whispered.

A smile spread across Imogen's lips and she whispered back, voice heavy with morning rasp, "Mornin', baby."

She glanced down at their bare bodies, the blanket for the bed haphazardly strewn over Imogen's lower extremities while Laudna's torso remained exposed. Imogen's brows turned upward, mouth curling in a small frown. "Oh, honey, are you cold?"

"When I'm next to you?" Laudna said softly. "Never."

"Well, I'm sorry for hoggin' the blanket."

With a small flick of a finger, the blanket shifted up to cover Laudna's lower half, and Imogen pulled the former in tighter against her and squeezed gently as if that would transfer all her body heat to Laudna.

Laudna loved feeling the grooves of Imogen's scars against her skin, loved soaking in her radiating heat, loved being here…with her.

She at last felt like she was in her own body. She'd felt like a passenger for so long, but now it was as if she could fully experience every touch, every sensation, every desire and urge, and explore them. They were *hers*.

Imogen adjusted her cheek against Laudna's upper body which was followed by a long exhale. Her chest, which pressed into Laudna's ribs, thumped steadily with each beat of her heart.

She extricated her hand from Laudna's grasp and ran a feather-light fingertip down the length of Laudna's abdomen. As that gentle touch moved lower, the muscles in Laudna's torso twitched, sending shivers along her skin. Then, Imogen's finger traveled back up from navel to chest and settled over the brutal scar between Laudna's breasts. That scar illuminated a stark contrast against her pale skin from the purple glow emanating underneath.

Sometimes Laudna still felt the sword in her. She'd feel the force of Ishta's hilt in her back, feel the phantom tearing of flesh and bone, and a sharp, stabbing pain would overwhelm her, crushing the air from her lungs and leaving her paralyzed for a breath of time.

Imogen's touch was like a balm, warming and easing the icy pain of death from Laudna's soul. She shifted forward and pressed her lips to the center of the scar, leaving behind the echo of a deep, temperate kiss.

Black tears burned behind Laudna's eyes at the rawness of that action, but when Imogen peered up at her, a tender smile on her lips, she couldn't help but smile back.

Imogen's smile grew into that familiar beaming grin, nose scrunching and amethyst eyes nearly closing behind lavender lashes. Then, that smile faded into an expression of awe and tender adoration, and for a moment, Laudna simply gazed at Imogen as though her freckles were constellations adorning the night sky.

Laudna would spend the rest of her life being grateful for that day the girl with purple hair and honeyed voice stepped between her and the mob. Though they'd escaped to safety, Laudna never really stopped running. She'd been chasing Imogen every step of the way, reaching for a heart that Imogen offered freely within lightning-flecked hands.

With a breathless exhale, Laudna absorbed the love glistening in Imogen's eyes and for the first time, allowed herself to truly believe every ounce of her darling's heart had been gifted to her. She'd tucked Imogen's heart away within her own like a priceless gem she safeguarded with cupped palms.

Imogen pushed forward and pressed her lips to Laudna's, enveloping her mouth with a sudden kiss. Her thin, calloused fingers cupped Laudna's jaw and tangled into her hair at her nape.

You've always had my heart, Laudna, she breathed as she shifted her mouth to kiss Laudna again. *It's yours. Forever and always.*

Laudna opened herself to Imogen's advances and returned her kisses with a renewed vigor she was still beginning to grasp herself. She slid a hand along the small of Imogen's back and then brushed her palm upward, dragging her nails lightly along soft skin and purple lightning.

She pulled away just enough to speak against Imogen's mouth, and she tapped black-tipped fingers against the purple glow emanating from her chest. "You, Imogen darling, are etched into my heart. Not even Delilah can change that."

Imogen grasped Laudna's jaw between two fingers and guided her lips to hers. "She's never had that power," she breathed, voice low and raspy. "Even when she'd nearly taken you from me, she could never touch your love." Another kiss. "She could never withstand *our* love."

Laudna blinked and pulled away. "Imogen," she began, "I'm sorry—"

"Don't," Imogen said with a pointed finger against her lips. "No apologizin'. Not today. Never again."

"The things I did—"

"*She* did," Imogen said firmly. "You fought her *every step of the way*."

Laudna remembered her words in Aeor—the conversation Imogen had with her, and the promise she'd made then.

I promise that I will fight. I don't know what that will look like, but I will try. I will try, Imogen. I will give all of myself in fighting her because all I want is you, Imogen. I want you, that cottage, a quiet life.

After a moment, Laudna muttered, "I did." A breathless chuckle shook her chest. "I did fight her. For me. For you. For us."

Imogen laced her arms around Laudna's neck, resting her forehead against hers, and whispered, "I'm so proud of you."

Laudna sniffed and blinked more tears away. "That means a lot."

"I'm always proud of you," Imogen said with a lopsided grin, "but baby, I'm practically burstin' with pride gettin' to witness you overcome her. After thirty years of bein' manipulated by that lyin' bitch, for now, you're…free." She shrugged. "Not free of her just yet, but free from her influence at least."

"That muddy line between me and her," Laudna said slowly, hands idly tracing circles along the width of Imogen's back, "has never been so clear, so…defined. I am *me* again." She gave a small smile. "She's not poisoning me any longer."

Imogen's eyes sparkled as she stared at Laudna with that soft smile. "I missed your smile," she breathed.

"I've missed you."

"You know I meant what I said before," Imogen began slowly. "On the roof that night." She glanced up and bit the corner of her bottom lip before she said, "Even if we hadn't succeeded in containin' her last night, even if you'd lost your fight against her, even if—" She released a long breath. "I'll always love you, Laudna. Nothin' could change that."

Laudna surged up and captured Imogen's mouth with hers, pulling the younger woman on top of her. After several deep, breathless kisses, Laudna pulled away and muttered, "I'm glad I don't have to spend another second missing you, darling."

A faint blush spread underneath Imogen's freckles. Despite it, she tilted her chin up and kissed Laudna again, lingering against her lips. "You know," she mumbled, "I'd grown used to the taste of you," Imogen said, her slow drawl heavier than usual, "but sugar, you're even better without her."

Laudna grinned. "In every way."

Imogen slid her hands under Laudna's back and laid her head on her chest. "I love you, Laud," she breathed, her words warm against bare skin.

Laudna wrapped her arms around Imogen and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "I love you, my darling Imogen."

"We're one step closer to that cottage," she whispered.

A hopeful warmth spread through Laudna's chest as a grin blossomed upon her lips. "One step closer to forever with you, darling."

Imogen grazed gentle fingers back and forth along the breadth of Laudna's shoulder blades nestled between the mattress and her back. *Forever and a day.*

Surrounded by warmth and the comforting, familiar weight of Imogen, Laudna let sleep take her by its serene hand. She didn't allow herself to think about the journey ahead because for a few golden morning hours, this moment—Imogen—was hers.

Forever and a day.

Imogen sank onto the bed, a low groan pushing its way up from her core as fatigue weighed on her. The circlet had finally attuned so the constant chaotic and ditzy singing from Jester's mind no longer reached her, but the effort of having to continually reform her mental walls to keep out seven new minds had left Imogen exhausted.

Although she could no longer hear it, phantom sounds of Jester's mind echoed through her head. What had started as background noise had become more prominent until she'd been inundated by off-tune singing that jumped between random sounds and some semblance of melody.

She thought she might have missed half of the conversation earlier that evening because she couldn't concentrate on anything but reaffirming the integrity of those mental walls. Imogen would construct that adamantium barrier only for outside thoughts to slam against it and jostle her will like white-capped waves crashing into rocks; brutal, deafening, incessant.

Within an hour, the emotional beating she'd been fending off left her feeling physically battered. Her muscles ached from clenching against the mental assault, her scars were hot and inflamed, and her head pulsed slowly like an approaching threat creeping up behind her. Imogen craned her neck to the side, eyes squeezed shut as she tried to keep the looming migraine at bay.

She inhaled slowly, deliberately, fingers clenching and unclenching to disperse some of the tension elsewhere. Even with the circlet on, the thoughts from the day had built within her mind like a dam holding back a rush of water. The amalgamation of pressure throbbed to the pulse of her heart, and with each beat, that dam cracked a little more.

She hung her head and just *breathed*.

In and out, in and out, in and out—

Another pulse of hot heat within her mind; further spider-webbing in the dam.

Imogen fisted her hands around the sheets, clutching the edge of the bed in a white-knuckled grip—

Breathe.

In and out, in and out, in and out—

Her clothes were red-hot irritation against her scars, the contact with the sheer material like setting flame to gasoline.

Breathe.

In and out, in and out, in and out—

Imogen almost clawed at her hair when another deep, echoing throb within her mind assaulted her like a clap of thunder.

Breathe—

Breathe, breathe, breathe—

I can't breathe—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

She rubbed her hands frantically back and forth along the flat of her thighs and attempted to shove the agony and heat down.

Shooting pain lanced through her head—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

Without fully meaning to, Imogen found her hands scraping against the fastenings of her corset, yanking at the straps, attempting to get it *off*.

Everything in contact with her skin was too much, too hot—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

Her head pounded—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

Her scars ached and stung like salt in an open wound—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

Fingers scratched and scratched and scratched—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

Blissfully cool hands captured Imogen's face and halted her frantic clawing at the corset. The smell of fallen leaves ribboned around her senses, and then, as if Imogen's head broke the surface of water after nearly drowning, she inhaled. It was ragged and on the edge of loosing a contained sob, but she could *breathe*.

In and out, in and out, in and out—

Tendrils of beautiful, haunting music slipped between the cracks in that broken dam and soothed like ice to a burn.

Breathe.

Little by little, those melodic shadows curled around the pieces of Imogen's mind and mended that lavender essence which had been left in tatters.

In and out, in and out, in and out—

As Imogen breathed, the world around her began to materialize into something other than burning darkness. In fact, cool air kissed bare skin, tempering her hot scars.

Those heavenly hands cupped her face, fingers lacing at the base of her skull in a cool embrace. Soft, gentle, constant.

Then, unintelligible sound formed into words as her mind sorted through the migraine fog and pieces of reality.

That's it. Breathe, darling. I'm here. I'm here. Focus on me. Listen to me, darling. Come back to me, Imogen.

Each word was like a lifeline which Imogen could grasp, so she clutched the tether and followed as that soothing voice beckoned.

I'm here, darling. I'm here. Come back, dear. Come back to me.

That voice which permeated her mind withdrew, and when Imogen finally grasped reality enough to know to open her eyes, the words continued—clear, gentle, whispered.

"Come back to me, darling."

Imogen blinked, the sound of her soft pants greeting her ears along with that voice which placated the fire like a balm. The world seemed to manifest around her as Imogen's mind slotted in sections of information like pieces of a puzzle until she could view the whole picture.

Dark eyes stared down at her, and a worried smile worked at the corners of those beautiful lips. "Hi, sweetheart."

As if her name was the answer to some unspoken question, Imogen found her mouth already forming the word. "Laudna," she breathed.

Imogen closed her eyes and leaned into the hand still pressed against her cheek. She curled warm fingers around the wrist and brushed her thumb along the softly protruding veins and tendons in the back of Laudna's thin hand.

She tilted Laudna's palm back ever so slightly and pressed her lips to the inside of her wrist. Laudna was cool against her, and as Imogen's mouth lingered against her skin, the faint beat of her heart almost seemed to reciprocate the contact like a kiss which emanated from Laudna's soul.

Imogen wanted to drink her in and get drunk off the essence of her, so she kissed Laudna's wrist once more and breathed in the scent of earth, orchids, and persimmons. The smell was diluted, but it existed nonetheless since it existed as part of Laudna.

Laudna's thumb brushed under Imogen's eye, wiping away tears she had not realized she shed. Her eyes glistened with love and a hint of sadness. "You're quite warm, darling," she whispered.

Imogen blinked several times as her body remembered what it was to talk, to move, and the corner of her mouth quirked in what was almost a grin. "Thank goodness I have you, then." She shook her head and tried to sort through the mess of her mind which still pulsed dully at the onset of a migraine. "When—how did you know—" Imogen took a breath. "When did you get back to the room?"

Laudna tilted her head and carded spindly fingers through Imogen's hair. "I've been here the whole time, darling."

Another shake of her head as her scars flared. "I don't—"

"You've been in a bit of a daze, darling." Imogen blinked again but didn't need to say anything because Laudna continued. "After dinner, I could tell you were struggling. I'd tried a few times to talk to you, but your responses were...distant. *You* were distant. You crawled into yourself to avoid further overstimulation, but I think you might have blocked *everything* out."

Imogen recalled blurry bits and pieces, and they bombarded her already fragile mind.

The increasing din of voices—

Surges of buzzing pain—

Hauling up her walls, hauling up her walls, hauling up her walls—

Thoughts slamming into her—

Waves crashing into rocks; brutal, deafening, incessant—

Hauling up her walls, hauling up her walls, hauling up her walls—

Pulsing pain—

Hot scars—

Thoughts slamming into her—

She inhaled sharply and tore her mind away, and Laudna was there. Imogen went to bury her face in Laudna's palm, but the sheen of red stopped her. She cocked her head at the sight of blood caked under her short fingernails.

She released Laudna and an internal shaking took over. Images of her hand burned into Laudna's skin, adorning her throat like a necklace, flashed through Imogen's mind.

"What did I—what did I do?"

That awful burn mark—the mark *she* had made—

Don't touch her—don't hurt her—stay away—stay away—

Don't hurt her, don't hurt her, don't hurt her—

I hurt her, I hurt her, I hurt her—

"Oh, gods, Laudna," she breathed, eyes scouring every visible inch of pale skin. "Did I—please don't tell me I hurt you again." Her hands were moving, frantically fiddling with Laudna's blouse collar, her sleeves, searching for any sign of damage— "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Laud. I didn't mean—I'd never—"

Laudna clasped Imogen's hands in hers and applied enough pressure to capture Imogen's attention, even if but for a moment. She stared into her eyes and said softly but firmly, "You did not hurt me, darling."

"But I—"

Laudna shook her head and pulled Imogen close, forcing her to look at her. "You could not have hurt me, Imogen; I do not bleed red."

I do not bleed red.

I do not bleed red.

I do not bleed red.

Imogen marinated on those words while her scattered brain worked to put meaning to them.

Laudna bled ichor.

Slowly, comprehension set in. "If I didn't hurt you, then..."

Laudna grazed cool fingers down Imogen's torso, and only then did Imogen fully grasp that air kissed her bare skin; Laudna's nails made direct contact with hot scars and the warm, soft skin of her body.

She sucked in a hiss when sharp, stinging pain shot across the surface of her sternum, and Imogen glanced down to a mess of blood and scratches that cross-hatched over her torso.

She sat in front of Laudna naked from neck to navel, strands of long lavender hair covering most of her chest, though there was no careful pattern to the placement; it clung to her bloodied skin in wild, tangled sections.

Imogen drew in an uneven breath when she realized she'd somehow ended up kneeling on the floor and her sheer robes and corset lay across the room as if they'd been ripped off and thrown in a whirlwind of panic.

Because they had.

She remembered clawing at her corset because she couldn't breathe and the contact of material on her scars had been agonizing—

Frantic fingers yanking at fastenings—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

Ripping at chiffon and silks—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

Imogen's dark blue pants were smeared with blood along the curve of her thighs, and once again she found herself all too aware of the bare, bloodied, and broken state of herself.

Imogen felt stripped and laid vulnerable in a way that surpassed the physicality of nakedness—like she'd ripped her soul out and presented it to the universe and the gods had determined it anathema.

She looked up at Laudna, eyes wide and blood-smeared hands trembling in her lap.

"I think being inundated with thoughts had pushed you over the edge because there was nothing I could do to get through to you," Laudna muttered, brows pinched. She placed a cold hand on Imogen's bare chest, just above her heart. "I think finally being alone, being somewhere quiet, your subconscious allowed you to break down, and there was no place to put all that madness—no way for it to manifest safely when released."

Laudna shook her head, black tears glistening in her eyes. "I'd never seen you so…frightened." She fiddled with her fingers and muttered, "You were burning up and you couldn't breathe—"

Everything in contact with her skin was too much, too hot—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

Her head pounded—

Get it off, get it off, get it off—

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe—

"You started ripping at your corset and your robes, but even after you'd torn them off, you *kept clawing*," Laudna said, voice breaking. She wrung her hands, twisting her arms in front of her chest. "Gods, you were hurting yourself and I—I didn't know what to do except—" she gave a sad smile "—except anchor you."

Blissfully cool hands—

Fallen leaves—

Beautiful, haunting music—

She'd taken that tether and followed it back to Laudna, back to her love.

Imogen laced her fingers between Laudna's, effectively halting the fidgeting, and pressed both sets of their hands to her chest. She rested her mouth against Laudna's knuckles, and after a few breaths of simply breathing her in, Imogen kissed her hand. "Thank you," she whispered against her skin. "Thank you for not lettin' me go."

Laudna tucked several loose strands of lavender hair behind Imogen's ear. "Of course," she breathed. "I promised I wouldn't."

I won't let you go.

A smile crept upon Imogen's lips, but it faded when she remembered the look on Laudna's face; the worry and concern etched into her skin. "I'm sorry."

With a shake of her head, Laudna whispered, "You've nothing to apologize for, darling." She slid her hand out of Imogen's grasp and waved her fingers with a gentle flourish and the smeared blood staining Imogen's torso and pants vanished.

Imogen loosed a long sigh and rested her hot forehead against Laudna's soothing cool chest, right over the glowing purple contours of her skin and ribs. Thin fingers carded through her hair, past the lavender ends, and continued to trail cool nails down Imogen's spine. A shiver shook her core.

"Do you remember what I said to you all those weeks ago?" Laudna whispered. "The morning we talked on the Silver Sun?"

"When I hadn't slept?"

Laudna's chin bobbed against the top of Imogen's head in a nod. "You are not a burden, Imogen. Your fears are not a burden. These powers which affect you so negatively at times are not a burden. They are real and they are a part of you, and needing help does not make them any more invasive in our relationship. Providing for you, caring for you when you need it does not prohibit me from loving you, nor does it make you any harder to love."

She clutched Imogen's hand which still radiated an intense heat compared to Laudna's cool touch. "Even after all the shit Delilah put me through, put you through, put the group through, what did you continue to tell me?"

Imogen closed her eyes and waited for a wave of throbbing pain to pass before she muttered, "You're never a burden, Laudna."

"Was it ever hard to love me?"

"No," Imogen said without needing to think about her answer. "I'll always love you."

Laudna cupped Imogen's warm cheeks and tilted her head back. She gazed at Imogen and that soft smile—the smile Imogen could never tire of—blossomed upon her lips. "You are everything to me, darling."

Imogen's own words echoed through her head. *Laudna? Laudna's everythin'.*

"You are more to me than the gods themselves."

We watched Imogen level an entire block of a city with her power, which is more intervention than I've ever seen from the gods—

Everything is being set up, is being staged for you to be the savior of Exandria—

But I think if it's goin' to happen—if it has to happen, if there's no stoppin' it, if it comes down to it and he's comin' out, then I would gladly step up and at least try.

You are very capable.

"It does not matter to me if Exandria is saved if you must be its martyr savior," Laudna whispered, the barest tremor in her voice, "because you are my world, Imogen, and if you are lost, then—"

Imogen pushed forward and captured Laudna's lips with hers, halting the rest of her sentence. Her hands roamed up Laudna's torso from her hips to her nape where she slid her hands on either side of Laudna's jaw, tangling her fingers in soft, black hair.

Her head pulsed, but it was dulled compared to a few minutes ago, so she shoved that feeling down and instead opened her mind up for Laudna's music to enter.

