A Future Glimpse

by DrawnToDarkness

Summary

An unexpected visitor from an alternate reality gives DG a glimpse into her possible future.

Notes

This has been sitting unfinished on my computer for 8+ years. How scary is that? Having been drawn back to Tin Man recently, I thought it was time to finally finish it off and see if any of the other WIPs gathering dust have settled enough to be finished, too. Hopefully it won't take too long for this one to be fully finished and uploaded - I promise I won't stop till it's complete.
A Future Glimpse
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The closer they got to the throne room, the more subdued the child in her arms became. It was almost as if she knew what was about to happen, almost as if she sensed these moments may be the last she spent with her devoted mother.

With tears shimmering in her bright blue eyes, Princess DG of the Outer Zone tightened her hold on her daughter at the same time as her husband drew her closer to his side. Glancing up at him, her heart ached at the tense expression on his face, the pain in his eyes at what they were about to do making her own a hundred times worse.

"It's not forever," she said quietly, though her voice seemed to bounce off the walls of the otherwise empty hallways. She met his gaze as he looked at her, hoping to reassure as well as seeking reassurance herself. "We'll be back for her. As soon as we can, we'll be back for her."

Her husband's hand tightened around her waist once again but his step didn't falter; she knew that if either of them hesitated, they'd talk themselves out of the plan they'd spent most of the last week talking themselves into. "It'll be a week. A few days more than that at most."

He didn't sound so certain, either.

The baby cradled to her chest gave a little whimper as the couple stepped into the throne room. Directly behind the throne, one of the panes of glass of the mirrored walls flickered ominously. DG squared her shoulders and walked towards it.

"You sure this is safe?" Turning to her husband, she found him almost glaring at the mirror.

If the situation weren't so serious and concern in his eyes wasn't so blatant, DG might have either laughed at the expression on his face or maybe felt insulted at what she could have misconstrued as a lack of confidence in her abilities. Knowing he was worried, for both her and their daughter, made her eyes soften and she reached out a hand to touch his arm.

"Both Az and I checked and double checked the world we contacted was right. She'll be safe there. Safer than she is here." Her smile faltered a little when his eyes locked with hers. "If there was another way…"

"I know." A sigh escaped him and he reached out, enfolding in his arms, their daughter cocooned protectively between them. Gazing down at her, a shadow crossed over his features. "It would be safer if you stayed with her."

"My place is here." She would be lying if she said she hadn't considered it, though. The thought of being away from her daughter, even for a short stretch of time, was almost unbearable. "Azkadellia isn't strong enough to fight the mage on her own and Mother won't be much help..." Shaking her head against the thought of what was to come, DG fixed her gaze on her husband's face. "My place is here," she repeated firmly, "with you."

His arms tightened around her, around his family, before reluctantly falling to his sides. Leaning down, he brushed his lips against his daughter's forehead. With a heavy sigh he couldn't disguise, he straightened and half-turned away from her, so he could both keep an eye on her and keep an eye on
the door. "Let's get this over with," he said brusquely. "The sooner it's done..."

"The sooner she'll be back," DG finished the thought, biting down on her bottom lip. She squared her shoulders and started walking towards the flickering pane of glass, her eyes beginning to sting as her daughter made a soft, cooing sound. "It's okay, my little princess," she whispered, her voice a reassuring murmur. "We'll all be together again soon."

Taking a deep breath, DG reached out with a trembling hand and touched the mirror's surface. Seconds later, there was a blinding white flash, and both mother and daughter were gone.

There was something about the cloudy surface of the mirror that drew her to it.

Something that kept her attention long after her mother had warned her not to touch it, long after the guards had been posted at the door and Tutor had expressed his concerns to the Queen and Consort – not quite far enough out of earshot, for DG had heard every word – that her fascination with the mirror could be further evidence that she was indeed the Daughter of Light drawn to darkness.

DG couldn't disagree.

Her actions as a child played heavily on her heart and her mind, despite the reassurances offered to her by both Azkadellia and Glitch that she wasn't to blame. In her own mind, in her memories, she'd heard someone crying and had wanted to help. In Tutor's mind, and, she suspected, in her mother's if not both of her parent's minds, she'd felt the call of darkness and had been unable to resist.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to believe that the phenomenon causing the pane of glass in the throne room was the work of evil. She could almost feel the magic behind it, almost sense the feelings that had been accidentally woven into the spell when it was cast.

Feelings that eerily mirrored her own.

Fear, anger, grief, guilt.

She felt all of them in spades.

Fear of what the future held for her, and her family, now that the witch had been defeated and her mother returned to the throne.

Anger that she'd been taken from the only world she could remember and left to flail helplessly in the one she was born to, without any guidance or support. Her parents were busy with their advisors trying to settle the realm, her sister was learning to live without the witch and Glitch was learning to live with his brain. The others...

... That was where grief came into it, she supposed. She mourned for her old life, for Momster and Popsicle, who had been restored as much as they could be but would never regain the memories they once had of the princess they'd raised on the Other Side. She mourned for Raw and Cain and maybe even the Glitch she'd once known, though all three were alive and well. They were just... gone. Raw had left to reunite Kalm with his people, promising he'd return one day. Glitch was still with them at the palace in Central City though he spent most of his time secluded in his lab, trying to find a natural balance between the Headcase she'd come to love and the noble advisor Ambrose had once been.

And Cain... Wyatt Cain, former Tin Man and someone she tried not to think about too much, had left with his son in the weeks following the Royal family's return to the shining city. There were Longcoats to hunt, and a relationship with his son to rebuild. He hadn't promised he'd return when he left but had tipped his hat to her, an emotion she couldn't read in his cool blue eyes as he'd casually commented that he'd see her down the old road.
When exactly that would be remained to be seen, and as the weeks passed, DG found herself doubting the day would ever come.

