

Soaked cloth bundled against Cleo's tongue and the sockets of her missing molars. The frayed ends choked any words that rose, urgent and confused, against its frayed ends, licking up the acid from her throat. Her muscles froze in a half aborted thrash after agony stitched over her hip like ribboned flame, and the hands pinning her into the sand doubled their effort. Fingers tangled into her hair, latched around her ankles, and shackled her right arm between her shoulder blades.

Broken shells and congealed blood—blood that didn't belong to her—glued Cleo's eyelids shut, and the effort to pry them apart nearly flung her back into unconsciousness. Her vision struggled to adjust to the light that flashed over the waves of the Loomtide.

Bloodstained foam tumbled onto the shore of the Rouser's Jaw. The shattered fragments of her glass arm littered the ground, a few cracked fingers poking out of the sand as if someone were reaching up through it, trying to escape burial.

Casualties saturated the beach beyond. Dozens of corpses and piles of golden Somni dust slumped into the sloping dunes. The bodies closest to her were a massacre, their vital points slashed and bludgeoned with vicious accuracy.

*Vicious accuracy*, Cleo thought to herself, squinting until the bodies blurred, until the carnage looked clumsy. *Now, that doesn't sound like me.*

One of the bloodied throats had a length of glass impaling it front to back. *Oh, there's my bicep.*

"Is she starting up again?" the voice near her ankles asked, a hint frantic, grip pinching. Had to be Daksha, the way his words gave a whistle through his gapped front teeth. "I don't know if I have another in me. My arms are shaking."

Cleo tried to squirm beneath their hands but that agony punched through her hip again, halting her movements. A groan pushed against the corners of the gag, a distant rumble in her chest.

Daksha whined in clear distress. "Come on, Scatheless, have mercy. If not on yourself, then on *me*."

"Just keep her legs down." That was Mar, straddling her back and holding her wrist. The split ends of his pale brown braid dusted the side of her neck, swaying as he adjusted his

position. Cleo wondered why he wasn't holding down her glass arm too until she remembered the iridescent remnants of her prosthetic. "Deep breaths, maybe?"

She tried to remember what broke her arm in the first place.

"Deep breaths," Daksha repeated.

She couldn't.

"Oh, here we go."

Cleo rolled her empty left shoulder.

"Deep breaths?"

Mar sighed sharply, leaning heavier onto Cleo's wrist.

"Excellent advice, Maria, really."

"Don't call me that."

"No, seriously. Deep breaths. That'll fix everything."

"Daksha," Mar started.

"I bet it'll even fix *this*," Daksha said, and Cleo knew he was giving a sharp nod to her prone form with a vaguely insulting gesture. "Why haven't we thought of this sooner? Hey, Scatheless. Let's take some deep breaths, and maybe that'll stop you from trying to kill yourself in your *sleep*!"

*Everything hurts.*

"I told *you* to take deep breaths. Not Cleo." Mar paused. "And she's unconscious, not asleep."

"She tries to kill herself either way—"

"Knock it off," the last voice scolded near her ear, laden and raspy like a handful of warm stones. That was Dolly, keeping her from slamming her head into the ground. "The both of you. Enough. We've done this plenty of times."

Awareness crept closer and skulked about the edges of her focus, using Dolly's voice as an anchor point. The more it did, the more Cleo realized the chaos clamoring around: in the smoke burning in the shrill wind, in the distant shouts and pleading the tumbling surf swallowed.

She thought of the dead all around—friends and enemies and strangers alike. The observations passed through her in a slack haze until it dropped, sudden and icy, like a knife through the ribs. She thrashed again, lungs aching with the panic, and the need—the need to fix this, to *do something*—

Mar hissed through his teeth, redoubling his effort and wringing a shout from her, from whatever was wrong with her hip—

She spat against the gag and kicked her feet, but Daksha remained firm, despite his trembling arms.

“She’s going to kill herself,” Daksha said between attempts to catch his breath, quick and haunted. “Sculptors, Cleo, you’ve gotta stop. *Stop.*”

Mar freed one hand to graze over her hip with a clinical touch, taking a hold of something and keeping it firm. The pain of the movement held Cleo still more than their hands did. “She’s too stubborn.”

“To die?” Daksha asked. “Or to stop?”

He didn’t answer. *Both*, Cleo heard.

Exhaustion forced her to go limp. As she did, Mar shifted. He was restless, she could tell. Keeping her pinned instead of attending to whatever tragedy had befallen the Rousers didn’t align with his purpose here. Clinical and efficient: Dolly’s resident fixer.

“Dolly, you’ve got the steadiest hands here. If we’re pulling the sword out, it’s gotta be you.”

So that was the cause of the searing heat in her hip—impalement. A familiar pain, just one she had been unable to place with her mind rocking around like a wave battered ship, queasy and unsure.

The last memory she could place was sitting at the foot of Daksha’s bed as he snored. She had been waiting for him to wake up. To tell him something. She vaguely recalled it being stupid. Something that would make him laugh.

Still, it was no wonder she couldn’t remember what it was, or remember anything that led up to her being facedown on the beach with a sword impaling her.

Dolly clicked her tongue. “Right. Pull it out and pray it won’t kill her.”

“Scatheless doesn’t bleed,” Mar muttered, though his voice had lost the typical bland confidence. “But it’s—it’s still *damage.*”

That was the funny thing about not having any blood. Contrary to common belief, things that would typically kill any other person—Dreamborn or human—would still kill her too.

Some considered Cleo lucky, uncannily so, for surviving this long. It wasn’t just the line of work, but rather her disposition to—what did Dolly call it? Right: to throw herself into every

grave dug in front of her. Most of the time, she couldn't convince herself there wasn't something new to find at the bottom, in the dirt.

Daksha laughed. It was a near manic thing. "For someone named Scatheless, she gets *damaged* a whole lot, doesn't she?"

Cleo wasn't the one who chose the ridiculous nickname. The inability to bleed and the lack of visible evidence for her injuries tended to give people false impressions, like that she had a shred of luck.

She needed to move, to tell them that she was awake and out of danger. At least, out of danger from herself. They didn't need to hold her down anymore, to prevent her from slamming her head into the ground or attempting to break her neck or biting out her tongue or finding a stray sword to fall on.

Well.

"I just—" Daksha stopped. "I feel like this is my fault. I lost track of her the moment the fire started. Then found her here, thrashing—"

"It's not your fault." Unshakable and entirely assured: Dolly, always Dolly. "She did her job. She protected us."

*I'm a bruiser*, Cleo found herself mouthing around the gag. *I'm a dog*.

She tried desperately to remember what she had protected the Rousers from. At least then, if she could, dying would feel a bit more worth it.

"Wait." Dolly leaned closer. Close enough that Cleo could feel her breath fanning hot over her ringing ears. "Sculptors. She's awake. Cleo? Kid." The gag scraped against her teeth as Dolly pulled it out. She spat, coughing as Dolly patted her curls. "Come on, Scatheless. Breathe. That's it, sweetheart."

Sometimes Cleo wondered if she even needed to breathe. Whoever dreamt her had already forgotten to include a few crucial things, namely blood, but also her back molar teeth, a few tendons in her ankles, and her right thumbnail. Her limbs fit together as if they had been plucked from different bodies—disjointed and mismatched, with differing knuckle widths and one leg longer than the other. It wouldn't shock her if, even after all of her gasping and choking, air was purely cosmetic.

She breathed anyway.