Like a blue dawn breeze, that soothing, minor melody imprinted on Imogen's soul, swept inside her as though she inhaled Laudna's essence through her reciprocation of their kiss.

"Darling," Laudna breathed against her lips, never quite severing contact as her hands searched Imogen's body, cool, careful fingers avoiding the torn and scratched front of her.

Muscle memory took over as the contours of their faces slotted into an all too familiar position where their mouths could connect perfectly.

Imogen shook her head, remembering that Laudna had tried to speak. "You keep sayin' I'm the savior of Exandria," she whispered, a slight rasp to her voice as she paused just long enough for her thighs to find purchase on either side of Laudna's hips. "Well," Imogen breathed, voice heavy as she sat into the straddle and tilted Laudna's head back so she could plant a soft kiss under her jaw, "you're mine."

Laudna's chest shuddered and her breath hitched, and her music ribboned around them, binding them together through that invisible tether.

"Let me show you," Imogen breathed against the cool skin of Laudna's collarbone.

Though Laudna's voice was thick with longing, she placed a gentle hand against the gashes in Imogen's flesh and whispered, "Are you sure, darling?"

Imogen clasped that cool, pale hand tighter against her warm skin. "Don't let me go."

She'd been untethered most of the night, all the thoughts in her head like a fever dream she couldn't wake up from. Laudna's touch, her scent, her music, grounded Imogen, and now that her body remembered what it was to *feel* Laudna—

"I love you," Imogen exhaled, sliding her hands under Laudna's blouse and grazing her fingers down her back, "and I want you. You and only you until the day I die." Imogen's head pounded to her heartbeat—like the blood in her veins sang for Laudna. "But only if you want me, too."

Laudna's gaze burned with desire, yet her voice remained tender. "Please," she breathed and pressed a kiss to Imogen's throat.

"Say it."

Hot breath kissed the spot where Laudna's lips had just marked as she muttered, "I love you, dearest, and I want you." Her fingers fisted in Imogen's hair and tugged her head back, bearing the latter's throat to the air. She planted a slow, soft kiss to Imogen's neck and said, "You are my everything."

Imogen placed an index finger under Laudna's chin, and with the slightest touch, pulled her forward until their lips met. Imogen broke away from the kiss early, set the flat of her hand against Laudna's chest, and pushed her to the floor, her other hand catching their weight as Imogen guided them down.

Laudna's melody soared, tangling around them in tendrils as lips and skin met, and with each kiss, each caress, that symphony turned to reverence as Imogen worshipped Laudna.

That endless, ravaging storm which had previously consumed Imogen and attempted to shove her tumbling into a darkness which erased her existence, now bowed to her will.

For the moment, at least.

That mote of light, shattered into hundreds of specks which she pulled into herself, stirred within her core. The God Eater remained docile, but as the seconds passed, its power returned like runoff trickling into the ocean.

Imogen curled a hand against her chest, closed her eyes, and *breathed*.

Exhaustion seemed to drag her limbs into the ground. Her body burned and ached from unhealed wounds and her clothes were a tattered, bloody mess, yet she couldn't stop. *They* couldn't stop. They'd been moving and fighting for what felt like decades, and still there didn't seem to be an end in sight. It was fight after fight, and yet it still wasn't over.

Imogen took a shallow breath which rattled in her lungs, and when she tried to breathe again, the air caught in her throat. She wrapped her arms around the front of her torso and hugged herself because perhaps if she held herself together, she wouldn't fall apart.

Gods, she was tired.

Imogen rubbed her forehead and forced her feet to keep moving anyway, though she proceeded forward in a half daze, not entirely aware of her surroundings.

The smell of brine and algae slithered up Imogen's nose like those dark tendrils which haunted the lake. Her boots scuffed against damp stone and mud, and as clear, crisp air greeted her, that slumbering power within her pulsed.

The gods themselves seemed to turn their immaterial heads in her direction; they knew the Sleeping One had awoken. They knew it was free from its cage.

She hadn't even realized Bells Hells had passed through the secret entrance from Ruidus and now trekked up from the belly of Lake Umamu.

Imogen touched her fingertips to her sternum. She was the vessel, and she'd carried a god eater across the threshold into Exandria.

You are anathema to them—

You and the Red End together have become the nightmare of my brethren—

Their armies currently mount to the moon itself in hopes of resealing you with the entity and staving off this pantheon apocalypse—

Bells Hells had met part of that army head-on, and it had only been moments before they had tried to kill her.

They'd tried to kill her.

Her. Imogen. A girl from Gelvaan.

She wasn't a savior, she wasn't some chosen martyr—she was just...Imogen.

We were never meant to be important.

Imogen waned nothing more than to *stop*. She wanted to settle down with Laudna and live a life of peace.

I would follow you anywhere.

She was so tired.

I don't want to abandon them now.

She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong—

I don't want to abandon them now.

She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong—

Imogen's legs gave out and her knees and hands slammed into the rocky shore of the lake. Pain throbbed through her joints and palms, but the sob which ripped from her somehow felt more painful than all the damage she'd sustained in the last few hours.

She was so *tired*.

Imogen covered her eyes with a hand as she cried, and for long moments she couldn't conjure words through the heaving sobs. Then, she gasped, "Gods—I can't—"

She was so tired.

Claw-like fingers clutched at her chest again as if she could cage Predathos in her hand—as if she could compress it into a particle of infinite power which she could wield. Instead, her nails scraped against stained chiffon and bruised and bloodied skin.

Imogen sat on her heels, back curled over her shoulders, tears littering the stone beneath as bone-deep sobs wracked her body.

Flashes of the fight tore through her, but there were no images, only blurs of violence, blood, and darkness. The partially healed wounds mapped on her flesh throbbed to her pounding heartbeat, and the necrotic damage which lingered seemed to slowly drain her remaining energy.

Another sob ripped from Imogen before she could smother it with a hand, and more hot tears fell.

In the midst of Imogen's soul fraying and her world crumbling around her, cool, gentle hands stole around her shoulders and a presence Imogen knew better than her own heart knelt behind her.

Darling? Laudna's voice was smooth and familiar against the roughness of her mind.

A broken exhale tore from Imogen as she shook her head. *Laudna*. Even in her mind, that one word was filled with sorrow and fatigue. *I can't—* Another shaky, broken gasp of breath.

What can I do, darling?

Imogen swallowed her tears and managed, *Stay with me. Please.*

Laudna wrapped her long, thin arms around Imogen, enveloping her in an embrace that felt like home. Her chin bobbed against the top of Imogen's shoulder as she nodded. *Of course, darling. Always.*

I won't have you stay—

I won't have you trapped in that place—

She has a name—

Imogen clutched at Laudna's arms as she fought against the sobs threatening to overtake her. *Thank you for defendin' me, for fightin' for me.*

Laudna merely held her tighter.

It was terrifyin' bein' inside that thing. Imogen shook her head. *Havin' it inside me?* Another shake of her head. She went to speak, but the feelings from earlier crushed down on her like the darkness she'd been trapped in.

Spindly fingers carded through her tangled and filthy lavender hair and tucked loose strands behind Imogen's ear. Then, Laudna rubbed slow, gentle circles over Imogen's back while her other hand clutched Imogen's bicep.

Imogen took a shuddering breath. *That storm inside me,* she continued, *mutated. It overwhelmed me and I fell into darkness almost like when I would drop into my dreams. Everythin' around me shifted and I descended head-first into a roilin' storm of vertigo.*

Imogen glanced back at Laudna whose expression was soft and scared, yet she continued those slow, soothing circles between her shoulder blades.

The chamber swirled and twisted into nothin' before it stretched and expanded like...taffy. Like my dreams, I was pulled backward through the floor into shadow, yet I knew my body was still standin'. Her hands trembled. *You all disappeared into faceless shadow which melded with the endless spinnin', amorphous room.*

Imogen shook a clenched fist in front of her chest, and her next words were a broken sob. "I could feel Predathos overtake me. I could feel—I could feel myself disappearin'."

"Imogen..."

"For a moment—" Imogen's brows rose in almost a grimace. She took a trembling breath and tried again. "For a moment—" She bit her lip and shook her head repeatedly. "—I was gone."

It feels like if that storm catches me, I'll be gone.

Just—

"Just—"

—gone.

"—gone."

Imogen's mouth and mind seemed to say that last word at the same time.

She placed both hands on Laudna's shoulders, clutching her so tightly her nails sank into thin skin as if her hold would prevent Laudna from disappearing. "And you—Predathos erased you." Tears streamed down her face now. "I couldn't—I had no memory of you, Laudna. Every part of you that fills my mind—your music, your melody of thoughts, your blue dawn quiet—it was...*gone*.

"For just a moment, I knew what life was like without you—if I'd never met you—and I don't want to experience that ever again." She inhaled shakily, torn and cracked lips a hairs breadth apart. "There was nothin' in there. I was alone and trapped with this insatiable hunger to feed." A pause gaped between them before she muttered, "I felt like a monster."

Laudna tilted her head, big, dark eyes filled with a deep, sad love. "I tried to reach you in there. I tried to...remind you." She brushed her thumbs in gentle motions across the crest of Imogen's cheeks and whispered, "May I?" Laudna glanced at Imogen's head; she wanted permission.

Imogen nodded and breathed, “Always.”

Laudna’s thoughts, dark and musical, drifted past Imogen’s mental barriers. Within the soaring, eerie melody, feelings took form in the shape of memories.

She saw the plains of Gelvaan, high grass weaving in the breeze and horses grazing in the background, Laudna’s hand in hers. The next memory flashed and Imogen saw them together in their little cabin in the woods. Dark green trees, moss, the scent of petrichor, and a comforting sense of peace washed through Imogen.

Another flash.

The moss-covered forests morphed into the little bedroom they shared at Zhudanna’s—into countless nights sleeping close, Laudna’s quiet words calming Imogen down from her dream-induced panics.

Then, her mind flashed again and Imogen was entering the Dreamscape Theater with Bells Hells.

Endless memories of her and Laudna swirled through Imogen’s mind, reliving their adventures from the last two years, and an overwhelming feeling of desperation and love spread through her.

Then, Laudna’s voice—distant, muffled—echoed, *I know you’re in there. Remember who you are. You’ve got this.*

Imogen’s own memories nearly shoved Laudna out—flashing images accompanied by a distant warbling sound.

Control it! Laudna yelled.

But Imogen hadn’t heard language, hadn’t heard her love’s voice.

You’re very capable.

There hadn’t been words, just noise, and she’d instinctually batted them away. Those lights, unfamiliar to her in the moment, had glowed as if her friends had been calling out to her, beckoning her home.

And then they’d vanished and Imogen had been tossed into the maelstrom of that storm.

Imogen blinked and pulled away from their overlapping memories, untangling their entwined thoughts.

That storm, that static which had filled her mind left Imogen reeling. Her fingers kneaded Laudna’s skin as she reached out with her mind, searching for that melody once more.

“I’ve missed you,” Imogen whispered breathlessly. “I’ve missed your music, your quiet.” She shook her head. “Predathos was so…loud, so terrifyin’.”

Laudna’s melody ribboned around Imogen’s senses, placating her fears with the comforting familiarity of her sound. She kissed Imogen’s forehead just below the gem of her circlet. “I’m so proud of you, Imogen,” she whispered. “You fought a god eater and did not let it win.

She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong—

“I know how hard it is not to give in, and I know how tired you are, but I’m proud you’re continuing to fight when right now it would be easiest to give up.”

She was tired of fighting, tired of losing people, tired of having to be strong—

"Soon," Laudna breathed, pulling Imogen into a cool embrace, "you can rest, darling."

Tears trailed down Imogen's cheeks and she sniffed as she clutched Laudna. "Laudna," she breathed, the word hardly more than air, "I'm scared."

Laudna kissed her temple as black stained her own cheeks. "Me too, darling."

"I don't—I don't wanna die."

"We're going to do everything in our power to make sure that doesn't happen."

I won't have you stay. I won't have you trapped there.

Laudna cupped Imogen's face in her thin hands and stared into her watery eyes. "You still reserve the right to change your mind—"

"Up until the very bitter last moment," Imogen finished, nodding slightly. She closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek. "I remember."

"I won't lose you," Laudna whispered. "Not if I can help it."

Imogen didn't bother wiping away the next tear that fell. "I don't wanna die, but—"

"No," Laudna said with a shake of her head. "Now you sound like me." She took Imogen's hands in hers. "You said before that if it came down to it, if there was no other option, you'd step up." Laudna nodded fervently. "You did that, Imogen. You stepped up. You took on Predathos. Now it's only a matter of when to let it go."

"We have a plan," Laudna continued. "The gods get a choice," she chuckled dryly, "which is certainly more than any of us have ever received." She placed a gentle hand against Imogen's sternum—against the mote of the God Eater—and said softly, "Either way, Predathos will not harm us, and as long as it's within you, the gods cannot touch you."

You are anathema to them.

"They're scared of it—of you. This could be our only bargaining chip."

I don't know if I want to save gods that don't love me—

I don't want to kill the gods—

I don't want them to be eaten—

You are anathema to them—

Imogen sucked in a rattling breath—

How do we know that you have the best interests of Exandria's gods in mind—

If you do indeed carry Ruidusborn among you, what assurances do we have that you are not yourselves deep-set allies of Ludinus looking to unravel and carry upon everything we've discussed here to the enemy—

—and broke down.

She was so *tired*—tired of being rejected, tired of being seen as something dangerous, tired of her existence being spat upon.

I don't know if I want to save gods that don't love me.

She was so fucking tired of seeing that fucking *look* in people's eyes—that look of instant distrust and wariness and prejudiced *disdain*.

“How did you survive the hate for thirty years?” Imogen asked softly. “The weight of their prejudice is so...heavy. It’s oppressive.” She clenched a fist and shook it in front of her chest. “It’s like they’re squeezin’ my chest; I can’t breathe.”

Laudna tilted her head pensively. After a moment, she said slowly, “People can be awful, and we don’t need more of that in this world.” She gave a sad smile. “Few know the violence it took for me to become this gentle.”

Imogen’s heart bled at those words, but she knew them to be true—*hated* how true they were.

The worst thing that’s ever happened to me has already happened.

Laudna nodded, eyes trained on some section of sky above them. “This life can be filled with ghastly people and horrid hearts, so find something good and hold onto it.” Laudna squeezed Imogen’s hand and glanced at her with that tender smile. “It’s harder to be overcome by the darkness of the world when you’re surrounded by light.”

Imogen slid her weight onto her hip and curled up on the rocky shore. She wrapped lightning-wreathed arms around Laudna’s waist and pulled her flush against her side, resting her head against her shoulder. “I love you,” she breathed.

Laudna kissed Imogen’s hair and whispered, “I love you, too.”

Imogen thought about the day ahead—of the conversations and negotiations which would determine the fate of Exandria and how she wasn’t ready at all.

“From the day I met you, Laudna,” Imogen whispered, “you’ve been the good in my life, the blue dawn after a starless night, the peace despite the chaos.” She lifted her head from Laudna’s shoulder to look into her eyes. “I’m terrified of what’s to come,” she whispered, throat bobbing. “Will you stay next to me?”

Laudna planted a kiss on Imogen’s cheek and whispered against her skin, “I don’t plan on ever letting you go, darling.”

I will not let you go.

I won’t let go.

Imogen sat up and captured Laudna’s face between her lightning-marked hands and guided their lips together. It was a soft, slow kiss, but Imogen settled into the deepness of it, savoring Laudna’s feel against her mouth. A hunger bubbled within her—a desperation for Laudna that rivaled even that of the God Eater. Imogen couldn’t get enough of Laudna as her hands roamed up and down the latter’s body, searching, feeling, *wanting*.

More than anything, Imogen wanted Laudna within reach. She wanted to grasp that immaterial tether which bonded their souls and wrap herself within that silver thread until they were one. She wanted to be near Laudna, touching her. She wanted to thread their fingers together so Imogen could hold her close and press her cool hand against her heart.

Laudna kissed her back with an equal fervor which was laced with desperation. Her hands grasped Imogen’s hips, and as she sealed her mouth with another kiss, Laudna breathed, *I will not lose you again. I can’t lose you again. We have that cottage waiting for us.*

After several more moments of slower, gentler kisses, Imogen rested her forehead against Laudna's and cupped the base of her nape with a hand, grazing her fingertips along cool skin. *I want nothin' more,* she whispered.

I don't know what the outcome of today will be, Laudna said, *but I will fucking fight like hell to hold onto this good thing I've found.*

Imogen managed a small smile. "Honey, I don't plan on ever lettin' you go."

Laudna barked a laugh at the quoted words. "I would follow you anywhere," she began, "but I would like to follow you home." She shook her head. "Since the day I followed you out of Gelvaan, chasing your stream of lavender hair like a strange road, I've been running home." Laudna grasped Imogen's hands. "I would run for an eternity as long as it led me back to you."

"Well," Imogen said with a low sigh, "I'm tired of runnin'." She placed a palm against Laudna's cheek. "After this, I don't plan on runnin' anymore." She smirked and nudged Laudna with a shoulder. "I never have to run when I'm with you; you're peace and safety and cool, quiet dark. You're the home I seek safety in, Laudna."

Imogen leaned forward and pressed one more kiss to Laudna's lips, lingering for a few heartbeats before pulling away. "I love you, Laud," she said almost breathlessly.

Laudna smiled gently. "I love you, my darling Imogen." She held out a hand for Imogen to take and then inclined her chin toward the armies gathered in the distance. "Together?" she whispered.

Imogen took a deep breath, steeled herself, and nodded. "Always."

A warm hand stole around Laudna's elbow as Imogen turned her and pushed up to press a soft kiss against Laudna's lips. The latter savored the contact, and though they were in the middle of Vasselheim's city courtyard, Laudna only pulled Imogen closer.

She'd almost lost her multiple times in the past 24 hours, so Laudna wasn't too keen to let go.

Eventually, Imogen pulled away, a hesitancy and stiffness to her movements. She curled her fingers down Laudna's jaw and whispered, "I'm gonna head back and take a bath."

Laudna cupped the small of her waist and almost protested at the thought of Imogen's warm, comforting presence vanishing from her side. "Would you like me to join you, darling?" she asked instead. "I don't need to hang around and chat with the Mighty Nein."

Imogen licked her lips and shook her head. "No. No, that's alright." She took a shaky breath and then added a little softer, "I think—I think I need a little time alone."

After everything, Laudna wasn't surprised in the least. She nodded. "Of course. I understand." She kissed Imogen again. "I'll let you know when I'm on my way back, my love."

Though Imogen nodded, her eyes were distant. She took a step back as if she were in a daze, and that small oddity almost had Laudna ignoring Imogen's wishes for solidarity. She reached out a hand to steady her, but Imogen righted herself.

"I'm alright," she muttered, unfocused gaze still concentrated at Laudna's torso instead of meeting her concerned stare.

Laudna bent forward, head titled to try and peer into Imogen's eyes. "Are you sure, darling?"

Still, those purple irises did not focus, yet Imogen nodded again. "Yeah," she breathed. "I'm just tired."

"I'd be more worried if you weren't," Laudna said with a forced laugh. Her half-smile faded and she leaned down to kiss Imogen once more.

Imogen inhaled, tired eyes closing at Laudna's touch, but for a moment, she seemed to come alive and reciprocated the kiss with more fervor than before.

For just a moment, Laudna's worry eased.

When they parted, she inclined her chin toward the outskirts of the courtyard. "Go on, darling. Take some time. I'll be back soon."

Imogen nodded once more and turned to leave, but Laudna touched three fingers to her wrist. "I love you."