The guilt was a no brainer, DG reflected as she sat cross-legged in front of the mirror. So many lives had been destroyed, others ruined beyond repair, because of one mistake she'd made in her childhood. Her people had suffered uncountable evil at the hands of the witch, her family torn apart and her sister imprisoned in her own body for so long. Her friends, the family of her heart, those she'd never had it not been for her quest to find the Emerald... They'd all suffered so much, lost so much, and it pained her to no end to shoulder the blame for that.

Maybe that was why they'd all left her, DG thought sometimes. Maybe they couldn't stand to look at her and see the reason their perfect worlds had shattered.

Lost in her thoughts, it took her a split longer than it should have done to notice that the surface of the mirror had begun to ripple. Her blue eyes widened when she noticed the change and she shot to her feet, her mouth opening to call out for the guards she knew were waiting outside on her mother's orders.

The call died on her lips, her voice failing her, as the surface seemed to melt away with a flash of familiar light and someone – two someone's – stepped through.

"Oh." Her eyes widened, dropping from a face so like her own to the cooing baby in the newcomers arms before rising again. "Um. Hello?"

Her double managed a strained smile but it was one that didn't reach her eyes. "I'd hoped it would be you. Me. Us." Shrugging a shoulder, her expression showed she felt as awkward as DG did at suddenly being faced with herself. "I don't have time to explain everything," she continued, taking a step towards DG that was laced with obvious reluctance. "My world is under attack. The witch's followers found another mage to worship and, well, they're leading an assault on my people – our family – as we speak. This is Ami, Amelia. My daughter." The woman's gaze softened noticeably as she looked down at the precious bundle she held. "They want her. I don't know why but I know she's not safe, not while all the fighting is going on." Lifting her gaze to DG's, the agony she felt was visible in her eyes. "I need to know she's safe, to know that even if we fail, my daughter will live. To know that if we succeed, I'll be able to come back for her and take her back to the safe world she deserves."

"You want to leave her here." DG found herself taking a step forward, folding her arms over her chest as her own heart ached in sympathy with the pain in her counterpart's voice. "Is there anything else I can do? Maybe I could come with you, help you fight...?"

"Two of us cannot exist in the same reality, DG. Glitch's research proved that. You'd be fine for a few weeks at most but the O.Z. would realise that you don't belong and would try to destroy you." Her other self shook her head, a crystal tear slipping down her cheek. "I don't have time to explain everything," she continued, taking a step towards DG that was laced with obvious reluctance. "My world is under attack. The witch's followers found another mage to worship and, well, they're leading an assault on my people – our family – as we speak. This is Ami, Amelia. My daughter." The woman's gaze softened noticeably as she looked down at the precious bundle she held. "They want her. I don't know why but I know she's not safe, not while all the fighting is going on." Lifting her gaze to DG's, the agony she felt was visible in her eyes. "I need to know she's safe, to know that even if we fail, my daughter will live. To know that if we succeed, I'll be able to come back for her and take her back to the safe world she deserves."

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"Of course." The answer came without hesitation, almost without thought. "I mean, I don't really know much about babies but I used to babysit the Collins kids when I was on the Other Side and..."

"Ami's a good baby," her counterpart reassured her when she trailed off nervously. Open affection lit up the other woman's face as she gazed at the child in her arms. "I thought I'd struggle with the whole Mom thing," she admitted quietly, "I didn't think I'd be very good at it but... It feels right." She
tore her eyes away from her daughter and shrugged. "I can't imagine my life without her in it now."

Watching a woman who looked so much like herself blink back tears as she considered the very real possibility of having to do just that, DG found her own eyes begin to sting. She cleared her throat and looked away, glancing back when she sensed the woman get closer.

"I will be back for her," her counterpart vowed, both to herself and DG as well as to the child she held out for DG to take. "As soon as I can, I'll be back."

A little awkwardly at first, DG took the baby girl. She bit down on her bottom lip and drew the small body closer to her own. She looked away from the other woman's tear-filled eyes to study the child she now held, a gasp escaping her when Amelia gazed up at her with very familiar eyes. "She's... I..."

"She has her father's eyes." Amelia's mother spoke fondly, twisting her wedding band without conscious thought. "I know you'll take care of her. If I can't make it back, my husband will. And if neither of us can..."

"You will." For a reason she couldn't pinpoint, DG was absolutely certain of it. "I won't let anything happen to her."

"I know." Turning away, lifting a hand to her cheek to wipe away the traces of tears that had fallen, the other woman walked up to the mirror and reached out a trembling hand to touch its surface.

Alone, DG gazed down at the baby girl in her arms. A baby girl who was a perfect combination – an undeniable one – of both her mother and father.

"Any idea how we're going to explain this to my parents, Ami?" The little girl cooed up at her in response, prompting a smile from her new guardian. "No, I didn't think so."

As she contemplated the child in her arms, the doors to the throne room flew open, hitting the wall with enough force to make them rebound instantly. DG instinctively turned away, shielding the child she held from both the loud noise and the magic she felt surging in the air to keep the doors from hitting the people who'd opened them.

"What is it? What happened? I felt a shift in magic..." Her usually composed sister stared around the room with wild eyes, fear on her face even as her light shone brightly from her palms. Beside her and slightly out of breath, Glitch moved into a fighting stance seconds before realising there was no visible threat in the room.

As a look of confusion crossed over his face, the former advisor noticed the awkward position DG had twisted her body into and frowned. "What's wrong, doll face?"

