

Autopsy:

If you had ever seen her without a shirt (which of course you wouldn't have, because she always took great care to ensure no one ever did), you would know that the claw marks started right where the small black handprints ended, where the flesh went soft right below her ribs. By some definition of the word, this was probably ironic.

His claws had torn through her armor like it was tissue paper: five fissures in a diagonal line from right waist across the stomach to the center of the chest up along the throat and across the face, disappearing into the hairline. If you were the medically-inclined type, there was something fascinating about the ability to see the different layers: chipped bone under torn muscle under peeled back skin. All a bright, garish red, of course. The blood had run out from under her armor down her legs and arms, it was drying into clumps in her hair, it had splattered across her face - her eyes were open and covered with a thin pink film from the blood that had run into them. Still, better that than to have lost them to his grasping claws.

What looked almost like semi-deflated red balloons were spilling out from the gaping holes in the metal over her stomach - don't look at them too long, don't wonder what they are - and cracked bits of collar bone were sticking dangerously upwards, happy to jab a misplaced finger. Soft pale skin had been torn to tattered ribbons on her throat and her lips had and cheek had been split open, showing bloodied teeth beneath. The bone of her nose was cracked and exposed, as was a bit of skull above her eyebrow. If you pushed back the stiffened hair, who knows what you might find? Ripped skin, a bit of skull, fractured bones showing brain? Is that where the magic lived? Black and white and sparking and angry and scared?

It's easy to wonder what each of them felt at that moment. The metal was hard, but how soft was the flesh beneath? Did it feel like fingertips dragging through thick mud, or was it wetter and slicker than that? Was breaking the bones like snapping twigs? How warm was her still-alive body as his hand traveled through it? Could he feel the rhythmic pulse of the blood as it swelled and flowed out around his hand in her throat? He couldn't have known the years spent on makeups and creams and lotions and stretches to keep the face tight, unmarred, perfect, as he pulled it apart like a wet piece of paper. But then again, maybe he knew exactly that, and what he felt was joy or triumph or vindication at ruining something beautiful, the thrill at being somewhere no one should ever be and feeling things no one should ever feel. Or maybe he felt nothing but familiarity and boredom: another check on the to-do-list.

The only hope for her was that she was too far gone to feel a thing.

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Hag:

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that there were bigger things to be worried about, but she couldn't stop thinking about how the creature's entire body looked like a soft, mottled bruise. The face was wrinkled, folds of skin with sweat leaking from between them, a pockmarked nose that stretched and drooped down below her mouth. And that mouth: yellow teeth, globs of foaming red-tinged spit, breath that smelled like - blood, meat, rot, disease. Horns that looked like insect bodies, cracked and pink and layered, bloodshot yellowed eyes, thickly matted hair with bugs crawling in and out. This creature was the most hideous thing she had ever seen.

Focus, she tried to tell herself, but she was going to die and this face, out of a child's nightmare, was going to be the last thing she ever saw. She couldn't even close her own eyes to block out the sight.

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Mirrors:

She was three years old, sitting on the vanity in front of the mirror, dabbing lipstick onto her round mouth just the way Mama taught her. The Governess clapped in delight, immediately scooped her up to show her off to her parents. "This one is going to make us proud," Papa said, ticking her stomach.

She was six years old, watching in the mirror as the new Governess showed her how to take her own measurements: waist, chest, hips, thighs, calves, upper arms. "If you don't learn these habits now, you'll never pick them up later," Governess told her. She kept her measuring tape in the finest jewelry box she owned, nestled on a slip of velvet, beside her pet rock and pressed dandelions.

She was ten years old, craning her head around to see the reflection as the new Maidservant taught her how to properly use a corset. How much to tighten it, how to breathe in small delicate sips, how much pain was "to be expected" and how much was dangerous. She stared into the mirror, memorizing every step, and imagined herself as a princess, curtsying and gliding across a ballroom.

She was twelve years old. "Your body is your greatest weapon," Mama told her, tugging at her hair, lifting her arm, pinching the unwanted flesh on her side, pointing in the mirror at each step. "Your clothing is your armor. Your makeup is your warpaint. Every single time you leave this house, you are in battle." And even though she felt a bit like a show pony, she was smiling because she knew that in this battle, she was going to win.

She was thirteen years old, staring into the mirror, and hating every single thing she saw. Her hands, hanging limply at her sides, were fizzing with dark sparks, leaping from coal-black fingertips. Her sides were marred with black handprints, starting towards the back of her ribs and dragged forwards to her stomach, marked with tight, raised scars that crossed and wound around as if following the lines of the palms. She started to raise one hand to her cheek, held it just a few inches away. She felt the normal, slight jolt of electricity, a bit of warmth, nothing else. Nothing like the earlier searing pain. She tapped her cheek with one finger. Nothing. Her eyes filled with tears and she bit down on the inside of her cheeks until she tasted blood and the sparks started to burn. She stared into her own eyes, fingertips hovering over her jaw. *Do it. Do it. Do what you did to him.* And then in a rush of emotion, her hands dropped to her sides. *Coward.*

She was sixteen years old and her entire body was aflame as she studied her own reflection. She had been reading one of Z's books, and all of a sudden, it wasn't the sweet romance she had been expecting but something - different. Something that explained the things that boys shouted at her as she walked to the temple. And she had realized for the first time, truly and properly, that someday, someone was going to see her. Not her face, not her dress, not her silhouette, but all of her - including the scars that each morning and night, she would dutifully smear some different foul-smelling cream on. Sometimes they burned or itched or scabbed over, but nothing she had done had ever made them better. She placed her hands gently over the scars on her ribs, and imagined.