Imogen slid her hand up and grasped Laudna's fingers. At last, those amethyst eyes met Laudna's gaze and the faintest, tired smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "I love you, Laud."

Then, Imogen walked away and Laudna let her.

Laudna stayed talking with the Mighty Nein longer than anticipated because the day's events had sobered even bubbly Jester's mood; she'd actually enjoyed the conversations and lost track of time.

When she did make her graceful exit, Laudna sent a message ahead. “I’m on my way back, my love. Be there in a few minutes.”

She waited for that sweet, slow drawl to fill her head, but as the moments passed, no response came. Laudna halted in the middle of Vasselheim’s courtyard and waited again.

Still, nothing.

“Are you alright, darling?” she tried again, attempting to keep calm. Her black-tipped fingers twitched and a tendril of dread slithered down her core. “Imogen?” her voice broke on the word.

Only silence greeted her.

Then, she blinked and picked up her pace back to their tent on the outskirts of the courtyard. Her thoughts raced faster than her feet moved, and then Laudna was running—running full speed on sore bones and achy joints, yet she only pushed harder.

Faster, faster, faster—

“Imogen?” Laudna ducked under the cloth flap and into the large tent, Imogen’s name a broken pant in her lungs. “Imogen? Darling?”

She poked her head around the linen wall dividing the main room from the bathing section and paused at the makeshift doorway.

Imogen, wet hair cascading down her back and shoulders in dark lavender waves, stood facing the corner of the room away from Laudna, naked and unnaturally still. Her hands were raised out in front of her, palms up and head lowered.

In the lantern light with Imogen’s bare skin exposed, her lightning marks and freckles almost glowed, but—

Laudna’s heart stuttered.

The scars mapped along her flesh were brutal, and for the first time, extremely visible. “Imogen?” Laudna said softly.

She did not move.

Laudna crept closer, moving slowly despite how her blood began to pound in her ears. She reached out a hand and caressed feather-light fingers across the curve of Imogen’s hip, nails grazing gently over soft skin.

Imogen sucked in air as though she’d been holding her breath for too long, and a shudder went through her. She lifted her chin and amethyst eyes landed on Laudna, but they did not see her; they were distant and unfocused.

Laudna stared at the horrible scar indented below her hand, and pieces of the past flashed through her.

Imogen’s limp body—

Tattered and bloodstained blue cloth—

Mauled skin—

Angry gouges and missing flesh—

Claw marks—

Faint, sparse indentations remained as a reminder of Extovass's deadly claws across Imogen's hip.

Laudna drew in a sharp breath and still Imogen did not focus. Whatever her thoughts were, whatever she was feeling, the dissociation needed to not break had a hold on her. So Laudna curled gentle hands over Imogen's open palms and hoped the contact would keep her afloat in the midst of whatever ocean of memories threatened to drag her under.

She glanced at the rest of Imogen, now completely exposed before her. She knew her body—*had* known her body like the back of her hand—but since their first night in Essek's house completely alone, completely bare, they'd been through hell and back.

Some scars Laudna recognized, though.

She raised a thin hand and tucked wet strands behind Imogen's ear. The pads of her fingers grazed against small gouges in Imogen's temple, just hidden by her hairline where that Slither had bit into her head.

Her hand moved lower until her fingers came to rest along the outside of Imogen's shoulder. At one point in time, that shoulder had looked like she'd gotten her arm stuck in a meat grinder. Now, faint scars adorned Imogen's body like jewelry. Even bits of her purple lightning marks had been permanently marred from the damage.

Just below her collarbone, Laudna traced the raised, jagged scar where Otohan had pierced Imogen's flesh—

Sprays of blood—

A flash of purple and pink lightning—

Mists of red—

Imogen's choked-off scream—

Laudna blinked and turned her face from the memory. Imogen's body was a map of memories. Her skin was a reminder of all she'd gone through, all she'd survived—and that one time she didn't.

Laudna rubbed a thumb along Imogen's forehead, just at her hairline, where a thin, pale scar lingered from her battle with Liliana.

She's not MOVING—

Fuck—gods—Imogen—

Cool, pale skin—

Black ichor—

Blood—

Burnt flesh—

Broken bones—

Imogen is dead—

After what Imogen had endured, Laudna couldn't believe she'd walked away with little more than a scar on her forehead. Physically, Imogen had healed, but Laudna wasn't sure how deeply the emotional scars ran. She glanced at the detached woman before her who struggled for

breath and could certainly guess how firmly those roots of trauma had planted themselves within Imogen's soul.

She cupped Imogen's face and brushed a thumb along her cheek, slowly, lightly, until those fans of lilac lashes blinked and a lightning-marked hand slid over Laudna's.

Laudna merely waited, holding her close.

Then, clear eyes found Laudna's and Imogen's brows scrunched together. "Laudna?"

"Hello, darling."

Imogen shook her head and blinked several times more. Her gaze seemed to find her bare body and wet hair which clung to her. "You were callin'," she breathed. Another shake of her head as if that would rid her of whatever fog clouded her thoughts. "I'm—sorry."

Laudna continued brushing her thumb in soothing circles across Imogen's cheek. "What's on your mind, darling?"

"A lot," she whispered simply.

"It's been a lot," Laudna whispered back.

Imogen inhaled as though she'd speak, but instead, she grasped Laudna's wrist with careful fingers and then tilted her hand back to kiss her palm.

Her lips were soft and warm against Laudna's cool skin, and the faintest trace of electric static crackled in the wake of the kiss.

"Did you bathe, darling?" Laudna inquired gently. Though there was an obvious answer, she simply wanted Imogen to keep talking. She wanted to ground her, keep her from floating away.

Imogen tilted her head but did not relent her touch against Laudna's wrist. Her fingers twitched—that anxious twitch which was usually followed by Imogen rubbing the pads of her fingers against her palms repetitively.

"Imogen." Laudna crooked a finger under her love's chin and guided her face toward hers. When Imogen's eyes raised to hers, she asked again, "Did you bathe, darling?"

"Yeah," Imogen exhaled. She closed her eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I did."

"Did you finish bathing?"

Imogen glanced down at herself and curled her toes once before settling back into that awkward stillness. She moved as though she was readjusting to her body, like she realized for the first time that her limbs were attached and her mind belonged to that amalgamation of flesh and bones. Imogen released another breath and whispered, "Uh, I—I don't know."

Laudna glanced past Imogen's shoulder toward the tub which hadn't yet been drained. The remnants of soap suds were scattered across the surface of brown, murky water.

She lowered her lips to the top of Imogen's head and planted a kiss on her wet hair, subtly smelling the lavender strands. The aroma of cheap shampoo laced with vanilla met her nose. Laudna pressed another kiss to her head, nodding.

When she pulled away, she said softly, "It looks to me like you cleaned and washed, but if you still feel dirty, I can help you wash again."

Imogen seemed to consider. Little muscles throughout her body shifted, almost like she squirmed, but then she shook her head. “No. I feel clean.” After a moment, she looked into Laudna’s eyes. “But thank you, Laudna.”

“Of course, darling.” Laudna caressed Imogen’s jaw and said tentatively, “What were you thinking about?”

Instead of speaking, Imogen simply stretched the skin on her abdomen with both hands, baring more lightning-marked skin to the lantern light. She leaned to let Laudna get a better look at the gouges in her torso which her long hair had hidden.

Laudna couldn’t help the small gasp which left her lips. She traced gentle fingers along the jagged grooves that spanned diagonally across Imogen’s torso from the bottom of her rib cage to the opposite hip. The wounds weren’t quite scars yet, but red, partially healed chunks of flesh which weren’t bleeding, but remained raw.

The marks—they looked like—

“Teeth marks,” Laudna breathed, eyes still fixated on the horrific wound pattern.

Imogen shrugged. “I was wonderin’ if you knew. There’s pieces of the fight I can’t recall.”

Laudna remembered every single moment.

MOVE—

There’s another hand—

WATCH OUT—

Stay back—

I can’t move—

IMOGEN—

She’s down—

PREDATHOS HAS HER—

ASHTON—

I’ll get her—

Your hammer—

Leave it—

I FUCKING HAVE HER, GO—

DORIAN—

IMOGEN—

HEAL HER—

“Predathos,” Laudna muttered, brushing the pads of her fingers over the gouges once more, “tore into you. It tried to consume you.”

Imogen nodded, though her eyes were blank, confused.

“You don’t remember that?”

“No,” she breathed.

Perhaps that was for the best.

Laudna gave a sad smile. “Ashton used their hammer to pry open Predathos’ jaw and they carried you out. When I couldn’t get to you, he stepped in and saved your life.”

The ghost of a smile graced Imogen’s lips. “I’ll have to remember to thank them.”

“For the time being,” Laudna cupped Imogen’s shoulders, “why don’t we focus on you, darling?”

Imogen moved suddenly, pressing close to Laudna, both hands capturing the sides of her face. Amethyst eyes peered up at her, concern lighting them. “Are you alright, Laudna? I didn’t even ask—You’ve been through so much—Are you hurtin’ at all?”

Laudna melted into her touch but managed a small smile. “I’m alright, darling. I fared better than you, I’m sorry to say. You almost died twice today, so I think it’s fair I’m a little more worried about you.”

Her eyes scanned Imogen’s body once more and smaller, more sparse scars were revealed as she soaked in the most minute details of her darling’s body. Laudna placed a cool hand over Imogen’s chest and skimmed three fingers down her sternum.

Imogen sucked in a trembling breath. Her heart pounded beneath Laudna’s palm.

“You’re my girlfriend, Laudna,” she breathed. “I think I’ll always worry just—”

Laudna’s black-tipped fingers grazed the scar Otohan had left in that final battle—the scar which remained after Imogen had barely scraped by alive.

“—a little…bit,” Imogen finished, breathless as Laudna’s hand settled there.

She could still envision the blade buried in Imogen’s flesh, see her love’s blood-soaked torso—

Imogen forced herself between Laudna and the blade, lightning sparking around her—

Scream Needle pierced Imogen’s sternum—

Imogen—

Run. Run, please—

I won’t be able to escape her—

A breathless groan—

Run—

You’re going to die—

Do it NOW—

A sickening squelch—

Wet, labored breaths—

Imogen’s tattered, bloody body cradled by broken rocks—

Laudna tore herself from that nightmare and curled her fingers down that scar.

Imogen gave a flat chuckle and placed her own hand over Laudna’s chest. “Hey, now we’re matchin’.”

Laudna’s heart cracked at those dull words which hid exhaustion and pain. She lowered her hand, took a ragged breath, and said softly, “Does it hurt?”

Imogen curled a hand over her chest where Laudna’s cool touch had been. “I think—I think the memory of it hurts more than the scarrin’.” She tilted her head in that way she did when

her thoughts grew louder. “I can feel her blade sometimes. I see it in my head, feel it pierce through me. Sometimes, I’m caught in that moment and I can’t escape.” Imogen gave a sad smile and shook her head. “But the scar itself doesn’t hurt.”

“Is that what you were thinking about?’

A shrug. “It’s been a storm,” Imogen said, gesturing vaguely at her head. A broken laugh broke from her. “I was kind of hopin’ I wouldn’t have to deal with storms anymore.”

“Well, you never have to deal with the storm alone.”

“I know.” Imogen nodded and pressed her hips against Laudna’s, arms wrapping around her waist. “I know.”

Laudna pulled Imogen into a hug, cradling her head against her shoulder. She planted another kiss on her hair and then rested the bottom of her chin on Imogen’s head. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“It’s kind of hard to describe,” Imogen whispered and clicked her tongue. “My thoughts have just been this storm of memories and feelings. I’ve been seeing flashes of the fight with Predathos, pieces of red emotion, whirls of blood and pain and death.” A shudder went through her. “I haven’t been able to shake it.”

Laudna inhaled to speak, but Imogen continued, so the former gladly closed her mouth to listen.

“Then when I came back here to bathe and I saw the extent of the...damage, I think that triggered somethin’.” Warm breath kissed Laudna’s shoulder as Imogen exhaled. “That storm roiled and expanded until my mind was nothin’ but visions of pain. I relived the fights against Otohan, heard Ishta screamin’ through the air, the burnin’ bite of its metal, felt teeth and claws and blades and magic tear through me again and again, fight after fight. It was like the events from the last few months bombarded me all at once and the sudden onslaught paralyzed me.”

She took a trembling breath and tightened her grip around Laudna’s waist. “I was drownin’. No matter how I tried to fight to the surface, those memories just shoved me under the tide again.” Imogen lifted her head and peered up at Laudna. “You’re my anchor, my tether. You ground me when I’m floatin’ away, and you keep me afloat when everythin’ threatens to suffocate me.”

Laudna rested her forehead against Imogen’s and whispered, “We’re that for each other, remember?”

Imogen’s forehead bobbed against hers as she nodded. “Thank you, Laudna,” she breathed.

“Always, darling.” Laudna kissed the tip of Imogen’s nose. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier to help pull you out.”

“You’ve got nothin’ to apologize for,” Imogen said. “I’m sorry I pulled away.”

“These last few days—these last few months—have been overwhelming. I don’t blame you for needing the safety of isolation. That’s how you used to cope when the noise got too loud. I understand.”

Imogen frowned. “Never from you, though. You’re never noisy, never painful.” She cupped the back of Laudna’s neck with a palm and pulled her close once more. “I could never tire of you or your thoughts,” she whispered. “They’re beautiful and peaceful. And you’re everythin’ to me.”

Laudna smiled and her chest swam with warmth. “I’ve never had anyone talk about me the way you do—with endless love and adoration—and it’s truly the most beautiful thing.”

“You’re beautiful,” Imogen breathed, brushing her lips against Laudna’s.

“You know,” Laudna exhaled, grazing her lips against Imogen’s bottom one, “I was right; you are Exandria’s savior.”

Imogen gave a muffled chuckle and slid both hands around Laudna’s nape. “Well, baby, you’re still mine.” She jutted her jaw out and captured Laudna’s mouth with hers, sealing in Laudna’s next words.

She tugged them toward the bed against the adjacent tent wall, but when she spun around to gently push Laudna down, the latter grasped her hips with both hands, halting her.

Laudna moved closer and Imogen’s breath hitched. She grinned at the want and adoration in her love’s beautiful violet eyes. Laudna lifted Imogen’s chin with a finger, savoring that all-consuming look in her gaze.

Imogen reached up to remove the pins from her hair, but Laudna stayed her hand.

“Keep it up,” she muttered, voice heavy. “I’m going to need it out of my face.”

An audible noise escaped Imogen’s throat, but she nodded and instead settled her hands over Laudna’s shoulders.

Laudna curved a hand around Imogen’s thigh and tugged her closer. “Are you sure you’re alright?” she whispered against her neck.

“You’re holdin’ me,” Imogen nearly panted. “I’m more than alright.”

“You’re still healing, my love. If anything hurts, we’ll stop.”

Imogen’s breath came faster, but she swallowed and mumbled, “You can never hurt me, Laudna.”

“But if it does, tell me and I’ll stop.”

Imogen shook her head. “Gods, please don’t stop.”

Laudna grinned at the flush of Imogen’s cheeks, the warmth of her skin, the beauty in her imperfections. She ran a thumb along the stretch marks adorning her thigh and then in one smooth motion, angled Imogen toward the bed.

“You’re no god,” Laudna breathed against her mouth, “but it’s my turn to worship you like one.”

Laudna pushed forward until their lips met, and Imogen’s fingers cradled around her nape as Laudna dipped forward. Her love trusted her completely because Imogen didn’t break away from the kiss when Laudna caught their weight with a hand as she guided them down.

Skin met clean linen, and with each kiss, each touch, Laudna took all her worry, all her anxieties, all her past fears, and turned them into nothing but love and devotion as she worshipped her darling Imogen.

Late morning Brussendar sun warmed Imogen's face as she dozed off and on listening to the summer breeze rustling the leaves. Shadows from the tree branches made light and dark mosaics against the still-dewy grass, and as Imogen leaned back in the hammock, open blue sky above her, she felt as though she might float away with the clouds.

Imogen closed her eyes and inhaled damp morning air, lemongrass, and gardenia. Her bare legs dangled over the side of the hammock, pale yellow skirt brushing over lightning-marked shins as the gentle breeze kissed tanned skin. Her sleeveless cropped top revealed more purple lightning streaking up her arms until the tip of one strike just barely caressed the bottom of her jaw.

The phantom feeling of Laudna kissing that mark sent a shiver down Imogen's spine and a smile bloomed upon her lips.

It had been a year since Imogen and Laudna settled into the little farmhouse nestled near the Cloven Peaks just beyond the Taloned Highlands, and only a bit more than that since Bells Hells had saved the gods, prevented a god eater from wreaking havoc in Exandria, and ran for their lives as a result of their actions.

An accord had been reached, but it was still tentative.

That would take time, but for now, Imogen was at peace. No running, no worrying, no fighting. At last, she could *breathe*.

Imogen inhaled deeply just to prove it to herself—to remind herself of what she finally had. Her world was quiet and her dreams were no longer tainted in red. Instead of storms, she saw her friends at night. In her dreams, they were together again.

Imogen lifted a hand and caught loose gardenia petals up in tendrils of her power. With a small movement of her fingers, she sent the pale petals dancing in the wind.

Soft, beautiful, haunting music seemed to intertwine with Imogen's lavender aura—a blue-dawn melody which Imogen knew better than her own heart.

A sound that felt like returning home.

Imogen lowered her mental walls to allow that melody to envelope her and wrap her soul in peaceful shadow.

Hello, my love, that wonderful voice whispered.

Imogen opened her eyes and grinned, nose scrunching. "Hi, honey," she replied softly.

Laudna stood before her, bare feet scrunched in the grass and dark red sundress blowing gently in the summer breeze. Her pale skin had actually taken on some pink from spending time outside—napping with Imogen in the hammock, mostly.

Imogen thought she was the most beautiful being she'd ever laid eyes on.

Her smile widened and she reached out her hands, beckoning Laudna closer. "Come 'ere," she said, light and love in her tone. "Join me, baby."

Laudna grasped Imogen's hands and the latter guided her into the dip of the hammock. It took no time before Laudna settled into her, leaning her cool cheek on Imogen's warm shoulder.

Imogen laced her fingers between Laudna's and pressed a kiss to the back of her pale hand.

“You didn’t wake me when you got up,” Laudna said, and it almost sounded like a whine.

Imogen shrugged. “Figured I’d let you sleep.”

Laudna tilted her head back and quirked a brow. “How did you sleep, darling?”

She kissed Laudna’s hand again. “Every night is a little bit better. After a decade of bein’ haunted by that storm, I know it’s gonna take some time before I get through the night consistently.”

“Nightmares?” Laudna inquired, peering up at her with those big, dark eyes.

“No,” Imogen breathed, and a part of her rejoiced to be able to say such a thing. “No nightmares.”

Laudna’s cheek brushed against Imogen’s shoulder as she nodded. “Good,” she whispered.

“What about you?” Imogen asked with a tilt of her head. “Anythin’ keepin’ you up at night?”

“Once in a while, of course,” Laudna said as her spindly fingers fiddled with the sheer material of Imogen’s skirt, “but I’m never more at peace than when I’m with you.”

Imogen leaned her cheek against the top of Laudna’s head. “Me too. Though that’s always been the case. From the moment I met you, you’ve done nothin’ but bring me peace. You’re like sittin’ alone in the forest.” She grinned. “Or like swayin’ in a hammock under the trees.”

Birds chirping in the distance took over the conversation as a comfortable silence fell. A silence that wasn’t really quiet since Laudna’s soothing music cradled Imogen’s thoughts with the delicacy of child’s hand.