Amelia answered before she could, her wail of discontent drowning out any reply DG could have made.
Her mother's first response to finding her youngest holding a baby who was so clearly a Gale daughter was to demand DG cast a glamour spell to hide the infant's recognisable features. "The last thing we need now, my angel, is rumours that you are an unwed mother to surface."

DG rolled her eyes but complied with the request, casting one of the few basic spells Tutor had managed to find time to teach her so that only she could see Amelia's true form. Her mother, the only one other than DG to get enough of a look at the baby to be certain of her parentage, visibly relaxed as the light magic settled around the child while both Az and Glitch looked disappointed, and her father was left mildly curious.

"Now that's taken care of, we can arrange for someone to care for the child until her mother returns." Queen Lavender looked expectantly to Glitch. "Ambrose, will you be able to arrange for..."

"No." It took a moment, plus the surprised look on her mother's face, for DG to realise that the protest had come from her and that everyone in the room were waiting for her to continue. "I promised I'd take care of her, and I'm going to keep that promise. I'm not handing her off to a maid or nanny or whatever you have here when Amelia was entrusted to me."

The Queen blinked once, before fixing a strained smile on her face. "DG, my darling, I admire your determination to stay true to your word but I am sure your counterpart didn't expect you to spend every waking moment with the child." At DG's shrug, Lavender shook her head. "Surely you must realise how impractical it is? You don't have time to take care of a child, nor do you have the knowledge or experience needed. You have lessons to attend, and I arranged for you to meet with the seamstress and..."

"... And I'm busy spending hours by myself wondering what I'm actually doing here," DG finished, her eyes narrowing slightly as she tightened her hold on her young charge. "I have one lesson a day at most, assuming Tutor isn't busy helping Az find her light." She threw a quick smile at her sister as she spoken, to show there were no hard feelings and no blame. "And I've already met with the seamstress, several times. My opinion doesn't seem to touch for anything because nothing I say is taken into consideration. I have a closet full of outfits I hope to Ozma I never have to wear." She paused to take in a breath. "I know I'm not Ami's mother but I'm the closest thing she has. Surely it's in her best interests if she's with someone she recognises and not a complete stranger?"

Lavender lifted a dainty hand, rubbing her temples in a gesture that somehow managed to still appear graceful. DG couldn't help but feel a little envious of her mother, and wonder if constantly moving with grace was a gift that had to be taught. Waiting for her mother's response, aware that no one else was going to say anything until the Queen had spoken, DG allowed her attention to drift back to the baby she'd refused to let anyone take from her.

She told herself it wasn't a maternal instinct she felt towards Amelia but couldn't deny she felt a wave of something protective surge through her at the thought of relinquishing care of the child to anyone else. She didn't think of Amelia as being hers, even though she could clearly see her own features reflected back at her in the baby, but she did know she'd already come to care for the child, even lover her in a way. There was a part of her, though, that couldn't help but wonder how much of that was to do with the familiar eyes that locked onto hers every time Amelia looked up.

DG couldn't describe how she felt when she looked into those eyes. Her heart seemed to both flutter...
and ache simultaneously whenever Amelia gazed up at her with those big round eyes, framed so beautifully by long dark eyelashes. Longing swept through her, followed by an icy cold wave of reality; Amelia wasn't hers and neither was her father.

Neither of them ever would be.

"How would it look, DG?" It took her a while to realise her mother was speaking again. "You need to establish yourself in the realm. The people don't know you; I daresay there are still some who are sceptical that you truly are my daughter, a Daughter of Light. If someone were to see you with the child and assume she is yours, or if they were to mention it to the wrong people... There could be public outrage, my angel. There are some who would call for your banishment because of the scandal, others who would see it as an opportunity to insist your father and I give into their demands to choose a suitor for you..." Lavender reached out across the small distance between their chairs and laid a hand on DG's knee. "I am only trying to protect you, DG. Added to that, if the identity of Amelia's father was speculated upon, if it was guessed correctly..."

That, it became evident, was the wrong thing to say.

DG straightened in her chair, the baby in her arms beginning to squirm at the sudden tension that filled the private parlour of the royal family.

"Think very carefully how you finish that sentence, Mother." The ice in DG's voice startled those around her. She stared at Lavender in silence for several long moments. "Amelia stays with me until her mother returns for her," DG continued quietly, firmly. "You can make up whatever story you want for the palace staff but I would recommend telling them the truth – an abbreviated version of it, if you like. I'll maintain the glamour spell for as long as she's here to help your peace of mind but for that reason only. Personally, I don't care. I'm not ashamed to admit who either of her parents are and won't hesitate to do so if you try to take her from me."

DG stood as Amelia began to whimper. She swept out of the room with a cold elegance her mother would have been proud of had she not been staring after her youngest daughter in stunned silence.

It was Azkadellia who broke the silence, barely managing to keep a smile from her face as she elegant stood from the over-stuffed chair she'd chosen. "I'll go and check on her," she murmured, keeping her gaze averted so her parents wouldn't see the pride – or the relief – she knew was shimmering in her dark eyes. She left the room at a far more sedate pace than her sister, the beginnings of her smile curling the corners of her lips as soon as it was safe.

She'd been worried about DG, concerned that her little sister had lost her spark, that she'd been broken by the restraints of pomp and propriety. When she'd confessed it to Glitch, he'd agreed in one of his rare moments of clarity and had agreed to smuggle two letters penned by the eldest Princess out of the palace without her parents knowing.

After her sister's display of temper, Azkadellia couldn't help but feel relieved rather than dismayed that DG was in danger of shattering the tenuous calm that had settled over the royal family. A false sense of serenity, she decided, was worse than no serenity at all.