She was seventeen years old, and she knew she was the most beautiful girl in the world. All of the young noblemen knew it too. They'd been calling on her every day. She was going to have her pick of them all.

She couldn't stop smiling, posing, practicing the exact half-smile and eyelash flutter in the mirror. She was *happy*. Almost happy enough to ignore the shiver of fear down her spine when she thought about what they might say if they ever saw her hands, arms, ribs - the things she had kept hidden for the last four years. But she smoothed her dress and practiced a twirl and knew how beautiful she was.

She was eighteen years old, and she knew she looked like a monster. She stared at herself with disgust, cataloging top to bottom. Of course there the scars were hideous, but the suitors didn't see those. So what was it? Watery eyes, sickly complexion, too strong, too tall, too loud. Stop eating. More makeup. Tighter corset, higher heels, lower neckline. What was going to happen to her?

She was twenty-one years old, and her body didn't feel like her own as she stared at herself in an unfamiliar mirror in an unfamiliar room. Her ribs pressed against her skin from days of eating plain trail rations, and muscles stood out on her calves, her arms, her thighs, from days of walking and fighting and more walking. Her hair was a tangled mess, the skin under her eyes was dark, there were calluses on her feet. Her family would be *appalled*. But as she moved her bare feet across the wooden floor, sinking into a mock fighting stance, she couldn't help but revel in the moment of power. With styled hair and a face of makeup, she would be unbeatable.

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Stars:

Almost every night, one of her brothers or sisters would have to go find her in the garden. After dinner and any evening lessons, she would slip away to have a few minutes for herself - and for the sky. She had never tried to put words to it, the feeling she got from laying on her back in the grass and staring up at the expanse above her. She would watch the watercolor swirls of clouds paint themselves, or make up her own constellations, or imagine what else might be up there, beyond her view.

When they had arrived in Barovia, it had been a hard adjustment - the clouds, always covering her sky. Not beautiful sunset clouds, either - a bland, endless sea of white. No stars to wish on, no moon to dance for. But she had believed that one day, she would see it all again. And some nights, she would watch the firelight dance on pine needles and imagine the tiny pinpricks of reflected light were stars.

Not anymore. Now she could see a gray blur of objects that were a few feet in front of her but not the pine needles above their campsite - much less the clouds above the trees - much less the sky she missed so badly, if she ever even got to a place to see it again. She couldn't clearly see the faces of her friends, or the reflection of her own face in the mirror. She would run her fingers over it, feeling the tight raised scarring over her eyes and cheeks. Really, she wondered if she should be grateful she couldn't see it.

Some nights, when everyone else was asleep, she would pull out Maxwell's notebook and hold it as close to her face as possible. It wasn't the real thing, and it never would be, but the precise, measured drawings made her feel a bit closer to her brother, and to the sky they had stared up at together. Maybe he was looking up and thinking of her. For now, she could live with that. She had to.

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Fairy Tales:

When Isadora was young, most nights ended with her and her sisters in a pile in one of their beds, listening to the governess's fairytales. These weren't stories of princesses and knights and dragons. These were stories of marriages and murders. Beautiful young women who charmed rich young men and

poisoned their evil stepmothers. Handsome noble boys who went off to war and left their wives to run their estates. Isadora loved them all.

When she got a little older, she started borrowing her sisters' romance novels. These books were about jealousy and desire and possession. Dark and brooding strangers who swept damsels off their feet and into bed. Monsters who were tamed by the face of a beautiful woman, and swore to defend her to the death. Runaway brides and star-crossed lovers. She loved these, too - pouring over the pages by candlelight, silently practicing the lines and the moves.

In real life, what she saw was mess. Her father disappearing for days and her mother's breath stinking of liquor. Her brother's marriage turning cold and distant, separate rooms and separate meals and separate lives. She remembered the warmth in Sebastian's gaze as he watched Antonio chatting with customers and thought that was the closest thing she had seen to happiness. And that, of course, was disgrace.

What she had expected was something coldly professional. A business arrangement. An exchange of her dowry, her body, her time, for some semblance of power. When she had dared to dream, she had thought of those romance novels - a tight grip, dangerous words, dark nights.

When it came to her in real life, she couldn't wrap her head around it. She had known that love was a tool, or a hurt, maybe. She hadn't anticipated all these tiny observations that made the world spin.

The scar across his brow. The scrawls and loops of his letters. The gentle lines at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. The well-kept leather of his boots. The way his hair fell in his face when he was writing. The warmth of his hand against hers.

There was fear, and jealousy, and longing, like in her books. And she would have been thrilled to give him her money, her body, her time, like she had been taught. All of that was true. But it didn't begin to cover the softness. The little half-smile he gave her when she caught his eye. The rush of protectiveness that stole her breath whenever he tugged at the bandages around his neck. The sense of calm she had found as he took her hand in his, sliding his fingers between hers, irregardless of the scales and the danger and the cold.

As it turned out, love was warm.

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