For a while, Imogen let the warm breeze and Laudna’s cool presence guide her toward rest, the gentle rocking of the hammock lulling her to sleep.

It was beautiful. It was peaceful. It was perfect.

…

“Imogen?” Laudna’s voice tugged her out of sleep, the elegant tone to her voice slightly higher than usual.

“Hmm?” Imogen hummed, eyes still closed.

“Do you ever think about…getting married?”

Imogen opened her eyes and blinked the heaviness from them. She glanced at Laudna and then down at their hands cradled in her lap.

“Sure,” she said gently, lightly. “More so now—now that I feel like I can think about the future—our future. Because we have one now. Because we’re livin’ it.” She wrapped her other arm around Laudna’s shoulder and pulled her closer. “Has it been on your mind?”

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Laudna whispered with a small exhale.

Imogen straightened. “Because you want to get married?”

“Of course,” Laudna breathed, eyes wide. “I would marry you a thousand times if I could.”

Imogen let out a shaky breath and nodded.

“Do—” Laudna bit her lip. “Do you want to get married?”

She released another breath through her nose as she stared at Laudna. Then Imogen cupped the back of Laudna’s neck and tugged her mouth to hers. She kissed Laudna, slow and deep, once, twice, three times before Imogen breathed against her lips, “Yes.”

It was one word, but Imogen’s heart resounded through the love-thick tone.

Laudna kissed her again before she broke away. “Just so you know,” she said rather breathlessly, “that was not a proposal.” A laugh broke from Imogen. “When we do this,” Laudna said a little softer, “I would like to do it properly.”

“‘Course,” Imogen whispered with a half grin. She paused, considering Laudna’s words. “You said you can’t stop thinkin’ about it…”

Laudna nodded. “Yes.”

“How long have you been thinkin’ about it?”

Laudna turned and slid her legs over Imogen’s thighs and then cuddled into her, cool arms wrapping around her waist. “Well, darling, we both know I haven’t always exactly been the most optimistic about my future.”

“I’m aware, Ms. Dead End,” Imogen said with a raised brow.

“But,” Laudna continued with a nudge, “since reclaiming my body and mind, I’ve reclaimed my future, in a way.” She sighed. “Delilah was just the beginning. Little by little, I started to believe we’d survive—that we’d get to be happy.” She shrugged, a small smile on her lips which faded. “Then when I started to believe in an ‘after’, you began to sink into despair. All the stuff with Predathos and Ludinus and your mother—it was too much.”

Imogen grasped Laudna’s hand. “You never lost hope. There were many times you reminded me of our cottage. Times when I was so close to losing myself, yet you reminded me of who I was.”

“Our future together was the one thing I clung to. It was my light in the dark—*you* were my light in this dark uncertainty.” Laudna shook her head. “I’ve been unsure about a lot of things in my long life, but you I was always sure of. From the day I met you, I knew I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if you’d run from me, too.”

Imogen nudged Laudna back, a grin picking at the corner of her mouth. “I found something good and I held onto it.”

Laudna looked at Imogen with that tender smile she’d never tire of. Then, she said, “Since Lieve’tel, since binding my soul to yours, this future together finally feels *real*.” She held Imogen’s hands in hers. “I want to celebrate that. Us. Our future. Our lives.”

Imogen leaned forward and kissed her, causing Laudna’s melody to swell into a beautiful, haunting crescendo.

When Imogen pulled away, she whispered breathlessly, summer breeze carding through her hair, “Darlin’, I’d love nothin’ more.”

Imogen drank in the sun-dappled autumn air as she swayed in the hammock beneath the canopy of flaming orange leaves. A crisp breeze ruffled the hem of her oversized blue flannel, and goosebumps formed on her thighs below the edges of her white shorts. Instead of letting that sensation occupy her mind, Imogen focused on the gentle rocking and tried to push her anxieties to the side. She hadn't been this nervous—or excited—since she asked Laudna if she could kiss her, and today, they would promise forever to each other with another.

Imogen closed her eyes as a smile bloomed upon her lips. She tilted her head back and breathed deeply, the smell of fallen leaves reminding her of Laudna. Her nose scrunched and that soft, unburdened grin deepened at the thought of her love.

She searched for Laudna's mind, and as her power picked up scattered bits of that blue-dawn melody, Imogen found her way back home.

Mornin', baby, she whispered, a smile in her immaterial words.

Laudna's smooth voice floated to Imogen along that thread which bonded them. *It's late, darling. Are you just now waking up?*

Imogen chuckled. *No. No, I've been up for hours.*

I'm in the same boat, it seems. I slept terribly.

Me too.

Out of excitement, of course, Laudna clarified. *Well, all right, and nerves. But mostly excitement*.

Imogen bit her lip. Her next words were a whisper on the breeze. *I can't believe I get to marry you today*.

I've been having a hard time wrapping my head around that, Laudna said with an airy chuckle. A pregnant pause took over their connection before Laudna nearly whined, *I wish I could see you.*

The evening can't come soon enough, Imogen agreed.

Laudna's words practically spoke her vigorous head shake. *But not too soon because I have so much to do to get ready*.

Imogen stuck her toes in the grass and gave the hammock a push. *I can already see how beautiful you'll be*.

I'll see you in the grove for first looks this afternoon, darling.

Imogen grinned. *I can't wait*.

I love you, Laudna breathed.

And I love you.

As their connection went quiet, Imogen opened her eyes to a brown-skinned gnome dressed in pink pajamas leaning against the nearest tree with a mug of coffee in hand.

"Hi, sweetie," Deanna said with a soft smile.

"Howdy," Imogen replied with a grin. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long." She took a sip. "You seemed like you were preoccupied so I didn't want to interrupt."

Imogen shrugged. “Can’t see the bride, but there’s no rule about not talkin’ to her.” She patted the hammock and motioned Deanna over with her chin. “Sit with me.”

Deanna padded over, and as she put a hand on the edge of the hammock, Imogen waved her fingers and caught the mug in a telepathic wind.

She glanced up at Imogen, brows raised. “Oh, well, thank you.”

“So you have both hands,” Imogen said simply.

In one relatively smooth motion, Deanna pulled herself up and spun around so her back sank into the hammock. She sat there for a moment, shoulders pressed into her ears and a grimace wrinkling her face.

Imogen laughed and held out a hand, but Deanna ignored it.

“Oh, I got this, babygirl,” she huffed, wrestling herself into a more dignified sitting position. Once situated, Deanna wiggled her fingers for the mug and the ceramic cup floated into her waiting hands. “Breakfast is waiting in the house,” her muffled voice said from behind the rim. “Eggs, toast, sausage and bacon, sliced apples and pears, and orange juice.”

Imogen gaped. “You didn’t have to make us all breakfast, Deanna.”

“Of course I did! It’s your wedding day.” She wiggled her shoulders. “Besides, I’ve been up since dawn and I needed something to do.” She glanced up at Imogen and patted her thigh. “I like taking care of people.”

Though Imogen heard the words, she didn’t fully comprehend them because her mind kept replaying something Deanna had said. *It’s your wedding day*.

Today was her wedding day. Today was her *wedding* day.

She was getting married today.

Soon, Laudna would be her *wife*.

“I’m gettin’ married today,” she breathed.

Deanna’s small hand curled around Imogen’s. “You’re getting married today.”

Imogen exhaled and sank into the hammock. “Oh, gods, I’m gettin’ married today.”

“You’ll be just fine.”

Imogen inhaled slowly, deeply, and then exhaled all her anxieties out. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Deanna leaned forward. “Do you know what might help, though?” she whispered. Imogen quirked a brow. “A hearty breakfast,” Deanna said with a wink. She hopped off the hammock and motioned for Imogen to follow. “Come on, babygirl.”

…

The farmhouse kitchen was alight with golden autumn sun as Imogen walked in where her friends were eating and chatting. Laughter, love, and light filled the space, and the moment

was enough to strike Imogen still with awe. The people she loved were here for her. They were here *for her*. To watch her marry her soulmate.

Deanna knocked Imogen from her reverie as she nudged her thigh with an elbow and passed the threshold into the kitchen.

Orym's face lit up as he spotted Imogen from across the table. He raised his half full glass of orange juice and shouted, "Hey, it's the bride-to-be!"

Next to him, Dorian turned, blue skin like the bright sky beyond. He gave a small nod and a smile. "Imogen."

"Mornin', Dorian," she said softly, returning the smile. She approached the table and met the gaze of the last friend: FRIDA.

In lieu of their emerald green trench coat, they wore the same shade in a set of pajamas. They stood from their seat to greet Imogen, feminine face practically smiling.

Imogen stood on her tip-toes and threw her arms around their neck for a hug. "It's so good to see you, FRIDA," she whispered.

A gentle metal hand patted her back and her laughter, soft and carefree, played from them. "I am honored to be here for you today, Ms. Temult," they said, their voice equally as tender as their touch.

Imogen pulled away and glanced at FRIDA's empty plate. "Have you eaten anything?"

"I am okay."

She exhaled and tilted her head. "Nonsense." She searched one of the upper cabinets and came away with a small bag of gems. She handed the pouch to FRIDA and said, "Pick as many as you'd like. Laudna and I save these just for our Aeormaton friends."

They pulled out a small bit of ruby and seemed to indulge in the precious stone. They glanced at Imogen as she sat down next to them. "Thank you."

She placed a hand on their shoulder and smiled. "Everyone should feel welcome here."

"I will always feel welcome wherever you are, Ms. Temult."

As Imogen settled in, Deanna filled her plate with delicious smelling foods.

"Thank you," Imogen said softly and scooped up a bit of egg.

Orym crunched on an apple slice. "So, how are you feeling?"

Imogen chewed and swallowed, lightning-scarred hands rubbing restlessly over the top of her thighs. She took a breath and glanced up. "Nervous, but excited."

Dorian placed a gentle hand on Imogen's shoulder, blue eyes brilliant in the sunlight. "You know, when I get nervous sometimes, I hum a little tune and that helps ease my anxieties." He closed his eyes and began to hum a beautiful, calming melody. The way the notes flowed felt like a warm summer breeze within her soul, and as Dorian continued to hum, Imogen could have sworn flower petals danced around her, intertwining with the smell of fallen leaves.

Dorian squeezed her shoulder and smiled tenderly. "Hold onto that melody when you need it."

Imogen pulled Dorian into a hug. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

He nodded.

Orym came around the corner of the table and leaned his chin on Dorian's tricep. He placed his smaller hand over Dorian's which still rested on Imogen's shoulder, and little violets bloomed between his fingers and intertwined with strands of long, lavender hair.

Imogen's brows pursed and she gave Orym a slanted smile.

He reciprocated the smile, eyes twinkling. "For luck," he whispered.

FRIDA loomed over the trio, Deanna by their knee, and placed a small, polished amethyst gem in Imogen's lightning-marked palm.

From their chest, a memory from years ago played, and Imogen's soft, breathy voice whispered, *Laudna's beautifully scary*.

FRIDA's eyes almost seemed to sparkle. "For love."

...

Makeup complete and hair half-done, Imogen burst from the house and sprinted barefoot across the grass. The afternoon sun had turned golden, heralding the beautiful autumn sunset the evening was sure to bring. As she ran, laughter bubbled in her chest and a smile blossomed upon her lips.

The smack of bare feet on straw-scattered concrete announced her arrival within the stables, but Imogen didn't stop until she reached the last stall on the left. She slipped inside the stall door and almost turned right into the nose of a Palomino.

Imogen patted the horse's neck. "Hi, girl," she whispered, closing her eyes and pressing her face against Flora's jaw. She breathed her in, her left hand absentmindedly stroking Flora's mane. "You're the only friend I haven't seen yet today."

Flora nuzzled her arm and as her muzzle met Imogen's sleeve, Imogen pressed three kisses to the bridge of her nose. Flora exhaled and stepped closer, dark eyes bright.

"Guess what?" Imogen whispered as she ran a hand down the bridge of Flora's nose. "Today's my weddin' day." Her heart leapt at those words and she grinned.

Flora shook her mane, shoulder muscles rippling at Imogen's light touch.

"I'm gettin' married today." Imogen stepped close and wrapped her arms around Flora's neck. She inhaled slowly and then breathed, nearly in disbelief, "I'm gettin' married today."

A force, almost like a finger tapping on her mind, pressed against Imogen's mental walls. She straightened. The power felt…familiar.

Imogen whirled when a soft knock against wood broke the silence and tension.

Liliana stood just outside the stall, hand still raised from the knock and a timid smile lighting her aged face. "Sorry," she grimaced, "I didn't mean to scare you."

Imogen blinked. "Mama."

Her mother, whose light lavender hair had been plaited carefully down her back, smoothed the front of her sky-blue dress and brown cardigan.

"You came," Imogen breathed.

"I was surprised but grateful to receive your invitation." She opened her arms and tilted her head. "May I?"

Imogen returned the smile with a small one of her own, and after a moment, she nodded.

Liliana embraced Imogen, the smell of open fields, fresh bread, and tea washing over the latter. Her hug was strong and warm and comforting. It was the embrace of a mother—one Imogen had never fully felt before.

Imogen only let herself soak in the touch for a moment before she pulled away.

Liliana folded her hands in front of her and glanced at Imogen's appearance before looking into her eyes. "You look beautiful," she said softly.

The corner of Imogen's mouth quirked. "Thank you, Mama."

"I know I'm here pretty early, but I wanted the chance to talk to you before you got caught up in the chaos."

"How'd you find me?"

Liliana tapped her temple. *Searched for you*.

Imogen cocked her head. "Lucky you I don't have my circlet on yet."

Liliana took a breath and glanced away. She seemed to be chewing on the inside of her cheek.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

She exhaled, lighting-marked fingers fidgeting. After a moment, she looked into Imogen's eyes. "There's someone else here to see you."

Imogen cocked her head as Liliana gestured toward the barn opening.

Relvin wandered into view, wide-brimmed hat clutched in one hand while the other slicked his brown hair out of his face. Streaks of white were beginning to show on his beard, along with shorter cropped portions on the side of his head.

His strong, handsome features were accentuated by the tan of his skin, and he'd aged since Imogen last saw him, but he looked healthy. Almost...happy. His eyes were brighter and there seemed to be less weight in his gaze.

Relvin wore a clean linen collared shirt, a pair of brown trousers, and shiny brown boots, and after fidgeting with the brim of his hat, dark eyes flitting around the small space, his stare met Imogen's.

When he reached them, Relvin put a hand on the small of Liliana's back and nodded at Imogen.

"Hi, Daddy," Imogen breathed.

His throat bobbed, jaw muscles clenching and unclenching. Then, he muttered softly, gently, "You look wonderful." The stiffness and hesitancy in his drawl spoke volumes.

Imogen nodded. "Thank you."

She hadn't seen him since Bells Hells visited Gelvaan, and though she'd grown and changed, the tension between them was still as prevalent as ever.

Relvin's throat bobbed, but before speaking again, a nasally breath caught his attention. He slipped past Imogen into the stall, and for a moment, he simply stared at Flora. Then, he placed a hand on the bridge of her nose and whispered, "Hi, girl." Flora nudged Relvin's hand and he chuckled. "It's been a while."

Imogen cleared her throat. "Thank you," she said slowly, "for takin' care of her while I was...gone."

He scratched under her muzzle and nodded. "She was your only friend for a long while." His throat bobbed again and he whispered over his shoulder, "It was the very least I could do."

There were so many unspoken words in his tone, yet Relvin didn't voice any of them. This time, though, Imogen could control what she did and didn't hear from his mind; she kept that tendril of power contained.

Imogen nodded, gaze lowered. After a moment, she ran her hand down Flora's nose and gave a breathy chuckle. "We were always better with horses than people."

Relvin looked away, jaw muscles feathering. Then, he whispered gruffly, "I shouldn't have been better with horses than *you*." He sniffed and placed his hat on his head, hiding his eyes in the brim's shadow.

Imogen's expression softened. She faced Relvin and tilted his hat back so she could stare up into his pained eyes. "I forgive you, Daddy," she whispered. "I forgave you a long time ago."

Something in his gaze hardened and he pulled away.

Such a familiar and heartbreaking thing for him to do.

He placed both hands on his hips and hung his head. "I don't deserve it."

"No," Imogen said simply, "maybe you don't." She tapped an index finger against her chest. "But I do. Laudna does. The woman I *love*, does. I forgave you for my sake—for my partner's sake." She patted the side of Flora's neck and sighed. "I was tired of runnin' from my past, and forgivin' you helped me move on."

Relvin ran a hand over his beard and nodded.

Imogen placed her palm against his scruffy jaw. "What I said to you in that message years ago is still true; I love you, Daddy. No matter what."

Relvin squeezed her hand, his rough callouses scraping along her knuckles. In his low, raspy drawl, he muttered, "I'm sorry, babygirl."

She gave a small shrug and led Relvin out of Flora's stall and toward Liliana. "You're here now," Imogen whispered.

He turned, suddenly, both hands clutching the brim of his hat once more. "I'm...grateful," he began, gaze lowered, "that I could be here today—that you wanted me here today—after not bein' there for you as I should have."

Imogen pressed a kiss to Relvin's cheek. "It's good to see you, Daddy." She smiled softly at Liliana. "You too, Mama."

She led them out of the barn and motioned toward the field. “Please, make yourself at home. There are chairs set out along with refreshments. Someone will lead everyone to the ceremony when it’s time.”

Liliana kissed Imogen’s cheek and gave her hand one last squeeze.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Imogen said, taking a couple steps backward toward the house, “there’s somethin’ I need to ask someone.”

...

Imogen halted outside the door. She bit her lip, contemplating, and then rapped a knuckle against the wood grain.

“It’s open,” Orym’s muffled voice said through the door.

Imogen grasped the worn, bronze knob and the door creaked open into a golden ray of light, dust particles floating in the air of the old room.

Orym already wore his dark amethyst suit, matching vest done up, and trousers tucked into tall, shiny black boots. He had his well-loved green sashes around his waist, the embroidered white flowers almost seeming to blow in an immaterial wind. The pocket square on his left breast matched the green of his sashes, and two white orchids were pinned just adjacent.

He stood in front of a mirror, deft fingers pinning a purple lightning bolt to his left lapel just below the flowers.

“Orym,” Imogen said softly.

The halfling turned, eyes brighter than she’d seen in a long time. “Yeah?”

She grinned, remembering how he’d looked at breakfast with his chin on Dorian’s arm. How happy and content he’d looked. She tilted her head. “You look so handsome.”

He smiled back. “And you are beautiful, Imogen.”

“I’m a nervous wreck.” Her chuckle came out more anxious than she meant.

Orym walked up to her, dark brown curls still wet, and smiled. “You get to marry the woman you love today.” He shrugged. “Nerves are normal. I nearly vomited on my wedding day.”

Imogen grimaced. “How did you, you know, not do that?”

“I focused on him. Only him. I didn’t think about the people there or what needed to be perfect. Once I saw Will, the rest of the world faded away.” Orym placed a hand on Imogen’s hip. “All that matters today, is you two. Today is a declaration of your love to each other. Not to me, not to Bells Hells, not to the guests—between you and Laudna. Nothing outside of her matters.”

Imogen took a deep breath and nodded. “You’re right.”

He smirked. “That happens sometimes.”

“Orym—” Imogen shook her head. “I actually came in here to ask a favor of you.”

“Anything.”

She bit her lip and then exhaled slowly. “Would you—would you walk me down the aisle today?”

His eyes widened. “Me?”

She nodded, grinning.

“You don’t want your dad...?”

Imogen shook her head. “No. I’d be honored if you’d be the man to walk me down the aisle.”