'It's good to see you back, little sister,' Az thought as she traced her sister's footsteps. 'I thought I'd lost you again.'

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Amelia's first eventful day on the other side of the mirror was coming to an end. DG held true to her word and refused to be parted from her, tending to the baby's every need with a flare that surprised everyone, herself included. With Azkadellia's help, she was able to use her magic to conjure up most of what she needed to care for Amelia. Everything else was taken care of quickly, with clothing and toys donated by everyone from the maids to the Cook, all of whom were smitten with the little girl from the moment they were introduced to her.

Queen Lavender had circulated a version of the truth to the staff and has asked for their discretion and their assistance in caring for the child. Neither she nor Ahamo had ventured to DG's rooms since her ultimatum in the family parlour, much to the relief of their youngest daughter.

Her rooms, never as immaculately neat as her sisters, looked as though there'd been some kind of explosion. Toys and clothes, bottles, diapers and other assorted baby paraphernalia lay scattered around the room in all shapes and sizes imaginable. Not that DG minded; she lay on her stomach amidst the colourful clutter, a smile on her face as she played with the giggling child.

"She looks so contented," Azkadellia commented from her place in a chair on the other side of Amelia. There was a wistful note in her voice, an audible trace of envy. The carefree happy days of their childhood felt like so long ago, a faded memory that sometimes felt no more tangible than a distant dream. "Her parents must love her very much."

"I'm sure they do." It was DG's turn to sound wistful but she covered it quickly with a bright smile. "But then who could resist such a beautiful smile, hmm? And those big round eyes..."

Her father's eyes, DG remembered with a jolt of something akin to longing. A jolt she quashed quickly but which the sharp dark eyes watching her picked up instantly.

"Can I see her without the glamour, Deege?" Her sister's request had her looking up so suddenly, she thought for a second she'd given herself whiplash. "I just... She's lovely but I wondered if I could see what you see, just for a second."

"I don't think Mother would approve," DG said after a short pause. "And I don't... I know she's not mine but I don't want anyone to think... If you saw her, you'd know who her father is, Az, and although there's definitely nothing between us in this world, I wouldn't want things to be awkward. And it would be, if he found out. It'd be weird and uncomfortable and..."

A little disappointed and more than a little suspicious, Az gave her sister a reassuring smile. "It's okay, little sister, I understand. You just seem so smitten."

"Who wouldn't be?" DG sat up and scooped Amelia up from her resting place on the floor, cradling her close as she leaned down to brush an impulsive kiss against the baby's forehead. As if in response, Amelia cuddled in closer, small hands clutching at the material of DG's dress as she yawned. "Must be hard work being so cute."

Az made no attempt to hide her smile as got to her feet. Whether DG was aware of it or not, she was well and truly wrapped around Amelia's adorable little finger. "She's had a long day. You both
have." Moving to her sister's side, she crouched down and reached out, running her hand over the baby's downy head of dark hair. It warmed something inside her when Amelia gave her a sleepy smile in response, recognition but none of the fear Azkadellia had come to associate with most people who saw her shining in the child's eyes. "I'll just be in my room if you need me, little sister. I hope you manage to get some sleep tonight."

As she left the room, Azkadellia couldn't help but remember that the last baby she'd been around had been DG herself. A fond smile curled the corners of her mouth as she remembered how her little sister had never wanted to sleep, not as a baby and not as a little girl, always too inquisitive and interested in the world around her to want to miss out on a single second. If Amelia was anything like her mother, Az thought with a smile as she closed the door behind her, DG was in for a long and loud night.

Alone with Amelia, DG got to her feet and walked through to her bedroom, humming a lullaby she remembered from the Other Side. The cradle that had been put beside her bed was certainly impressive, DG thought, an old family heirloom Azkadellia had summoned from somewhere in the palace. It was light green in colour, intricately decorated... and it reminded DG all too much of the sarcophagus she'd found herself trapped in during her quest for the Emerald.

"I'll see if we can get you something else tomorrow," DG promised Amelia, stifling a shudder at the memory. She gently laid the baby in the centre of her bed, keeping her in place with a hand on her stomach as she stretched to reach for the bag she'd thought to put at the end of the bed earlier. "One clean diaper and a newly made sleep suit coming right up," DG continued to provide a running commentary to fill the otherwise empty room. "Then we'll get you fed – we'll get both of us fed – and tomorrow, we'll go spend the day in the library." She smiled as Amelia flayed a small fist, almost as if in protest. "I know it doesn't sound exciting but it's one of the best rooms in the palace, besides Glitch's lab, and I think you're a little too young for that. It has a great view of the city and so many books... I'm sure I can find some kind of story to read you, and one of them must have something about opening portals to other realities, too. I really should make an effort to find out how your Mom managed to do it in case it's something I need to do to get you home."

Just in case her mother couldn't, DG thought sombrely. Just in case something happened to the magic users of Amelia's world and there was no other way to reunite the baby with her father.

"And maybe after lunch, we'll go up to the rooftop garden. It's not as pretty as Finaqua, but it'll be good for both of us to get some fresh air." Trying not to remember that the last time she'd visited the garden was after Raw and Cain had left, watching their forms disappear over the horizon, DG reverted back to humming as she continued to get Amelia ready for bed.

She made swift work of changing the soiled diaper, dressing the baby in the soft sleepsuit the Cook had given her – one the woman had just finished knitting for her own granddaughter but had immediately insisted DG use for Amelia after she'd learned of the baby's story.

"Don't you look a picture, hmm?" Amelia made a soft cooing noise in response, making DG smile. Settling herself against the headboard in the centre of the bed, the princess held the baby against her with one arm. She lifted her free hand, focusing on the magic she could feel building at her fingertips, summoning the light from deep within her and willing it to do her bidding.