Orym’s brows furrowed in contemplation. After a moment, he sighed and glanced up at Imogen, a tender smile picking at the corners of his mouth. He stepped forward and took Imogen’s hands in his little ones. “Imogen Temult,” he whispered, “I would be honored to walk you down the aisle.”

Imogen crouched down and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you,” she whispered in his pointed ear.

Orym’s damp curls tickled her ear as he whispered back, “Always.”

After a moment, he pulled away and swatted at Imogen’s thighs. “Now go, go!” he chuckled, shooing her out the door. “You’ve got a wedding to get dressed for!”

…

Imogen touched a hand to her chest as she absorbed her reflection. Beneath her lightning-marked hand, layers of white chiffon spread across her chest, flowing almost like a mantle of sheer material below her shoulders. Purple, iridescent lightning marks glowed through the sheer white sleeves which ran the length of Imogen’s arms down to her middle fingers. From her chest, the body of the dress descended in layers of white chiffon into waves of beautiful lavender, with translucent blue folded between to deepen the purple at the bottom.

Imogen ran a hand down the bodice, fingertips grazing white cloth orchids delicately sewn into the dress, and as her touch continued down, the orchids transitioned into stems of lilacs weaved along waves of deepening lavender material.

Deanna finished sewing one last orchid onto the dress and then stepped back, curls everywhere and pins pinched between her teeth. She cocked her head, eyes roving up and down Imogen’s figure.

Imogen waited.

At last, Deanna plucked the pins from her mouth and declared, “That’s what it was missing.” Her shoulders relaxed and a soft smile blossomed on her lips. “You look heavenly.”

Imogen beamed. “Thank you.” She took Deanna’s hands. “And thank you so much. This dress is absolutely beautiful.”

Deanna patted her cheek. “Of course, honey.”

Orym pushed off the door frame from where he'd been leaning and approached. "Here." He took strands of Imogen's curled lavender hair and weaved orchids and violets through to match the little vines he'd spread that morning.

Imogen didn't think she could smile any more. "Perfect."

"Now"—Deanna clapped her hands— "it's time for first looks! Come on, bridal party, let's move!"

Orym stuck his head out the door and called down the hall, "Babe, get FRIDA. We've got to get to the grove!"

Like a puppy peeking around a corner, FRIDA's head shot out from behind the kitchen doorframe, and then the rest of their body followed. "I've never been to a wedding," they said, animated voice soft. "This is exciting." They straightened their lilac tie and fixed the collar of their dark purple suit.

Imogen emerged from the room and placed a hand on their forearm. She smiled up at them. "I'm thankful you could be here."

FRIDA offered their elbow, which Imogen accepted with a scrunch of her nose, and let them lead her out into the golden afternoon.

…

An early golden sunset dappled the grove in rays of beautiful autumn light, and Imogen stood with her eyes closed, soaking in the warmth. The canopy rustled in the gentle breeze and an aroma of autumn leaves, lemongrass, hay, and orchids washed over her.

For a moment, Imogen simply existed in that peace, focusing on the autumn sun which kissed her cheek.

Then, a voice like the blue dawn slipped into her mind. *Hello, darling*.

Chill bumps erupted along her arms at the almost purr of Laudna's whisper. Imogen grinned. *Hi, honey.*

That haunting orchestra of beautiful, familiar melody filled Imogen's mind and set her racing thoughts at ease.

It was musical. It wasn't painful like everybody else.

From the moment they met, that sentiment had rung true; Laudna was peace.

Your mind was so…beautiful.

Your mind is so beautiful, Imogen whispered gently. *And I can't wait to see your beautiful face.*

*Turn around, darlin*g.

Imogen opened her eyes. Her heart pounded in her ears and her hands shook, but she simply drew those feelings in and let them pass over her. She glanced over her shoulder, head turning first before her body followed, and literally lost her breath at the sight before her.

Laudna's dress seemed to be made of layers of deep, blood red fabric adorned with tendrils of black lace. The base of the strapless bodice was the same red, but more black lace and beadwork decorated the surface.

Imogen took a stunned step forward, jaw agape.

As she neared, the details of Laudna's dress materialized. Thorned roses, tendrils of shadow, and what appeared to be streaking bolts of lightning spread from the bodice, moving up Laudna's chest, across her shoulders, and down her arms in sheer black tulle.

And each stitched and beaded design was sewn into the bodice in red thread.

Laudna wore her gold ear cuffs along with a single, dainty gold necklace in which a tiny lightning bolt hung from the chain.

Imogen blinked tears away, and when her throat tightened, threatening to render her utterly speechless, she whispered, *You're absolutely breathtakin', baby*.

Laudna looked down at her, big, dark eyes filled with adoration. *You are beautiful*, *darling*, she breathed.

She smiled that small, tender smile Imogen would never tire of receiving, and a teary chuckle broke from Imogen. "I can't wait to marry you," she said softly.

She ran a finger along the white streak in Laudna's updo and continued tracing down her head and along her jaw until her lightning-marked fingers came to rest under Laudna's chin.

Laudna bowed slightly so her forehead rested against Imogen's, closed her eyes, and let out a slow, soft breath.

Her scent filled Imogen's nose, and the fragrance was like being led home.

Laudna's voice was a melody imprinted on her heart. "I can't wait either, darling." Her mouth jutted forward, but Imogen placed a finger against her lips, halting her.

She bit her lip, smiling. "Not yet, baby," she whispered.

Laudna let out a breathy laugh and lifted her head. "Right. Sorry, I got lost in you, darling."

Imogen sighed. *Gods, I wanna kiss you so badly right now*.

Laudna sent a mental image of what she wished she could do to Imogen right then and there, and Imogen choked on her own spit. She coughed, cheeks flushing. She couldn't tamper the sly grin that appeared, though.

You're blushing, darling.

Imogen cocked her head and squinted at Laudna. *Ooh, you're so lucky you can't blush*.

Laudna took a step back into a ray of fiery sunlight, which illuminated her in a stunning portrait of burning red and gold. She blew a kiss to Imogen. "I'll see you at the altar, darling."

Imogen pressed the kiss to her chest, right above her heart, and nodded.

…

The autumn sunset bathed the forest aisle in golden light as the setting sun peeked just below the trees at the edge of the forest clearing. A wooden arbor had been erected and draped in deep amethyst and dark red cloth, and woven throughout the arbor were white, dark red, and lilac roses.

Above, dozens of golden, dancing lights floated among the branches of the trees.

The aisle had been marked by a bed of straw scattered with petals of the same roses which adorned the arbor over the altar. Small columns of straw and lanterns marked the walkway down the aisle, and the lantern tops were tied with ribbon Laudna had crafted herself.

Friends and family were seated in wooden chairs Chetney had carved, and both bridal parties stood in line on their respective sides with Braius in the middle.

Dorian stood with his mandolin strapped to his back, patiently awaiting the signal.

Imogen ducked behind the tree where she hid at the back of the venue and clutched her bouquet of flowers tighter.

A hand nudged her thigh. "Are you ready?" Orym whispered.

Imogen looked down at him—at the sparkle in his eyes—and nodded.

We're comin' down, she whispered to Dorian.

At her command, he slid his mandolin around and practiced fingers began strumming a gentle tune that felt like being wrapped in Laudna's arms. Then, Dorian's soft voice floated like the clouds as he sang the promised words, and Imogen took her first steps with Orym at her side.

"You're the one I've waited all my life for."

All the guests stood and turned to watch Orym walk Imogen down the aisle.

"You're the one I'd lose it all and die for."

Imogen smiled at the elderly woman—at her dear friend—bundled in a shawl and hunched over. Zhudanna waved a thin, wrinkled hand, face scrunched in a smile.

"And as the sun transforms into the moon, I pray we'd never lose the fire of our youth."

Opal turned to look, white hair gleaming in the sun. Her brown skin seemed to glow, and her eyes were bright. Opal Twice-Crowned, now crownless—and beaming at Imogen.

"I know I'll never stop chasing your heart. My love is yours to hold."

Imogen glanced to the right where she met the gaze of the Voice of the Tempest. Keyleth smiled softly at her, hands clasped over her chest. As Imogen passed, Keyleth bowed her antler-adorned head.

"Through every high and every low, our love will only grow."

Near the altar, Liliana and Relvin looked on quietly, both their gazes filled with grief, regret, gratitude, and love.

"And I'll be here when the sun sets, and I'll be here until our final breath."

Before Imogen took her place at the altar, she looked at her friends who stood there for her and Laudna, and sent them a silent message.

"My love is all for you."

Orym held out his hand and guided Imogen to the center left, head bowed. He kissed her knuckles and then retreated to his spot to the side.

Imogen took a shaky breath, trembling fingers fidgeting with her bouquet once more as Dorian moved into an interlude.

Then, *her* music reached Imogen's mind just as Dorian's voice wafted across the grove.

"In the darkness, our love shines the brightest."

Imogen turned away from the setting sun and set her gaze into the forest where Laudna emerged out of the shadow and into golden sunlight like a divine vision.

"When it's hardest, it won't paralyze us."

Ashton, dressed in a charcoal black vest, trousers, and blood-red collared shirt, offered their arm to Laudna. Though still shorter than Laudna, Ashton stood tall, chest out, and head high.

"When it feels like we have lost our way, we may bend, but darling, we will never break."

As they walked down the aisle, Imogen couldn't take her eyes off Laudna. Everyone around them disappeared, and for a moment, nobody—nothing—existed outside of her love, her Laudna.

"I'll never stop chasing your heart. My love is yours to hold."

That tether between them pulled Imogen close, and she found herself falling into Laudna's gaze. She was blue dawn wrapped in serenity, the peaceful dark of a star-covered sky, and a quiet melody which sang endless devotions unto Imogen's soul.

"Through every high and every low, our love will only grow."

My darling, Laudna's mind echoed. *My love. My Imogen*.

"And I'll be here when the sun sets, and I'll be here until our final breath."

Imogen only managed a breathless, love-sick exhale. *Laudna*.

"My love is all for you."

Ashton, their crystal head a sparkling rainbow in the light, led Laudna opposite Imogen, and then bowed at the waist as they stepped away.

"It's all for you."

The autumn breeze rustled the changing leaves above as the music faded out and a calm quiet blanketed the grove.

Braius, dressed similarly to Ashton as part of Laudna's bridal party, stepped forward and cleared his throat. "Friends and family of the honored brides, we are gathered here this evening to celebrate the union between two women whose love could rival the stars."

Imogen scrunched her nose at Laudna.

His deep voice carried out to the guests as Braius continued. "What started out as a fierce friendship, Imogen and Laudna's love slowly evolved into something so deep that the tether

between their souls became more than just an immaterial bond. They committed to each other so unbreakably, that only the Matron herself could cut the thread connecting their souls.

"Now these two women stand before us and each other to declare that same love in the form of a more metaphorical promise to one another; in matrimony."

Braius took a step back and inclined his chin.

Imogen handed her bouquet to Deanna and Laudna handed hers to Fearne. Then, Imogen's scarred fingers finally caressed Laudna's cool ones as the latter clasped Imogen's trembling hands.

Laudna raised a brow. *Should you go first, or shall I?*

Imogen took a shaky breath. *You go first so I have a little time to get my damn hands to stop shakin'*.

With a nod, Laudna merely squeezed Imogen's hands tighter, her cool grasp grounding her. Then, her beautiful dark eyes met Imogen's and that small, soft smile Imogen knew so intimately, appeared.

"Imogen, darling," Laudna began, those two words spoken with such quiet reverence Imogen's heart fluttered. "I will never forget the moment I saw you—a small woman with lavender hair standing against the mob. I was a stranger, yet you defended me like a friend. I was alone for thirty years, and the moment I met you, I didn't want to lose you." Her thumb brushed over the back of Imogen's lightning-marked hand. "Every day I am grateful you didn't turn me away because as we fled that night, I'd decided that I would have run forever as long as that path led back to you, my love, the girl who'd saved me."

Laudna shrugged, brows turning upward. "Because you did save me—in more ways than one. You first saved me that day in Gelvaan. Then you quite literally saved me from darkness and death. Again, when you asked to kiss me, and then finally when you helped me break free of Delilah forever."

Imogen glanced at Laudna's chest—at the faint purple glow which emanated from between thin, pale skin and black lace. She pulled her gaze away from that light source and back up to Laudna's eyes—to where the woman she loved peered down at her with unending tenderness.

"You've stayed by my side every step of the way, even when things looked bleak—*especially* when things seemed bleakest." A dry chuckle. "For years, I believed I was a dead end. I saw what I'd become and refused to acknowledge any way forward." Laudna grasped Imogen's hands tighter and touched them against her chest. "But you, Imogen, as you promised me that night under Kreviris, did not let go. When I tried to pull away, you merely held my hand tighter. Your love gave me the strength to fight for you, the woman I love."

Laudna closed her eyes and inhaled—subtly and slowly as though she breathed Imogen's essence in. When her eyes opened again, she said, "My darling Imogen, you are a warm summer breeze. You are light and soft laughter and gentleness. You are the one I can finally grow old with, and that in and of itself is the most amazing gift.

“So, my love,” Laudna said as she tucked a strand of lavender hair behind Imogen’s ear, “my promise to you is the same one I echoed back to you that night on Ruidus. Through the coming years I have with you, I will hold fast. As I take your hands in mine today, I will wrap that golden thread tighter and seal it with a kiss.” Tears gathered in Laudna’s eyes and her smile grew. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you—to live a simple life with you, to watch the sunrises with you, to raise children with you, to age alongside you, my darling, my love. Together.”

A teary laugh broke from Imogen as she sniffed and wiped a thumb under her eyes. She bit her lip, nodding. She stared up into Laudna’s eyes and whispered, *That was beautiful*.

Laudna’s thoughts sang, and instead of words, she merely smiled, bright and unburdened.

Imogen sniffed again and shook her head, pulling herself together. “Oh, gods, that means it’s my turn,” she mumbled. “Don’t mess this up, Imogen,” she muttered even quieter to herself.

She focused on Laudna—on her scent, her touch, her beautiful and haunting melody—and let that be her focus as the beat of her heart produced words spoken from her soul.

“Laudna,” she said softly, gently, “my peace, my music, my love.” A tear dropped into the corner of her mouth as she smiled. “This world is so loud, but you’ve always been nothin’ but a respite—a safe haven from the noise. The day I met you, it was your quiet that led me to you. Your beautiful mind was a light at the end of a dark tunnel. I’d been so lost in that suffocatin’ darkness, drownin’ in noise, and your music had pulled me to the surface.”

Imogen took a breath. “You saved my life that day. If you hadn’t come into town when you did, I don’t know how much longer I would have lasted. When my mind was crowded with thoughts and I became overwhelmed by the incessant buzz, your darkness, your blue-dawn quiet gave me peace. When those red storms consumed me and I had no way out, I reached for you. When I feared I’d float away, you anchored me.” She glanced into Laudna’s eyes and squeezed her hands. “Because you’re my tether, Laudna. You’ve always had a hold on me, even before our love had shifted into romance.”

Imogen chuckled. “Truth be told, I think I’d fallen for you long before I asked to kiss you. I think fallin’ in love with you was like slippin’ into one of my dreams—slowly and then all at once. I didn’t realize I’d fallen until I was standin’ in the middle of my feelin’s and there was no dream to wake up from. My reality was wakin’ up to you next to me. My reality was knowin’ I was safe in your arms and that I was not alone.

“Our souls are intertwined,” she breathed, touching a palm against Laudna’s chest, “and I hold your silver thread like the precious gift it is. You’re everythin’ to me, Laudna. You’re the calm in the chaos, you’re quiet in the noise, you’re a soothin’ cool touch when my scars burn. You’re my heart and my love.”

She reached up and wiped black tears from Laudna’s face. Laudna mirrored her, wiping salt from Imogen’s cheeks.

Then, Imogen tilted her head and smiled. “Through the storms of life, I promise I will embrace each new day, each hardship, each beautiful moment with you, and I will not let you go. After so much uncertainty, I can’t express how grateful I am that I get you for the rest of my life.

You and only you. I get to experience life with you—the stormy nights, the cold mornings, the cozy afternoons, the walks through the trees, the sunny naps in the hammock, the horse rides at sunset, and even the sleepless nights when our baby cries relentlessly. But all of it will be beautiful because I will be experiencing it with you."

Laudna turned her head and wiped ichor from her eyes before it could stain her cheeks. She sniffed and managed a chuckle. "That was wonderful, darling."

Braius motioned to Deanna and Fearne. "Please present the rings."

Fearne handed Laudna a gold ring inlaid with tiny amethyst gems around the top half of the band. Before she pulled away, the faun met Imogen's eyes and smiled.

"Laudna," Braius said, "do you promise to love and cherish Imogen Temult, to care for her in sickness and in health, and to remain faithful to her for as long as you both may live?"

Laudna slid the gold ring on Imogen's left hand and nodded, eyes brimming with love and tears. "I do."

Deanna reached up and handed Imogen a black ring inlaid with rubies around the top half of the band and patted her hip.

Braius turned to Imogen and the latter took a breath.

"Imogen Temult, do you promise to love and cherish Laudna, to care for her in sickness and in health, and to remain faithful to her for as long as you both may live?"

Imogen smiled softly at Laudna as she took her pale hand in hers and fit the black band to her left ring finger. "I do," she breathed.

"By the divine power of the Platinum Dragon and that which resides within me, I now pronounce you wife and wife," Braius announced. "You may kiss your bride."

As if some force keeping them apart snapped, Laudna practically lunged forward. She cradled Imogen's face and pulled her lips to hers.

Imogen pushed up on her toes, head craned back to meet Laudna's height, and slotted her fingers in the perfect spots around Laudna's ears and along her jaw.

Static electricity danced between their mouths, and as Imogen met Laudna's lips with her own, a purple spark ignited at the climax of their connection.

The kiss was slow and deep and charged with passion. It was everything Imogen had been waiting for, and it took everything in her not to chase Laudna's taste with her tongue.

When applause rose around them, Imogen pulled away, breathless, her gaze immediately latching onto Laudna's whose dark eyes shone with a soft smile.

Her love rested her forehead against Imogen's and lifted lightning-marked knuckles to her lips. "My darling," Laudna whispered between kisses, "my wife, my love."

Imogen jutted her chin forward and captured Laudna's mouth with hers. *I love you, Laud*.

I love you, my darling.

"All right!" Ashton boomed, waving their hands. "Make way for the brides!"

Imogen laughed when they turned back and winked.

Orym bounded onto Dorian's shoulders while the latter began playing a beautiful tune on the mandolin once more. Dorian beamed, his handsome smile lighting the space, and Orym's

eyes sparkled emerald in the golden sunlight. Ashton offered an arm to Fearne who gave a sly smile but accepted nonetheless. Chetney bowed and offered his elbow to Deanna and the dark-skinned gnome tilted her head, smiled, and looped her arm in his.

Braius bowed to FRIDA and offered his large arm. “Friend,” he inclined with invitation.

“Thank you, Mr. Doomseed,” FRIDA’s voice chirped from behind.

As the new brides left the altar, their family behind them and music floating in the air, Imogen leaned her head on Laudna’s shoulder and let her wife’s serene melody fill her soul.

...

Outside the barn, in a clearing surrounded by a sea of flaming foliage, Imogen led Laudna to the reception space, scarred fingers grasping cool, spindly ones.

She glanced back at Laudna who looked at her as though nobody else in Exandria existed, and motioned with her chin. *C’mon*.

Laudna smiled.