In a flash, a tray appeared on the bed by her legs, complete with a modest dinner for herself and a fresh bottle for Amelia. "Here we go, little one. Dinner for two."
I promise, it won't be too long before a familiar face puts in his first appearance...
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Morning came quickly, which was just the way he liked it. Ever since the threat of permanent darkness at the double eclipse, Glitch found himself willing the nights to pass quickly. His unease wasn’t helped by the part of his brain that belonged to Ambrose, either, who had only known darkness while separated from the rest of him.

Long-term sensory deprivation had a continued effect on him and the first days following the operation to reunite both halves of his brain had been torture of another kind.

Both sides of him had struggled. Glitch had at first felt lost under the onslaught of memories and the wealth of knowledge he suddenly found himself in possession of again while Ambrose had struggled to acclimatise to life outside of the stasis jar. The ability to touch, taste, see, smell and hear that were taken for granted by those fortunate to have them threatened to overwhelm him. He was now one person, with one mind, but there were two distinctive personalities living within him. Glitch was the dominant personality but he was learning how to call upon Ambrose if and when he was needed, which he suspected was the only reason Queen Lavender had decided to keep him with the Royal Family instead of sending him away, too.

And that’s what she’d done, he knew. The part of him that was Ambrose said it made sense; DG needed to rebuild the relationships within her family, to learn how to be a Princess of the realm, and the presence of her friends would be a distraction. The part of him that was Glitch thought it was nonsense, and cruel, and hadn’t the girl suffered enough?

He knew it had been difficult for DG in the weeks following the eclipse and felt guilty that he hadn't been able to be there for her. He knew she'd taken Raw and Cain leaving hard – he had, too, which was partly why he'd agreed to hide Azkadellia's letters to them within his own.

DG, he suspected, hadn't written to her friends for fear they'd only write back out of some sense of obligation. The younger princess carried far too much blame for Glitch's liking, something he'd only realised after Azkadellia had come to him with her concerns. So preoccupied with his own issues, Glitch hadn't noticed how withdrawn DG had become until Az pointed out that the only time either of them saw her was at breakfast and during the family's evening meal.

He spent more time with Azkadellia than he did DG, Glitch had realised. He – Ambrose – had far more memories of Azkadellia than he had of DG. It was Az who'd helped the advisor in his lab, Az who'd listened intently to his theories, Az who'd shared his enthusiasm and asked countless questions. He had a vague memory of thinking the older princess had once had a childhood crush on him, and a distant recollection that maybe he'd reciprocated.

The Azkadellia who'd emerged after the witch's demise was the girl Ambrose remembered affectionately and it was those memories that helped keep Glitch's fear at bay. It was getting easier to see her for the woman she was and not for being the evil sorceress who'd once worn her face. Glitch found that he enjoyed spending time with her, particularly if he managed to make her smile or laugh. They were, he decided, both trying to find themselves again and that was somehow easier to do when they were together.

The only downside was that their growing closeness had seemingly come at the cost of the friendship he and DG had built, something Glitch was hoping to rectify soon.
Starting today, he told himself decisively, bounding out of bed with an enthusiasm that came from the side of his brain that belonged to Glitch. It was the decorum of Ambrose that had him reaching for a neatly pressed uniform and it was a combination of them both that had him hurrying from his room.

He met Azkadellia in the hallway outside of DG's room, greeting her with a genuine smile and small bow, not knowing which was responsible for the pretty blush that stained her cheeks.

"It's been surprisingly quiet," Azkadellia confessed, biting her lip as she turned towards DG's door. "I don't know if she cast a silencing spell or if Amelia's just a very good baby..."

"My guess would be the former if she takes after her mother," Glitch joked, pleased with himself when the comment coaxed a chuckle from the princess beside him. "Shall we go in and see how she is?"

In answer, Azkadellia knocked on the door, her hand dropping to the handle and turning it without waiting for a response. The princess wasn't perturbed by the sight of her sister's suite but Glitch, who hadn't seen the state of the room the day before, stood on the threshold and gaped in horror.

"What...? DG!" He launched himself forward, his heart pounding fearfully. "What happened in here...?"

Azkadellia's hand on his arm kept him from rushing through the room in a blind panic. "It's okay," she told him soothingly, "it was like this yesterday. Tidying isn't a priority when there's a baby to take care of, and DG still refuses to let the maids do everything for her."

Even as his brain processed the reassurances, his body began to calm down. Glitch opened his mouth to question why DG still refused to let the maids do their jobs when the princess in question walked into the room from the direction of her bedroom.

Her hair was still damp, tied back from her face in a messy ponytail. Her eyes were bright, though, and her smile was warm as she held a towel-wrappped Amelia close. It took her a few seconds to notice them, her smile growing wider when she did. "Oh, hey, guys. I didn't hear you come in."

"You look rested." Out of the corner of his eye, Glitch saw a suspicious look pass over Azkadellia's face. "Did Amelia sleep through the night?"

DG laughed lightly and Glitch realised the sound was almost foreign to him. It'd been so long since he'd heard it, he'd almost forgotten what it sounded like. "She woke up a couple of times but settled quickly. We're gonna have to do something about the cradle, though. She slept better once I brought her into bed with me. Can't say I blame her. I'd hate to sleep in that thing, too." She gazed down at the baby in her arms. "Still, I think I slept better last night than I have since I came back to the O.Z., even with the interruptions."

The honesty in her voice brought both Glitch and Azkadellia to the heartbreaking conclusion that she'd been keeping a lot of secrets to herself. If she hadn't been sleeping, what else had she been suffering from in silence...?