Tables draped with dark red and lilac tablecloths, matching roses and white orchids set as centerpieces, and purple candles so dark they were practically black, adorned every surface. Dancing lights strung along an invisible thread trimmed the open sky, illuminating the guests below, and where flower petals might have been sprinkled, dozens of Laudna’s little trinkets and creations had been scattered along the surfaces of each table.

Imogen touched a finger to the body of a thread spider and grinned.

“Pâté did such a good job,” Laudna whispered, pointing out the placement of the strange creations.

Imogen tilted her head, the whisper of a smile at her lips. “I never doubted him.”

Laudna kissed her shoulder and ran a hand through lavender hair.

Dorian’s music followed them, the smooth melody wafting around them like leaves in the wind.

Fearne galloped past them, dark red dress flowing like fae flowers in the wind, and shouted, “Dance!”

“Oh, yeah, baby!” Chetney howled, throwing his hips back.

Fearne slapped his butt. “Chet!”

“What?”

She gestured toward the brides. “Imogen and Laudna’s first dance,” she scolded.

Chetney waved a hand and scoffed. “I knew that.”

Small hands shoved Imogen from behind and she stumbled into the center of the grass. She whipped her head over her shoulder only to find Deanna shooing her with her fingers.

Dance! she mouthed. *Go on!*

“Yeah, go on, fun-scary,” Ashton muttered with a half-smirk, already leaning nonchalantly on the nearest table.

Laudna glanced from them to Imogen, and when their eyes met, the world around Imogen evaporated. Laudna fiddled with her hands, but she smiled nonetheless and closed the gap between them.

Imogen shrugged, eyebrows raised as she bit her lip. “May I have this dance?” She held out a lightning-marked hand.

Laudna grazed thin fingers over Imogen’s palm and stepped closer. “Of course, darling,” she whispered. “Though I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not either.”

Once Imogen had an arm around Laudna’s waist, she whispered, *Hold tight*, then pressed off a foot and into the air. Laudna’s scent mingled with the clear evening breeze, sun-dappled wood, florals, and spice, creating an aroma that wrapped around Imogen like a tangible safe haven.

Imogen leaned her cheek against Laudna’s shoulder and the latter rested the bottom of her chin on flower-plaited lavender hair. She placed a hand in Laudna’s palm as they circled slowly and that beautiful, haunting melody ribboned around Imogen’s senses.

As Dorian’s smooth tune continued, Imogen and Laudna simply held one another and swayed while floating gently in the air.

I love you, darling, Laudna breathed and the depth of her music deepened.

Imogen caressed the outside of Laudna’s hand with her thumb. *I love you so much*.

Tender lips kissed the top of Imogen’s head, *I love you.*

I love you.

Those three words, spoken like a sacred vow, hung between their immaterial bond, echoing softly as though each repeated declaration was a kiss on Imogen’s heart.

When the song ended, Imogen touched down to the grass, almost dizzy when reality set back in and the reception space around them materialized once more.

She glanced up at Laudna and smiled.

“Hit it, blue boy!” Chet hollered, pointing a finger at Dorian. “It’s time for this Master Craftsman to show his mastery of the dance floor!”

“Ooh!” Laudna quipped, black-tipped fingers twitching excitedly. “Come on, Chetney. Show us what you’ve got!”

Shouts of encouragement rose above the upbeat music, claps to the beat filled the atmosphere, and laughter rang through the valley as Bells Hells, whole once more, celebrated Imogen and Laudna.

...

As the evening turned to dusk, Imogen slipped away from the festivities to talk to other friends who had come and found several familiar faces at an outlying table.

Lady de Rolo, dressed in a beautiful form-fitting blue gown, and Lord de Rolo dressed in a fine suit of similar shade, talked quietly as Imogen approached.

Pike, seated to Lady de Rolo's right, seemed to be nursing a wine flute while fiddling with her gold necklace. She wore a yellow dress, and her white hair had been pulled into a braided bun and adorned with gold jewelry. Pike glanced up when Imogen reached the table.

"Oh, your dress is even prettier up close," she gasped, abandoning her half-drunk wine. Her eyes scanned Imogen from head to toe, seeming to drink in every little detail. "You're stunning, Imogen."

Imogen grinned and forced herself to not shrink away from the compliment. "Thank you."

Lady Vex'ahlia squeezed Lord de Rolo's hand and stood, smiling brightly. "Congratulations, dear."

Imogen fidgeted with her ring between her right index finger and thumb. "Thank you, Lady de Rolo."

Lord de Rolo gave a nod. "It was a lovely ceremony, Ms. Temult."

"Thank you for comin'."

Pike smiled. "We all appreciate the invitation."

"I wanted to show my thanks, Ms. Trickfoot," Imogen said softly. "This day wouldn't be happenin' without your help."

She took a deep breath and looked to Lady de Rolo, memories of that morning in the Greyfield flooding her.

Go. Be with her. Love her. Don't waste a second of it.

I don't intend to.

"I haven't wasted it," Imogen said, flower-plaited hair blowing gently in the autumn breeze. "I won't ever waste what time I have with her."

Lady Vex'ahlia smiled tenderly, understanding in her hazel eyes. She glanced at her husband who stared at her with an adoring intensity.

From her periphery, Imogen caught a swish of red hair. She bowed her head to the Lord, Lady, and cleric. "Excuse me."

By the refreshments table, two people were engaged in a light yet sincere conversation. Keyleth, who wore a simple forest green dress and smaller antlers, was accompanied by a young man. He had long, dark hair, pale skin, and dressed in all black save for a fiery autumn leaf pinned to his breast. While she talked, he simply looked up at her in quiet adoration. His expression didn't shift much, but his hazel eyes conveyed the depths of his thoughts—and every single one seemed to consist wholly of the Voice of the Tempest.

"Imogen," Keyleth turned with a smile.

"Tempest," Imogen said with a bow of her head.

"Oh, no," Keyleth waved her hands, "I'm just Keyleth today." She smiled softly. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

The ghost of a smile graced the young man's lips and he gave a slight nod. "Congratulations." His voice was low, and his accent flowed across his tongue like smooth liquor.

Imogen returned the gesture. "Thank you."

"Oh!" Keyleth gasped, blinking rapidly. "I'm so sorry. You two haven't met." She glanced at the man with a fondness Imogen often caught Laudna looking at her with. "This is Vax'ildan."

"Pleasure," he said.

Imogen blinked. "Vax'ildan…"

Lady de Rolo's voice once again flashed through her mind. *That man is my brother. My twin brother. Vax.*

That's why he seemed familiar—he shared a face with Lady de Rolo. "You're Lady Vex'ahlia's brother," she breathed.

His eyes sparkled. "She is my sister and my best friend."

Imogen's gaze flitted between Keyleth and Vax. "How do you two...?"

Vax glanced sidelong at Keyleth as though she were the only thing that existed in Exandria. With a gentleness Imogen didn't expect, he whispered, "She is my love."

Imogen could have sworn Keyleth blushed. And for a moment, this wise, powerful woman seemed nearly overwhelmed with an innocent giddiness which she hid externally, but Imogen felt.

Keyleth looked into Vax'ildan's gaze, the hardened lines at the corners of her eyes softening. She clasped his pale hand which he drew to his lips and kissed the Tempest's knuckles.

Imogen smiled softly and looked to the Tempest. "I'm happy for you."

Keyleth shook her head. "Well, thank you, but we should be the ones congratulating you. It's your wedding day."

Imogen shrugged. "What better time to celebrate love than at a wedding?" She clasped her hands behind her back and bowed her head. "Thank you for all you've done, Lady Keyleth. You're part of the reason I was able to marry the woman I love today."

The Tempest placed a gentle hand on Imogen's shoulder. She tilted her head as though to speak, but instead, she gave a smile that spoke to Imogen more than words ever could. Keyleth nodded, brows scrunched in understanding.

Imogen?

Her mother's voice crept into her mind, soft and hesitant.

She looked to the Tempest and her Champion, and excused herself, turning toward the sunset.

…

“It was nice to see you,” Imogen said, a small smile appearing as she showed her parents the way out.

The setting sun had lowered behind the trees, casting the sky in watercolors of orange and purple, and fireflies lit up the meadow like the stars which would soon appear above.

Liliana tucked a strand of hair behind Imogen’s ear and sighed. “My beautiful girl,” she said softly, almost as though she hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

Imogen tilted her head. Then, she wrapped her arms around Liliana and whispered, “I love you, Mama.”

For a moment, Liliana did not move. Slowly, her hands crossed over Imogen’s back and grasped for purchase, holding her daughter tight. “I love you.”

That part of her which made her pull away earlier, tugged at Imogen’s mind, but she fought the instinct and instead breathed Liliana in.

I’m tryin’, Mama, she whispered.

A hand caressed the back of Imogen’s head. *That’s already more than I deserve*. Liliana kissed her hair. *I will be eternally grateful for the second chance*.

If I’d given up on Laudna when she was at her lowest, we wouldn’t be here today. Imogen inhaled sharply and pulled away, glancing through the crowd toward Laudna. *She wouldn’t be here*. She looked at her mother. *If my friends had given up on me, I wouldn’t be here. We all saved each other*.

“You saved me,” Liliana whispered. “Even after what I did.”

Imogen chewed on the inside of her cheek. She gave a curt nod and looked away. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told Daddy: I love you. No matter what. Even when I didn’t want to, I did.” Flashes of the fight with Ludinus, now more blurred than before, appeared in Imogen’s mind. “You didn’t deserve that,” she breathed.

I would have understood if you had left me.

Imogen shook her head. *I’d already lost you once.* She glanced at Relvin who looked everywhere but at her and Liliana. *I don’t want to lose either of you*. *Not again*.

I never want to make such a mistake again.

You won’t.

Liliana exhaled and gave a sad smile. “I hope to see you again soon.”

“Me too, Mama,” Imogen whispered.

She turned to Relvin who removed his hat and didn’t take quite as long to look at her.

When he finally meet Imogen’s amethyst gaze, the corner of her mouth quirked into a faint smirk. “One day we’ll be better with each other than horses.”

A dull, nasally chuckle escaped him. Calloused hands fidgeted with the brim of his hat for a moment before he sniffed and breathed, “I’d like that.”

Imogen stared up at him gently, earnestly. “Bye, Daddy,” she whispered.

Relvin raised a hand but stopped and curled his fingers into a loose fist, retracting slightly. The small muscles in his jaw feathered and he blinked several times as though his mind and body waged a war. Then, his expression softened and he moved slowly, reaching for Imogen.

He cupped the back of Imogen's head and kissed her hair. "Goodbye, babygirl."

Imogen stepped back and watched until her parents disappeared down the road and into the approaching night.

…

Hours after the celebrations had ended and the moons found their way into the heavens, Imogen, dressed in her blue sleep shirt and shorts, found Laudna on a quilt in their yard, staring up at the sky.

She knelt down, taking Laudna's face in her hands, and kissed her. "Hi, baby," she breathed.

"Hello, my darling."

Imogen settled next to her and laced her fingers between Laudna's. "Tired?" she asked, glancing sidelong at her.

Laudna met her gaze. "Wide awake."

A laugh broke from her. "Me too." She curled up on her side and rested her head on Laudna's shoulder. "I feel like I haven't seen you all day."

Laudna craned her neck back so she could stare into Imogen's eyes. She grinned. "But now I have you all to myself." She crooked a finger under Imogen's jaw and drew her forward until their lips met.

Imogen inhaled at the taste of her, and her mouth automatically began searching for more. She slotted her fingers around Laudna's ear as she grasped by her nape, hands twisting in black hair.

Laudna's other hand found the curve of Imogen's hip and pointed nails grazed along her shorts, pulling up the hem of her shorts. Cool, spindly fingers ran along the stretch marks on the outside of her thigh, searching, feeling, *wanting*.

A huffed laugh broke from Imogen. *I'm all yours, baby*.

You're mine, Laudna breathed, and the adoration in those two words awakened something in Imogen. *Some part of me hoped for you before I ever called you mine, and I still can't believe that I get to love you, Imogen*.

Imogen kissed Laudna again before she sank back onto the quilt and curled against her once more. She wrapped an arm over Laudna's torso and leaned into her wife's figure—

"You're my wife," Imogen breathed. A part of her still couldn't believe it. She married the love of her life and Laudna was her *wife*.

"My darling, my love, my wife," Laudna said, smiling against Imogen's cheek. A hushed shriek escaped. "My *wife*." *My darling Imogen*, she whispered, *I love you*.

Imogen nestled her nose against Laudna's, an unburdened smile blossoming on her lips. *I love you so much, Laud.*

I love you.

I love you, Imogen repeated like a promise. *I love you, I love you, I love you*.

Laudna's music swelled like a cresting wave—magnificent, beautiful, and as haunting as the moon-kissed tide.

A mix of emotions—adoration, unconditional love, and unadulterated joy—mingled between them as their immaterial bond weaved around that thread which connected their souls.

Imogen felt the very depths of Laudna's essence and she wanted nothing more than to sink into that pool and lose herself entirely within her love.

"I'm so grateful I get to love you," Imogen whispered. "It's the best thing I'll ever do."

"Loving you is a promise." Laudna chuckled. "Perhaps the easiest promise I've ever made."

Imogen laughed, tears welling in her eyes. "You've always had my heart, Laudna."

I won't let go. She whispered those four words that they'd promised to each other before speaking matrimonial vows aloud.

Laudna pressed the back of Imogen's hand over her heart. *I won't let go*.

"I'm yours, darling," Laudna whispered back. "Forever."

She stared up at the clear night sky adorned with stars, and for the first time in her life, Imogen did not shy away from the red glow of Ruidus as she fell asleep next to her love, her Laudna, her wife.

Laudna sat at the small kitchen table writing, the warm, gentle breeze picking at the edges of the loose paper strewn about the table's surface. The warmer months hung on, and though the late summer evening provided a soft breeze, the house remained stuffy even with the windows open.

She breathed in the scent of lemongrass and sun-bleached wood, and with a huff, threw the top half of her jaw length hair into a small bun and cinched it tight with her rock chisel. Laudna finished her thought, folded up the letter into an envelope, and addressed it *Zhudanna*.

A sad smile crept at her lips. Zhudanna had grown quieter, slower when replying to Imogen's Messages, so Laudna had suggested checking in on her the old-fashioned way—by mail. That gave Zhudanna time to think and reply, and her responses tended to be far more enthusiastic that way. Though both her and Imogen worried; they feared the day was nearing when they'd send a letter out and simply never receive Zhudanna's response.

Laudna shook her head, chasing the thought away. She drained the last of her tea which had gone cold, and stood, tucking the envelope under an arm.

Their small farmhouse, nestled near the base of the Coven Peaks, overlooked acres of farmland. Orchards of fruit and blossom trees, wheat, corn, and tobacco plants filled their property throughout harvest season. The tobacco had been harvested two months ago, and Imogen had travelled to Gelvaan to sell it as she had for the past two years since they'd acquired the land.

Laudna glanced out the window to the rows of stalks swaying slightly in the breeze. The corn would be ready to harvest any day now, Imogen had said. Most likely in the next two weeks, she'd make another journey northwest to Gelvaan where she'd sell a portion of the crop. When she returned, she'd gather the remaining corn and sell it locally in town. Laudna had a small craft shop there that she'd opened two years ago called "Saffron Supplies." It contained her handmade monstrosities and little buddies, and it was a space where she got to share a small part of herself with the world. Her shop attracted folks like Laudna—creative, curious, and just a little strange. She loved it.

The ghost of a smile appeared and Laudna pulled herself from her thoughts. Movement caught her attention. In the distance, Imogen led her white peppered filly, Iris, and her onyx mare, Dahlia, toward the stables. Before entering, Imogen paused and leaned her forehead against Iris'. Her mouth moved, but Laudna didn't need to hear her to know what she said.

Good girl, Iris. Thank you. Imogen stroked Iris' nose and then moved to Dahlia and repeated the same motions. *Good girl, Dahlia. Thank you.* She said those words to her horses every day, thanking them for their hard work and loyalty.

Laudna found it incredibly endearing.

In the next moments, Imogen disappeared into the stables with Iris and Dahlia, and Laudna busied herself with making dinner.

She almost had dinner ready, yet Imogen hadn't returned to the house. Laudna hummed, wondering where she might be.

She paused.

The gentle, smooth sound of guitar strings plucking and the soft scratch of fingernails strumming against taut metal wafted to Laudna on a musical breeze.

Laudna pushed off the counter away from the fried potatoes and wandered toward the warm light filtering in through the open front door which bathed the spacious living room in rays of gold. She ventured toward the door and leaned a shoulder on the frame. She tilted her head, her heart swelling at the sight before her.

Imogen, dressed in her work jeans, boots, a flannel with sleeves rolled to her elbows and top two buttons undone, sat on the edge of the porch, guitar cradled in her lap. She adjusted her brown cowboy hat and then glanced down at the head of the guitar where Pâté perched, nodding his little bird skull to the tune.

Imogen said something to Pâté which Laudna couldn't decipher. Then she chuckled, and Laudna wanted nothing more than to get drunk on the sound. Against her tanned skin, Imogen's lavender lightning scars were almost white, and they emanated a soft incandescence.

Imogen removed the capo from the neck of the guitar and adjusted her right arm over the body. She glanced at Pâté and whispered, "Another one, buddy?"

"Always," he barked.

A soft smile crept at Imogen's lips.

Laudna couldn't help her own smile that blossomed upon her mouth, and she laced her hands together in front of her chest, content for the moment to just watch. She waited almost breathlessly.

The tendons in Imogen's hand danced as she plucked at the strings, her red bracelet faded and nearly threadbare from the years of wearing it. The bracelet shifted with her movement, revealing pale skin just beyond the reaches of her tan. The movement of calloused finger pads sliding along the frets with her left hand squeaked softly, both hands moving differently but in unison to create the gentle, almost staccato melody.

Imogen's low, breathy voice, perhaps only meant for Pâté, seemed to join the golden light and warm evening breeze. "*We were married by the ocean*," she began, "*we were tethered by the sea.*" The slight rasp in her tone, though not eloquent or precise, was warm and beautiful.

Laudna found herself falling.

"*We tied string around our fingers to remember our ideals.*" Imogen's fingers moved, chords changed, and the slender muscles in her forearm danced as she played. Smooth, graceful, confident. "*I'll be brave when you are frightened. You'll be strong when I am weak in the knees.*"

For all the lightning which crackled beneath her skin, grace and gentleness abounded. For the power Imogen held, the wrath and fury she could conjure, alone and at ease, she was simply a woman. A strong, beautiful, capable woman. Laudna's heart and soul.

As Imogen sang, Pâté attempted to join her, though his singing was more gravelly yelling than actual melody. Between breaths, Imogen chuckled, and the sound was sugar and bourbon; sweet, smooth, and robust.

Laudna tucked a short strand of hair behind an ear, and she fiddled with the sleek black wedding band adorning her left hand. Imogen's own gold band glinted in the sunlight as her fingers shifted chords.

Laudna's heart and soul.

The one she loves.

Her wife.

Imogen continued, blissfully unaware of her presence. "*I'll be calm when you've had enough of these rushing waves. You'll be the oxygen I need.*"

The melody faded as all sound escaped Laudna and she merely watched, soaking in the peace her wife brought. She studied the curve of her nose, the way her brow furrowed slightly as she focused on the chords and the lyrics, how the scar on her chin crinkled with certain words, how the very sight of Imogen was warmth, life, and comfort.

Home.

It was a beautiful, simple moment, and Laudna would have given anything to continue living in it—

Laudna paused. She took a breath, letting the pain and trauma from previous years wash over her and not through her. She'd already given so much to save Exandria. She'd lost Imogen for brief moments—had her heart sundered and stitched back together. She'd nearly lost her friends, her family—Bells Hells.