"I thought we'd have breakfast here," DG continued, oblivious to the serious direction their thoughts had taken. "Then I told Ami we'd got to the library for a bit before spending the afternoon in the garden. You're both welcome to join us, unless you've got something more important to do...?"

Azkadellia had a morning lesson with Tutor, and Glitch had planned to spend the day fine tuning the design of his latest machine but both shook their heads.
"I've got no plans, Doll."

"There's nothing else I'd rather do than spend the day with you and the little princess."

DG beamed at their replies, her eyes lighting up. "Great! I'll get Ami dressed, and then we can have breakfast. Az, if you'd do the honours..."

As DG disappeared back inside her bedroom, Azkadellia used her light to summon the breakfast she knew the Cook and kitchen staff would have already prepared and left in the family parlour for them. She moved towards the table, stopping to clear a path through the assorted items scattered on the floor with an indulgent smile on her face.

She was oblivious to Glitch studying her, a similar smile curving his own lips. He waited until she was ready to sit down before following quickly, pulling out her chair before she could. The gesture resulted in another pretty blush spreading across her features and Glitch ducked his head to hide a flush of his own.

Neither were aware of DG watching from the doorway, and neither noticed her hold Amelia just that little bit closer as she made a wish for something she thought could never be.

'I hope you're happy, my sister,' DG thought as she joined them at the table. 'At least one of us should be.'

The library in the Central City Palace wasn't as informative as DG hoped it would be. She and Azkadellia had scowled the old volumes for hours, leaving Glitch to entertain Amelia, but found little to help replicate the spell DG's counterpart had cast to open the doorway between their realms.

"There has to be something." DG sat back with a sigh, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Surely the O.Z. would have records of something like this being done."

"If there is, we're obviously not looking in the right place," Azkadellia admitted. "Maybe Tutor could help but since there's no reference to it in any of the Ancients texts..." Her voice trailed off and she gazed at her sister thoughtfully.

Disturbed by the sudden scrutiny, DG straightened, a line marring her brow. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Forgive me, little sister." Azkadellia blinked, shaking her head slightly. "I was just considering that maybe there's no record of such a thing being done before because it never has been." She held up a hand when DG started to protest. "Hear me out, Deeg. We both know your magic is strong, stronger than mothers and even mine. Maybe it's a spell your counterpart first created, one you haven't thought of yet."

Recalling the emotions she'd sensed behind the magic in the throne room, remembering the strength of the spell that had held the doorway open, DG considered the possibility. "She might have cast it," she said slowly, "but she would've needed you to help maintain it." Her sister looked sceptical but didn't argue. "And that doesn't help us figure out how she did it in the first place in case it's something we need to replicate."

"Why would you want to do that?" The question came from Glitch, who walked across to the table covered in books where the princesses sat. "If she doesn't come back for Amelia, won't that mean they lost the fight she told you about? Why would you want to take Amelia back to that?"

"I don't. I won't." Despite the subject, DG felt a smile curve her lips when Amelia reached out for her the moment she saw her. Taking the baby, surprised at how much she'd missed Amelia even
thought she'd only been across the room with Glitch, DG paused to press a soft kiss against Ami’s forehead before settling her in her lap. She smiled again when a tiny fist wrapped around her finger. "If her mother doesn't come back for her, I won’t assume the worst. It's possible she'll be drained from the battle, too drained to open the doorway again. If she didn't make it, I owe it both to her and Ami to try and reunite the little one with her father. He'd take care of her, love her enough for both of them if he has to."

Distracted by her thoughts and by the child in her arms, DG missed her sister and Glitch exchange a speculative glance.

"What if he's gone, too, doll? What will you do with Amelia then?"

It was the question DG had been asking herself since the doorway had closed and Amelia had been left in her care, a question that had been troubling her since seeing her mother's reaction to the baby. She had no doubt that her mother would protest if she said she wanted to raise the child, no doubt that the threat of a royal scandal would frighten the Queen already fighting to regain the love and loyalty of the people... If it came down to it, though, DG suspected she could go against her mother's wishes for the sake of the baby in her arms.

Not that she'd have to.

"Her parents will come back for her," DG answered after a long pause. "I'm not ready to consider otherwise right now."

"How can you be so sure, Deege?" Azkadellia watched her sister carefully, noting the way DG held the baby a little closer. She sensed a shift in magic and wondered if her sister was even aware of the shield she'd begun to cast around herself and Amelia. "How can you know they'll come for her?"

"Because I know her mother. Because if she was mine, nothing would keep me away," DG answered softly, her certainty so absolute, the note of longing in her voice so clear that it brought a tear to Azkadellia's eye.

"Well, that answers one question." The voice, so familiar yet so unexpected, came from behind them. "You gonna introduce us to your new playmate, Princess?"

DG looked up from the child in her arms, a stunned gasp getting caught in her throat at the sight of the men standing in the doorway to the library.

Wyatt Cain held her gaze, an eyebrow arched expectantly as he waited for an answer.

**
Chapter 5

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At Glitch's suggestion, the reunited group moved up to the rooftop gardens to continue the conversation. From what Cain had gathered, the Queen wasn't best pleased at the arrival of the child DG was holding onto like a lifeline and the palace was abuzz with speculation at the youngest princess's connection to it.

Her, Cain corrected himself. The baby was a girl.

He'd been on his way back to Central City when he'd met up with Raw. The viewer had been a little breathless, obviously in a hurry, and had insisted they travel together – and travel fast.