Laudna closed her eyes and inhaled once more.

She didn't need to give anything; she could exist here, now. Imogen sat only a few feet away, warm and full of life. The moment wasn't some trick; it was real, and Laudna only had to ask because Imogen gave her love freely.

The effervescent woman before her was all Laudna needed. All she wanted. All she could have ever hoped for.

"*We oblige as we learn to enlace for the rest of our lives…*"

Laudna had never loved anyone more than Imogen—would never love anyone as much as her.

"*...the rest of our lives.*"

The soothing melody of Imogen's song met her ears, and it washed over her like a wave, bathing her in its feeling more than its meaning. Laudna's smile grew.

"*You'll be balance when I waiver, I'll be warmth when you are shivering cold.*"

Pâté's brash words rocked Laudna from her thoughts. "'Ello, mum! Imogen's singin'!"

Imogen paused and glanced over her shoulder, purple eyes bright. She tipped her hat and gave Laudna that enticing half-smile, her slow drawl almost melodic. "Hi, baby."

Laudna pressed off the doorframe and joined Imogen on the top porch step, abandoning her watchful resting place. She glanced at Imogen who looked up at her with that honey smile. With a finger, Laudna tilted the rim of Imogen's hat back and leaned in for a kiss.

Imogen hummed, lips spreading into a grin.

She tasted of almond and bourbon, and smelled of open pastures, clean air, and lilac, and Laudna never wanted to part. Eventually, she pulled away, giving the back of Imogen's neck a soft caress, tangling her fingers at the base of her hair. "Hello, darling," she whispered. Without looking away from her love's face, Laudna waved a hand, chasing Pâté away.

Imogen brushed the back of her index finger down Laudna's cheek and then cupped her palm under her jaw. "How long have you been standin' there?"

Laudna gave a soft smile. "I'm not sure. I was far too entranced to know."

She waved her hand. "It's just a little singin'. Nothin' too fancy."

"It was beautiful," she whispered. "I could listen to you for hours on end, darling." Laudna laced her fingers with Imogen's. "I didn't know you played."

A breathy chuckle shook Imogen's chest. "I haven't for years." She tapped the guitar with a hand. "When I went to Gelvaan to sell the tobacco, I saw this beauty." She shrugged. "I hadn't realized how much I missed playin' until I was holdin' this in my hands. After the first strum, it was like all the pieces came together, like some small part of me which had been missin' finally settled into place."

"And I'm just now hearing this wonderful talent of yours?"

Imogen shrugged. "I'm a little rusty."

"You're wonderful."

Another sugared laugh. Imogen held Laudna's gaze for a moment and that half-smile grew into a grin. She huffed an exhale, bright eyes sparkling.

Imogen's essence wrapped itself around Laudna, cloaking her in purple electricity and stars. That immaterial tendril of power reached out, caressing Laudna's mind.

Imogen tilted her head, still grinning. *Your music is so beautiful.*

Laudna smiled. *I wish I could hear your music. I've imagined what it might sound like—your essence, your soul.*

Like a banjo, accordin' to Orym, Imogen said with a chuckle.

No, no. Certainly not. I'm sure it's something far gentler. Something smooth. Laudna paused, considering. *Actually, I think your music would sound like that guitar in your hands. Steady strumming laced with the melody of a mellow summer breeze blowing through lemongrass.*

She glanced sidelong at Imogen only to find the latter staring at her, a million unspoken thoughts behind her eyes.

Laudna caressed her cheek, brushing a thumb along her freckles. "Have I lost you, darling?"

Imogen blinked and shook her head. "Oh—no. I was just listenin' to your music."

"Did you hear anything I said?"

She bit her lip. "Uh—no. Well—yes. I heard somethin' about lemongrass."

Laudna gave her a look of faux reprimand. "I'm offended you don't hang onto my every word, darling."

Imogen entwined her fingers in Laudna's hair. "You have no idea how much I do, Laud." Her gaze had gone distant again—like she was focusing on something unsaid—something Laudna could not hear or experience. After a moment, Imogen shook her head again and planted a kiss on Laudna's shoulder. Then, she nodded at her guitar. "Do want to give it a try?"

Laudna blinked and placed a hand against her chest. "Me?"

"Yes you, silly." Imogen smiled and adjusted her hat.

"Darling, I don't know how."

Imogen shrugged, and her next words were like the soft summer breeze. "I can teach you." She shifted, motioning Laudna in front of her. "Come here."

Laudna positioned herself on the step below in between Imogen's legs, and the latter lifted the guitar over her head and placed it in Laudna's lap. Imogen's body, as always, radiated warmth, and bits of grass and straw stuck to her jeans scratched at Laudna's bare arms.

Imogen leaned against Laudna's back and her scent of lilac, bourbon, and leather washed over her. Laudna tilted her head back, grinning up at her wife. She planted two kisses—one on Laudna's nose and the other on her lips. "Howdy," she breathed against her skin.

Laudna pressed up to meet Imogen's lips for another kiss. "I love you," she whispered.

Imogen smiled and tucked her hair behind an ear. Another kiss. "I love you, Laud."

"My tether," Laudna whispered.

Her smile grew. "Tethered hearts."

"Tethered souls."

After a beat, Imogen took Laudna's hands in hers and guided them to the correct positions on the guitar. Her long hair brushed against Laudna's neck, and she wanted nothing more than to lean back into her and soak in the sunset.

"Your hands go here," Imogen said, oblivious to Laudna's thoughts. Her tanned fingers wrapped around Laudna's pale ones as she helped place her left hand onto the fretboard.

Laudna curled her fingers so just the tips were pressed against random strings like she'd seen Imogen doing.

"Good. That's perfect." Imogen's right arm reached around Laudna and pointed to the strings. "The top string closest to you is E, and it's the lowest note." She brushed the side of her thumb against the single string and a low humming vibration reverberated through the guitar into Laudna's chest. "And then in ascendin' order, the next five strings are A, D, G, B, endin' with E again."

Laudna frowned and glanced up at Imogen. "There are two E's?"

Imogen waved a hand. "It's less complicated than I'm makin' it seem. One E has a low sound while the other has a much higher sound. Top and bottom."

Laudna placed a black-tipped finger against the top string and plucked. That same low vibration echoed. A breathy chuckle escaped. She repeated the motion for the bottom string, but this time, a higher, sharper note resonated. "Fascinating."

"Now," Imogen said, tapping Laudna's left hand with her index finger, "this hand is how you make a bunch of different notes and chords with just six strings."

Her breath kissed Laudna's cheek, and the rim of Imogen's hat brushed strands of her hair, yet Laudna wanted to be closer. She squirmed on the porch step, and without even breaking her sentence, Imogen automatically moved closer, eliminating the gap between her torso and Laudna's back.

"The different squares or sections along the neck are called frets. The closer to the headstock your hand is, the lower the sound, and the closer to the bridge you get, the higher the sound."

Laudna nodded slowly. "Almost like a piano—how from one side to the other, the keys either ascend or descend in octave?"

Imogen kissed the side of Laudna's head. "See? You've got it." Her fingers caressed Laudna's as she gently grasped her three middle fingers, placing them at different spots on the guitar. The index finger she set at the second string, second fret, and the middle and ring she placed at the first and sixth string, third fret. "This," Imogen said softly, "is a G chord." She nodded. "Give it a try."

Laudna glanced at her long, slender fingers and hesitated. "I don't want to hurt it."

Imogen shook her head and took Laudna's hands in hers. "You won't," she whispered. "I trust you. Besides," she huffed, smiling, "the strings are metal and they're easily replaceable. You won't hurt anythin'."

Laudna nodded and glanced down at the guitar. She took a breath and then ran her thumb down the length of strings. At the slow speed she strummed, each note rang individually, and Laudna tilted her head.

"Try strummin' faster," Imogen suggested, infinite patience and compassion in her tone. "Try and do it with one smooth motion."

Laudna's fingers twitched. "Alright." She repeated the motion, but quicker and with more fervor. Sure enough, all six strings played almost at once, which created an entirely new sound.

Imogen beamed. "You're a natural, baby."

Laudna laughed but shook her head.

"Do you want to try puttin' some chords together?" Imogen whispered.

"That sounds lovely."

Though it was a long, slow process, by the time the sun had sank behind the barn, Laudna could piece together an uncertain and unsteady chord progression. It wasn't anything close to Imogen's grace and ease, but pride pricked at her.

Laudna glanced at the horizon which had shifted colors from a brilliant golden sunset to vibrant pinks, oranges and purples which faded to a blue star-speckled night sky. It was getting late. Abandoned fried potatoes, beans, and pork flashed through Laudna's mind. She'd forgotten about dinner. Laudna stood, but before she could get her bearings, Imogen's hand clasped her wrist, halting her.

"Wait," she said, tugging the guitar from Laudna's other hand. "Sit for a few more minutes?" Imogen shrugged. "I know dinner is cold."

Laudna tilted her head and gave Imogen a small smile.

Her heart and soul.

Her wife.

She took Imogen's hand from her wrist and kissed the back of it, the textured scars warm on her lips. "You, my love, are far more important than some cold potatoes." She sat, positioning herself right next to Imogen.

Imogen's eyes sparkled like the fading sunset, but she blinked and pulled her gaze from Laudna as she adjusted her position around the guitar. For a moment, she sat there, ear tilted in Laudna's direction. Her left hand created different chords, and her right plucked the air a few inches above the strings as though she listened to some inaudible music before she played it.

Then, Imogen began, but the tune this time was slower, almost eerie. Still beautiful and enchanting, but haunting. Her fingers moved, a little more unsure than before, but the strength and grace remained. Her eyes fell shut, her head tilted like she strained to hear whatever melody she interpreted.

Laudna still watched Imogen's hands, her movements, but this time, let the music consume her. It wafted around her like tendrils of shadow, soothing her before the melody gave way to something adjacent to repose and light. Not golden sunlight—not like Imogen, but something calm like the blue hour right before dawn. It chased away the elegant cold and replaced the comforting dark with something earthy and sweet.

Laudna had no words—only emotions which she couldn't describe. Beautiful didn't seem to do it justice. Alluring, perhaps. Maybe even divine.

Imogen stopped and placed her palm against the strings, silencing the reverberations. She shrugged, a timid grin creeping at the corners of her mouth. With a tilt of her head, she muttered, "That's what you sound like." Imogen tapped Laudna's temple with a finger. "In here. That's what you sound like—your music."

Laudna blinked, unable to string together coherent words.

"When I'm overwhelmed and there's nothin' but noise in my head, I focus on that melody. I focus on you, Laudna. Your music is a symphony which soothes my panic and smooths out the clankin' notes of the world. This is your music, Laudna. It's subtle light in the darkness. It's peace when I'm overwhelmed by chaos. It's steady and comforting, and it eases my panic like your cool touch against my hot scars."

Imogen set the guitar against the porch railing and faced Laudna fully. "Over the years, I know you've struggled with the darkness within you. I know you've felt like a burden, like you're a dead end." She tucked a strand of hair behind Laudna's ear. "I hear that music every day. *Every day*. That's why I was always so confused and frustrated when you shrank away or saw yourself as less than. Because I hear your soul every day, and all I hear is beauty from you, Laudna."

Imogen cupped Laudna's face and gently tugged her forehead to meet hers. Their lips met for an almost feather-light kiss; soft, gentle contact.

She was sugar, almond, and bourbon.

She was warmth, wild summer air, and a steady presence.

She was *everything* to her.

At last, Laudna pulled away and caressed the back of Imogen's neck. "You are everything which completes me, Imogen. When I waiver, you steady me. When my own thoughts become too much, your voice fills my head and chases away the dark." She looked into Imogen's eyes. "You don't always see how wonderful you are, darling. It's easy to get caught up in the voices. If you never hear any other voice than mine, then let my words be this: I am here. I will always be here. When the voices are too much, let me placate your anxieties, let me hold you. Let me remind you of the beauty and warmth that I see when you can't hear anything but noise. Because all I see—inside and out—is you, Imogen darling. You. And I will never need anything more than you—everything you are."

Imogen closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A few moments passed. Then, she whispered, "Your music is beautiful, Laudna." She opened her eyes. "I am so lucky to be able to hear the depths of your soul every day. I am so lucky to live in your music, to have you by my side." Imogen removed her hat and wrapped her arms around Laudna, leaning her head on her shoulder. "My wife."

"The love of my long, once lonely life," Laudna whispered, pressing a kiss to Imogen's hair. "I am lucky to know your warmth and kindness, Imogen. I am lucky to have seen the worst of you—to have seen you at your weakest, most broken—and know that I would experience you at your most powerful." Laudna tilted her head and pressed another kiss to Imogen's hair. "I get to see you whole, happy, content. I'll ask for nothing else as long as I live."

Imogen squeezed Laudna's waist, hands gathering in the material of her skirts. "I love you, Laud. More than anythin'."

Laudna pulled Imogen closer, basking in her warmth. "And I love you, darling." She carefully extricated one of Imogen's hands from her waist and pressed it to her chest where her heart beat slowly. "That is you, darling—my heart and soul."

Imogen glanced up at Laudna and smiled. "There's no where else I'd rather be."

Laudna slipped Imogen's golden yellow chunky sweater over her head and suppressed a shiver as she made her way toward the blazing fire in the hearth. The flames beckoned her as though she were a moth unable to escape its draw.

Though she'd known it was nearing the end of Duscar, she hadn't really given much thought to the date. The Coven Peaks usually sheltered their little homestead from the winter weather, but several inches of snow had recently graced the ground, and Laudna felt every icy snowflake in her bones. Since the weather turned, she'd been bundled up—mostly in Imogen's sweaters—since Imogen never bothered with them. She savored the nights when Imogen would pull her close and wrap her radiating warmth around her, chasing away the underlying chill which seemed to permeate Laudna's soul.

Laudna sank into the loveseat and curled her knees into her chest. She shook the sweater's sleeve cuffs down around her hands and then balled her hands under her chin. She folded in on herself in an attempt to make her long, lanky frame as small as possible to trap in the nonexistent heat her body gave off.

Though she sat no more than a few feet from the crackling fire, the burning heat did nothing to melt the stiffness from her bones.

Laudna closed her eyes and tried to imagine Whitestone as the beautiful city it was and not the dark, damaged place she'd died in.

Tendrils of memory wrapped in pine and snow blew like a winter wind. The Sun Tree, decorated with ribbons, candles, dainty ornaments, holly berries, and garland, welcomed all to celebrate Winter's Crest. Snow-covered cobblestone streets, golden lamplight, graceful, soaring music drifting through the air, and children laughing rapped on Laudna's mind.

All those years she'd stuffed away clarified within her thoughts as though a hand wiped across a fogged windowpane.

Dancing lights, dressed trees, festive food, and the remembrance of light and laughter permeated the memory of those dark, isolated days when Laudna wandered Tal'Dorei nameless, voiceless, and barely more than a ghost given form.

Although Laudna saw the holiday images and knew they were the embodiment of love and warmth, she only felt that freezing, icy wind which came with Winter's Crest time.

The living room of their little farmhouse glowed with the warmth of the fire and little golden fairy lights draped around the exposed wooden beams of the ceiling, yet Laudna could not shake off that eternal chill.

She glanced at the dancing flames. If she could crawl inside them like an ember and let their heat burn away the cold, she would.

Another shiver shuddered through her body.

A warm, drawling voice like a late summer breeze kissed the inside of Laudna's mind. *Laudna, honey, are you alright?*

She sucked in a sudden breath but managed a small smile as she met those amethyst eyes which sparkled in the firelight. She hadn't even heard Imogen come in.

"I'm alright, darling," she whispered.

Imogen tilted her head, doubt swimming in her gaze. She approached and placed a gentle hand on Laudna's shoulder. Her palm exuded a soft heat, which even through the knitted sweater was blissfully warm. Slender, lightning-scarred and freckle-flecked fingers squeezed gently, sending tingles down Laudna's arm.

A vision of the broken, dead Sun Tree with frayed rope hanging from its branches flashed through Laudna's mind. She pressed four fingers to her temple and willed the awful image away.

"Usually I'm the one with headaches," Imogen said with a lopsided grin. When Laudna merely sniffed, her tone melted into that soft, quiet voice Imogen only ever spoke to Laudna with. "Honey," she said, coming around and kneeling in front of Laudna while also coincidentally blocking all heat from the fire, "talk to me. What's botherin' you?"

Laudna shook her head and waved a sleeve-covered hand. "Just a little cold is all. Don't worry about me, darling."

Imogen huffed a laugh. "Well, you're my wife, Laudna; I'm always gonna worry."

Even now, with the faintest bit of contact, Laudna felt as though she needn't worry. Imogen's touch emitted tenderness and love and compassion, and her essence enveloped Laudna with that immaterial lavender aura which intertwined with her soul.

Imogen was golden warmth and eternal safety.

Since the day they met over five years ago, Laudna knew wherever she went, whatever she faced, she'd be alright as long as Imogen was near.

Imogen, the girl who had saved her.

She'd followed that stream of lavender hair like a strange road, and though she never stopped following that purple path before her, beckoning her onward like a beacon in the night, Laudna never feared. Not as long as Imogen was around.

Where are you going?

Wherever you're goin'.

I would follow you anywhere...

And she had—to the ends of Exandria, to the heart of Ruidus, to a battle against a centuries old elf who threatened to unleash a god eater.

And then home.

Laudna had followed Imogen home.

Though she never had to go far to find it since Imogen, her love, her darling, her wife, was the only home she ever needed.

Imogen's scent wrapped around her like a cozy blanket, placating Laudna's anxieties. Her soft tone drew Laudna's mind back to the present where her wife's hand rested on a bent knee. "Is there somethin' I need to be worryin' about?"

Laudna stared into the flickering flames and whispered, "Today is Winter's Crest."

"Oh," Imogen breathed.

After a moment, she stood and crawled onto the cushion next to Laudna and her heat was like a comforting touch against Laudna's thigh. Imogen held out her hand, palm-up, and wiggled her fingers.

Laudna glanced sidelong at her.

She quirked a brow and once again motioned for a hand Laudna had hidden away.

Reluctantly, Laudna yielded an already cold hand to the open air, but the moment Imogen's electric touch made contact, the former knew she'd never want to part from the consolatory, tingling heat.

Imogen brushed her thumb along the back of Laudna's icy hand, the raised scars leaving a trail of warmth in their wake. "I don't recall you ever celebratin'."

"I used to," she whispered, "a long time ago." She threw Imogen a crooked grin. "Winter's Crest is all the rage in Tal'Dorei. It's quite the spectacle."

Those last few words made her pause. She'd described her hanging in the same way.

It was quite a spectacle.

Sloughing skin beneath her hands—

The scent of rotting flesh shoving into her nose—

Phantom braids of a noose slicing into her neck—

Deep bruises lacing her pale, broken throat—

Imogen's palms cupped Laudna's face, the gentleness of her touch extricating her from the past. Those worried, kind eyes stared at her, love brimming in them. "I didn't mean to awaken painful memories," she whispered.

"You did nothing of the sort, darling." Laudna scoffed and managed a smile. "Besides, it was a long time ago."

Imogen tilted her head and bit her bottom lip. "Doesn't mean it can't still hurt."

Laudna exhaled a shuddering breath and gripped Imogen's wrists as her thumbs brushed lightly back and forth across her cheeks. "It's hard to see Whitestone as it is and not as I knew it." She chuckled, but it was dull. "I died in a very dark, desolate place." She glanced up at into Imogen's eyes and suppressed another quivering chill. "It's hard to separate those memories during a time that's meant to be a celebration of liberation. Makes truly enjoying the holiday a bit difficult."

Imogen grinned and leaned in closer to whisper, "What if we made some new memories?"

Laudna stared, unsure how to take that sentiment.

Imogen settled closer, fingers still curled along Laudna's jaw. "I know about thoughts gettin' to be too much, and I especially know how negative ones can be so...heartbreakin' that they drown out anythin' good that might peek through." A slow, almost teasing smile blossomed on her lips. "What if we filled your head with so many good, wonderful memories that the bad ones had no more room to haunt you?"

Laudna placed a hand over her mouth as a disbelieving rasp broke from her.

"What?" Imogen said, that grin still apparent. "Is it ridiculous?"

Laudna shook her head, her own smile blooming as she threw her arms around Imogen. “No, it’s a lovely thought, darling.” Laudna sank into Imogen’s embrace as she whispered, “It’s the sweetest, most thoughtful idea.”

Imogen’s breath tickled her neck as she whispered back, “Would you like to celebrate?”

Laudna blinked and pulled away, though she still made sure to clutch Imogen’s hands in her own. “Winter’s Crest?”

“Why not? It is Winter’s Crest after all.” Imogen loosed a honeyed laugh. “That’s when people usually celebrate it.” A joyous glimmer appeared in her eyes as she spoke. “I know it’s late, but I could make us hot cocoa and bake some cookies.”

The ghosts of Winter’s Crest and the nightmares of Whitestone past, faded bit by bit as Imogen talked until nothing remained but her melodic, drawling voice, the smell of hickory, lilac, and almond, and that ever-present, permeating warmth.

Imogen filled her days and nights. Imogen’s beaming smile replaced the shadows of her nightmares. Imogen, whose essence was like a summer breeze, suffused the winter which clung to Laudna’s soul.

Imogen was *everything* to her.

Laudna found herself smiling as she focused back on Imogen’s animated ramble.

Her wife shrugged, hands waving in front of her chest. “I might remember one holiday tune from my childhood I could possibly play on the guitar—”

Laudna’s eyes widened at that. “Could you sing?”

Imogen’s excited rant halted, but her smile did not dim. She smiled, nose scrunching, and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I could do that.”

Laudna tucked lavender hair behind Imogen’s ear and the latter closed her eyes as she leaned into the touch. “Anything—everything—sounds lovely, Imogen.”

Those lightning-flecked fingers caressed the inside of Laudna’s wrist.

“But...” Laudna said softly, the faintest bit of sorrow creeping through, “I haven’t got a gift for you.”

Imogen smiled, eyes shining, and pulled Laudna into her as she sank back into the couch. Her warmth spread, thawing the ice in Laudna’s bones. “Well, then we’re even because don’t have a gift for you, either.”

She ran her fingers through Laudna’s silky hair and pressed gentle kiss to her cheek.

As though Imogen’s kiss were a mote of fire, that warm, tender flame spread and Laudna felt herself melting.

Laudna leaned her head against Imogen’s chest, right between the soft part of her nape and collarbone, and sank into the tendrils of heat which wrapped intangible arms around her.

“This is gift enough,” she breathed, and for the first time in a long time, Laudna felt truly warm—body and mind.

Though those dark, cold days still existed, she knew future Winter’s Crests would be filled with love, light, and golden warmth—they would be filled with Imogen.

Autumn in the Highlands came with fiery trees, cool mornings, and the scent of robust coffee floating through the kitchen. A dozen burning candles—which were a purple so dark they nearly looked black—gave off an aroma of blackberry and sage, and bundles of dried lavender, rosemary, thyme, and eucalyptus, hung from an overhead fixture above the wood countertop.

Various jars of Laudna's trinkets and crafting materials lined the rustic white shelves, along with jars of flour, sugar, bowls, pots, and pans.

Several hand-woven rugs covered the dark wood floor, and plants hung from the matching wood beams that lined the ceiling.

Even at the early hour, sunlight poured through the windows, dousing Imogen in golden rays and illuminating the cozy kitchen with a warm glow.

Imogen finished lacing her well-worn leather boots and sat up, resting an elbow on the edge of the table. She traced a finger over the "C-Pop" carved in the table's grain and couldn't help but grin.

Chetney had made practically everything within their home—including their house. He'd even carved the phases of the moons and painted the little wooden crescents black, which hung above the two large east-facing windows overhanging the sink.

Imogen stood with a loud exhale and hooked the strap of her brown overalls. She placed her breakfast plate and empty coffee mug in the sink and glanced to her left at a dark leather journal.

Laudna's dream journal.

Imogen leafed through a few of the weathered pages and caught some familiar words from nearly a decade ago: "twins," "army," "mysterious figure," "malevolent," "Otohan"—

Otohan's blade screamed through the air—

Imogen gasped and pulled away—

The kettle on the stove whistled, breaking Imogen from the vision.

She touched three fingers to her chest—to the old scar that lay hidden beneath her tank—and blinked the past away. With a shake of her head, Imogen turned her attention from the old, inked words and focused on the space around her, the place and time she existed in *now*, and breathed.

After several moments, she began to methodically and expertly prepare Laudna's tea—a deep red raspberry leaf, oatstraw, and chamomile loose-leaf tea—completed with a spoon of honey.

Imogen set the steaming mug down, and with a flick of her fingers, pulled her brown rancher hat toward the outstretched hand. She grazed the tip of her thumb over the weathered and faded red thread sewn through the hatband and she smiled softly to herself. Her eyes settled on the identical bracelet adorning her wrist, and blue-dawn music connected to her soul seemed to manifest at the memories from years' past.

Just as Imogen set the hat down on her head, soft lips kissed her cheek and that beautiful, haunting melody wrapped its immaterial arms around her consciousness.

She smiled and managed to grasp Laudna's chin before she could pull away too quickly. She guided her wife's lips to hers and gave a slow, tender kiss.

When they parted, Imogen glanced up into Laudna's beautiful dark eyes and whispered, "Off so soon, baby?"

"I have some errands to run before opening the shop," Laudna said as she put her wine-red shawl over her bony shoulders. "Do you need anything, my love?"

Imogen shook her head, nose scrunching as she grinned. "No, we're good here. Thank you."

"Always, darling," Laudna hummed. She stooped to gather her things but looked up with a smile. She slung her bag over her shoulder and then wrapped thin, spindly fingers around the warm mug of dark red tea. "Thank you, darling."

Imogen gave a soft smile. "I know how cold you get this time of year."

Laudna sighed as she sipped. "If only we could have stayed in bed."

"If only," Imogen whispered, brushing a thumb along Laudna's cool jaw. "Oh, by the way," she began with a glance at the plate of untouched eggs, sausage, and strawberries—now most likely cold—and gestured at it. "Have you seen—"

"Upstairs."

"Doin' what?"

"I don't know," Laudna said with a shrug. "I heard movement, but I'm not sure what's happening up there."

"I'll handle it," Imogen said with a sigh. She angled her hat back and pressed another kiss to Laudna's lips, sweetness lingering on her tongue. "I love you, baby. I'll see you tonight."

Laudna's cool fingers squeezed Imogen's lightning-marked hand. "Message me if something happens. I love you, darling."

"Of course," Imogen said with a smile. Then, as easy as breathing, she sent tendrils of her power into her love's mind, wrapped Laudna's thoughts in a warm summer breeze, and whispered, *I'm always here*.

Laudna's music swelled, that smooth melody catching the heels of Imogen's lavender essence. She grinned. *You're always welcome*.

With one last raspberry-infused kiss, Laudna set off across the dewy grass.

Imogen leaned a shoulder against the frame of the front door and watched as Laudna headed toward the morning sunrise, her path into town all too familiar. She didn't turn away until her wife finally disappeared into the trees at the edge of the clearing.

After several moments of breathing in the crisp morning air, Imogen plucked her flannel from off the front door coat hook and wandered back toward the bottom of the stairs.

"Grace Temult!" Imogen called, her accent deep and drawling as she stared at the top landing. "What are you doin'?"

She slid the flannel on as she waited for an answer, but none came.

"Your breakfast is gettin' cold, babygirl."

Still, no answer.

With a heavy sigh, Imogen trod up the wooden stairs, the crimson and lavender lightning adorning her hands almost iridescent in the morning light.

At the top of the stairs, Imogen angled to the right and knocked quietly against the wood grain of the bedroom door.

"Gracie, what are you doin', honey?"

A small gasp sounded from behind the closed door.

"I've got to get out to the fields and you need to get dressed and eat." She waited a beat, ear lowered toward the door. "Grace."

Imogen tilted her head and grasped the doorknob, expecting it to turn, but the knob merely rattled as the locked gears did not budge.

She sighed and placed both hands on her hips. "You know I can unlock this door with my mind, little lady."

Instead of an answer, faint muttering and various dull clatters met Imogen's ears.

"Grace," she gasped, and with no more than a thought, unlocked the door and shoved it open with a burst of lavender wind.

Inside the room, Imogen beheld a disaster, and a split-second later, the scent of fresh grape juice hit her nose.

Her little girl, barely six years old, sat on the faded wood floor covered in smears of purple paste, a bowl of spilled grapes at her side, and partially crushed charcoal in a mortar and pestle resting by the opposite hip.

At Imogen's intrusion, Grace looked up at her mother, her pale lavender eye practically white in the sun, and her dark brown eye almost a golden honey. She'd slathered her short, rich brown hair in that purple paste, and pieces of grape skins hung from damp, straggly strands near her cheeks.

Imogen soaked in the scene before her, blinking. Her words didn't quite work, so she muttered, *Gracie, what are you doin', babygirl?*

Grace gave a timid, hesitant grin. "Hi, Mama," she said quietly in her high, slightly raspy tone.

Imogen knelt down, gently took some of Grace's messy hair between her fingers, and couldn't help but sigh. *You just got a bath last night.*

Then she glanced down at the grapes and tilted her head. *Are those the grapes Mommy was gonna use to make juice?*

Grace bit her lip as she fiddled with her little, purple-tinted hands. "I was going to pick Mommy some more."

With a slow exhale, Imogen eased herself to the floor, crossing her legs underneath her. She looked her daughter in the eyes. "If you want anythin', all you have to do is ask. If you needed some grapes for somethin', just let me and Mommy know that, okay? Don't hide it from us. We would've been happy to go out to the vineyard to help you pick more."

Grace nodded but didn't meet Imogen's eyes.

Imogen took Grace's hands in hers and inspected the strange purple paste, making a face. "Where did you find this?" She bent down and sniffed it. "And what is it?"

"Mommy had it downstairs," Grace said with a ghost of a grin. She picked up the empty jar and read slowly, sounding out the letters, "Sw-ee-t vi-o-let."

Imogen cupped the back of Grace's head and tsked. "You smeared your hair with the powder of violet petals?" She titled her head. "Why, Gracie?"

Grace shrugged. "Because."

Imogen rubbed her thumb back and forth across Grace's cheek and said softly, "Because why, babygirl?"

A little hand reached out and caressed Imogen's lavender hair, so Imogen took Grace's hand between her thumb and index finger and kissed the back of her knuckles. Her daughter's other hand found Imogen's freckle-adorned face and pressed the heel of her palm against her cheek, chubby fingers spread wide as though she was trying to grasp the entire surface of Imogen's cheek.

Then, Grace gave a dimply smile and said, "I wanted hair like yours, Mama."

Imogen's posture melted a little at that. She cocked her head and a breathy chuckle escaped her nose. "Well, baby, that's real sweet, but I'm afraid violet petals and smashed grapes won't quite get your hair to look like mine."

Grace blinked, looking confused. "Why not?"

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"But—" Grace's eyes found the ceiling as her thoughts swirled around in her head loud enough Imogen could practically hear them without even opening her mind. "Andi, the girl at school, said she has hair like her mama's." She looked up at Imogen, head cocked comically far to the side. "But my hair isn't like yours or Mommy's."

Imogen gave Grace a slanted, sympathetic smile. "Come here, babygirl," she muttered as she gathered her messy girl in her arms. "I'll explain while we get you cleaned up."

Cradling Grace to her chest, Imogen crossed the creaky boards of the hallway and into the washroom. She knelt on one knee, Grace balanced on a hip, and turned on the faucet which brought in cold water from the well outside. She lit the charcoal below the metal tub and waited a few minutes for it to warm. Then, Imogen pulled Grace's stained pajamas off and placed her in the tub.

Kneeling by the side of the tub, Imogen gently scooped handfuls of warm water over Grace's head and watched as ribbons of violet streaked down her skin and stained the bathwater.

Slowly, methodically, Imogen washed, and for several minutes, Grace merely stared up at her, big eyes wide with silent anticipation.

"Do you remember," Imogen whispered as she lathered a fruit-infused shampoo into Grace's hair, "what I told you about my mama? How some mothers give birth to their daughters?"

Grace nodded, though confusion glistened in her eyes.

“Since my mama gave birth to me, I have her hair.” Imogen tilted her head as she continued cleaning. “And sometimes, children have their daddy’s hair.”

“But what about children who have a Mama and a Mommy?” Grace wondered, index finger gently tracing Imogen’s scars. “What about me?”

“Some mamas give birth to their daughters and some mamas choose.” Imogen said, running her hand through clean, dark hair. “Your mommy and I, we chose you. We loved you so much we couldn’t imagine our lives without you.”

Grace stared at her little hands half covered by murky purple bathwater in her lap. Imogen could tell her brain was mulling over the information and trying to understand it.

For a little while, both sat in silence.

Then, Grace reached up and touched a finger just below Imogen’s amethyst eye. “We have matching eyes.”

Imogen could hear the unspoken question. *We have matching eyes but not matching hair? Why don’t I look like you and Mommy?*

Imogen pressed a kiss to Grace’s fingers and inhaled slowly. “What do I call you?” she whispered.

Her eyes lit up. “Gracie!”

Imogen chuckled. “Yes, that’s true. What’s the other one? The one about the moon?”

Grace craned her neck back, grinning. “Roo-dus-born baby.”

“Yes,” Imogen laughed, “you’re my Ruidusborn baby.” She discarded a grape skin in the trash and moved on to cleaning out the remaining violet petal paste. “Do you remember which moon Ruidus is?”

“The red one.”

“Yes.” Imogen stood and drained the tub and then plucked a towel from the rack.

With a swoop, Imogen scooped Grace up and blew a raspberry against her wet cheek. Though Grace tried to push away, an explosion of laughter burst from her, which drew a hearty chuckle from Imogen.

“You, my babygirl,” Imogen said through her laughs, “are like me. We were both born under a flare of Ruidus. That’s why you have your lavender eye and why I have my amethyst eyes.”

“Is Mommy Roo-dus-born too?”

“No, Mommy’s very special in a different way.” Imogen tilted her chin as she ran her lightning-flecked hand through Grace’s wet hair. “Mommy used to have hair like yours when she was young.”

“But not anymore?”

“Not anymore.”

“Why?”

Flashes of Laudna’s past—the torture, the hanging, the awakening, the years alone, Delilah, seeing her younger self through Laudna’s eyes—bombarded Imogen.

She inhaled sharply but smiled down at Grace. “I’ll let Mommy tell you why one day. That’s her story to tell.”

“Okay,” Grace mumbled, pouting for only a few seconds.

“Alright,” Imogen said with a nod. “Let’s get you dressed because Dahlia and Iris need their breakfast, and so do you, little lady.”

Before she could carry Grace back to her room, though, she wiggled out of her mama’s grasp and streaked across the hall, giggling like a little gremlin.

“Babygirl, you need to put clothes on,” Imogen scolded with a shake of her head, though a smile appeared, nonetheless.

“No!” Grace shrieked, little feet stomping against the floor in her wobbly run.

“Babygirl, it’s not gonna to warm up until later. If you don’t put clothes on, you’ll be cold.”

“The horses don’t have to wear clothes!”

“You ain’t a horse; you’re a little girl who needs to wear clothes. We can’t be streakin’ out in the open.”

Grace stumbled around her mess of a room, laughing, while Imogen held her favorite pair of faded overalls in a hand. She let her run and squeal until her little lips took on a slight purple hue.

“Alright, babygirl,” Imogen said sternly yet gently, “come here.”

Her little girl pounded to a stop, mouth open in a wide grin and eyes alight. Still smiling, she breathed, “Yes, ma’am,” and wandered over, already reaching for the overalls.

Imogen clicked her tongue and maneuvered the overalls out of reach. “No ma’am. Underwear first.”

After wrangling Grace into the overalls, a long sleeve shirt, a fur-lined flannel, and boots—which Grace insisted she could put on and tie herself—Imogen headed for the door, mind already thinking of the duties that needed completed.

Dahlia would probably nip at her for being late. Iris would just be happy to see her. Then she had to muck out the stalls, clean out their shoes, shine their saddles—

“Mama?”

Imogen turned to where Grace stood, a half pout on her face as she stared at the mess on her bedroom floor. “What is it, baby?”

“Can I still have hair like yours?”

That list of things scrolling through her mind…evaporated.

Imogen glanced at the grapes and smears of violet paste and wondered how she might be able to do such a thing. She turned her scarred hand over and stared at the palm. Perhaps…

Imogen knelt down in front of Grace and took a breath. “Of course, baby.”

She ran her fingers down the length of Grace’s brown hair, and as her hand travelled, lavender strands appeared. Within seconds, her childhood self seemed to be standing before her.

“Come here, baby.” She held out her hand and Grace wrapped her fingers around Imogen’s index.

In the washroom once more, Imogen lifted Grace up and pointed at the mirror over the sink. Two lavender haired girls stared back at them.

Grace gasped and leaned forward, nearly taking Imogen with her. She placed a hand against the glass of the mirror, staring wide-eyed at her reflection. “Wow,” she breathed slowly, voice awe-struck.

Imogen ran a flat hand down Grace’s hair and said, “Now you look like Mama.”

Grace whirled in her grasp, her whole body practically vibrating. “Mama! Mama, Mama, Mama! Can you—can you make it look like Mommy’s too?”

Imogen cocked her head.

“Mommy’s hair is black and white,” Grace continued excitedly. “Can you do that too?”

Imogen envisioned Laudna’s beautiful, dark hair adorned by the shock of white, and gathered Prestidigitation magic at her fingertips. Black carved through the lavender in a section by Grace’s ear, and another at her temple. And then like frost growing across a windowpane, white crawled through part of the black; a manifestation of Laudna.

She crooked a finger under Grace’s chin and then pointed at the mirror once more.

Grace’s expression melted into something like dumbfoundedness before a beaming smile stretched across her face. She smooshed her cheek against Imogen’s and wrapped both her arms around her mother’s neck, squeezing tight.

“I look like my mamas,” she breathed.

“Come on,” Imogen grinned, “let’s go show the horses.”

Already kicking in the air, Grace tore from Imogen’s arms, barreled down the stairs, and flew out the front door, flannel flying like a cape behind her.

From the yard, Grace’s shout echoed, faintly meeting Imogen’s ears. “Dahlia! Iris! I put on clothes just so I could show you my hair!”

Imogen’s heart swelled, and the smile that spread across her face might as well have been as bright as the morning sun. The golden light enveloped her as she leaned her palms against the porch railing, watching contentedly as her daughter bolted toward the stables.

Laudna, honey? she whispered, sending her thoughts into the ether as she searched for the tether which bridged two hearts.

That blue-dawn melody answered like an echo of Imogen’s own soul. *Yes, darling?*

Gracie has a surprise for you when you get back.

Laudna’s soft smile permeated her next words: *I can’t wait to see it.*

Imogen adjusted her hat, letting her fingers linger on the red thread before she followed after her daughter.