They'd both assumed DG was in some sort of danger and had quickened the pace. It hadn't come as a surprise to him that she'd find some sort of trouble to get into while he was gone; the kid was a magnet for that kind of thing, which was why Cain had determined to do his part to help round up the last of the Longcoats so he could get back to her as soon as possible.

Not that the Queen knew that, Cain thought. Or DG herself, come to think of it. He hadn't told either of them of his intentions, though Jeb had been pretty quick to put two and two together when he'd realised how eager his father was to get back to the city. A long talk and several mugs of ale later, his son had given him what counted as his blessing, reminding him that life was too unpredictable to risk putting off going after what you wanted.

Returning to the palace and finding DG with a baby in her arms wasn't what he'd been expecting, nor was the swell of emotion he felt on seeing her like that. His first instinct had been to demand who the child belonged to; the second to take them both in his arms and protect them from whatever had DG feeling so defensive. He didn't have Raw's gift for sensing emotions but in DG's case, he didn't need it. He could see how tense she was, how she seemed both content to take care of the child but worried for the future, as any mother would be.

The wistfulness in her voice when she'd spoke of the certainty that she'd go to any length to get back to the baby were Amelia hers had been obvious to him, too, and had made something in his chest ache with a longing to make her wish come true.

"Baby content," Raw announced after eagerly taking the child form DG after they were all settled in the relative privacy of the glass dome at the top of the palace. While the Tin Man in him protested that they were too exposed in their current position, Cain did his best to tamper down on his cautious side, reminding himself that the glass around them was drenched in centuries of magic, allowing them to enjoy the view while keeping them out of sight of everyone outside of it. "Does not worry. Knows she is safe and loved." The viewer's dark eyes left the child suddenly and focused on DG in question. "Senses spell but does not fear it."

"There's a spell on her?" Cain glanced from Raw to the baby. The little girl smiled up at him, waving her hands happily as she looked around at those who surrounded her. "Is it dangerous...?"

"No, it's harmless." DG didn't sound happy about it but merely shrugged when he turned his attention back to her. For a reason he couldn't fathom, the younger princess seemed unable to hold his gaze for long. "It's a glamour spell," she explained. "Mother insisted."
"The Queen is concerned DG's reputation may be harmed," Glitch chimed in, the Ambrose side of his brain feeling it was necessary to defend the Queen in her absence. "Amelia apparently bears a striking resemblance to her parents."

Cain watched the child in question reach out her arms to DG, warmth blossoming in his chest at the sight of the smile on DG's face as she accepted the baby from the viewer. "Apparently? You've never seen her without the glamour?"

"Only Mother and Deege have," Azkadellia replied, unable to completely mask her disappointment. "Mother asked DG to cast the spell before anyone else could."

"Asked isn't really the word I'd use," DG muttered, settling the little girl on her lap. With the flick of her wrist, she summoned a brightly coloured toy that was eagerly grabbed and quickly found a home in the little ones mouth. "But she's right in that there's no doubt who Ami's parents are. You just have to look at her to know."

When she didn't continue, Cain let his gaze drop back to Amelia. He studied the child intently, trying to see through the glamour spell. Now that he knew it existed, he could make out the slight blurring of her features, the way her eyes didn't seem to stay one colour. He wasn't naive enough to think it was the first time he'd been in the presence of such a spell but it was the first time he'd been able to see the telltale signs that magic was in use.

"Should I be able to see her eyes change colour like that?" He asked aloud, reaching out to catch the toy Amelia dropped. He handed it back to her and was rewarded with a happy smile for doing so.

"You can?" The surprise in Azkadellia's voice answered the question. The elder princess squinted at Amelia, trying to see what Cain described. "I don't know why that is. I can't see through the spell even if I try to counteract it with my magic."

"Raw see through magic," the viewer announced, earning a grateful look from DG that was gone so quickly, Cain thought he'd have missed it if he hadn't been watching her. "Amelia beautiful baby. Looks like mother but with father's eyes."

"She's pretty perfect," DG agreed, an ounce of pride in her voice. "And hopefully she'll be able to go home soon."

Sensing her desire to change the subject or at least shift it a little, Cain couldn't help but oblige. "Where exactly would that be? All the furball and I were told is that the kid appeared out of the blue one day."

"She's from another reality," DG explained quietly. She adjusted Amelia in her arms almost without conscious thought before continuing. "Her mother created a doorway using a mirror in the throne room. I'm not sure how she did it but I'll figure it out."

"Her mother being...?"

"Me. Well, that reality's version of me." DG let one shoulder rise and fall in another shrug, one too small to disturb the baby rapidly falling asleep in her arms. "She said there was a war going on. The Longcoats had found a new leader and they were attacking the city. She said they wanted Amelia but she didn't know why."

"So to keep her safe, she brought her daughter here." It was, Cain decided, something DG would do. She'd hate every second of it but she'd do it to keep her child safe. He wondered what Amelia's father thought about it and felt a frown arrange his features. "Why didn't she come through, too? Or
DG shook her head sadly. "She said she couldn't, that it would be too dangerous. Apparently that
can only be one version of someone in any one reality. If there are two, the one who shouldn't be
there would die." She shook her head, a sigh escaping her. "I should have offered to switch places
with her, should've said I'd go back and she could stay here..."

Everything in him protested against that idea. The thought of coming back to find the DG he knew
and... the DG he knew was gone... Cain's hands clenched into fists, even as he tried to control his
reaction. "She wouldn't have agreed," he assured DG instead. "She wouldn't have left those she
loved to fight alone."

DG met his gaze for a brief moment, an unguarded expression on her face for a split second before
she looked away. "I have to figure out how she did it. If she doesn't come back, I need to go through
and find out what happened. Amelia deserves to know the truth even if she can't be reunited with her
family."

"Would that be safe?" Can kept his eyes on her face, watching for any of her tells. As he expected,
DG's jaw clenched for a split second before she forced herself to relax. "If she's alive, you'll have to
get out of there pretty quick. And if she's not, if they lost... I'm sure the Longcoats in any reality
would love to have you as a prisoner, DG."

"It's a risk worth taking." Her expression softened when she looked down at the now slumbering
baby. "I'll need to know eventually whether or not she has a home to go back to, no matter how
much I'd love to live in denial for as long as possible."

"Would it be safe for her to stay here?" Glitch's brow furrowed as he tore his gaze from DG and the
baby to shoot a worried glance at the former Tin Man. "If her mother couldn't come through because
one reality can't support both of you, is Amelia going to be safe here? What if she came into
existence in this world...?"

There was a moment's silence. Azkadellia and Glitch watched DG thoughtfully, while Raw had a
look of what Cain could only describe as knowing concern on his face. It was DG's reaction that
Cain was most interested in, though. A blush rose up her neck to stain her cheeks even as sadness
fluttered across her features. She shook her head and carefully avoided looking at anyone.

"I'm pretty sure that's not going to be an issue," she said after a pause. "Ami will be safe here in that
respect, though I'm not sure how mother would react if she was told Amelia would be staying long-
term."

Azkadellia reached out to take her sister's hand, a familiar glow appearing between their palms at the
contact. "If that were to happen, we'll make sure Amelia is raised by a family who love her, DG.
Mother wouldn't just cast her out onto the streets, you know."

Because he was paying attention, Cain noticed the distress flare in DG's eyes, followed by the
determination before both were quickly covered up. He made a mental note to try and talk to her
about it later. Failing that, he knew he'd have to keep a close eye on her should the worst happen and
Amelia's home be lost to her. There was no way the princess he knew would allow a child who was,
in effect, her daughter be raised by strangers – and no way he would let her raise the child alone.

With Amelia asleep and the conversation reaching an uncomfortable conclusion, talk turned to what
Cain and Raw had been doing during their time away from the palace. Raw told them about the
progress his people had made in rebuilding their village, his pride most visible as he spoke about
Kalm and how much the young viewer had achieved since the fall of the witch. Whilst once a young
cub who would jump at his own shadow, Kalm was improving in not just his training but also in coming to terms with what he’d seen.

Cain, in turn, spoke briefly about the progress he and Jeb had made in capturing the Longcoats who continued to hide but spoke mostly about his son. He found himself sharing anecdotes and stories about Jeb's exploits that he’d once thought he'd keep private just so he could see the troubled look fade form DG's eyes for a little while, embellishing here and there with the sole intention to see her smile.

He didn't smile much when the tables were turned. Glitch kept them entertained for a while with stories of his blending with Ambrose and the tribulations it presented – like the first time Ambrose had caught sight of his reflection and had – in DG's words – 'freaked out' over the condition of his hair. Even Azkadellia had managed to regale them with a story or two about her lessons with Tutor, her pale cheeks flushing with colour when she admitted to accidentally trapping the man in his canine form for two days after a spell went wrong.

DG, Cain realised, had little the share. His chest ached at the way she shrugged and told them that the only thing of interest she could remember was Amelia's arrival. From the guilt on both Azkadellia and Glitch's faces, Cain realised the younger princess has been vastly ignored after his departure, left to her own devices with no guidance and little in the way of companionship.

Cain tempered down on the anger he felt at the way she'd been treated, promising himself instead that it would never happen again. Not if he had anything to do with it.

They stayed outside until Amelia woke and began to whimper. DG immediately got to her feet, rocking the baby gently. "She's hungry," the princess explained after a moment, "and she needs changing, too."

"Will you be dining downstairs with us, DG?" Azkadellia looked like she wanted to follow her sister but remained sitting at the slight touch of Glitch's hand against her arm. "I'm sure one of the maids would be willing to sit with Amelia..."

"I'll just have dinner in my room," DG gave her sister a small smile of apology as she cut her off. "Amelia will need a bath before bed and I'm pretty tired myself so..." She smiled again, a little less convincingly than Cain was sure she'd like. "I'll see you all in the morning."

Raw waited until she was out of sight and earshot before releasing a deep sigh. "DG worried, sad. Cares for Amelia. Does not want child to know pain of losing parents but does not want to say goodbye either. Believes once gone, Amelia will never return."

"Will she?" Az stared at the viewer curiously. "Can you see if Amelia will come to be in our reality?"

Raw didn't answer straight away. He stared off into space, a distant expression his face, before fixing Cain with a piercing expression the former Tin Man couldn't read nor look away from."One day Amelia could come to be, one day in not too distant future." **
After feeding Amelia, DG tried to distract herself from the dark thoughts she was having by throwing herself into playing with the little girl. When the little one started to look tired again, DG decided it was time to get her bathed before she got too tired and started to get grumpy.

She hummed to herself as she carried the little girl into the en-suite bathroom. She made a bed on the floor beside the tub with the fresh fluffy towels a maid had put there at some point during the day and carefully set Amelia down. Once convinced Amelia was happy, she moved to turn on the taps, adjusting the temperature until it was warm but not too warm and added some bubble bath.

When there was a shallow covering of water in the tub, DG turned off the taps and divested Amelia of her clothes and diaper. She picked the baby up, cuddling her close for a moment before setting her down in the water, holding her carefully so she wouldn't slip.

Amelia let out a giggling shriek as she slapped her hands against the water, delighted when it splashed up around her. She squealed again when DG removed one hand from her back to splash her lightly with the frothy water, bubbles floating around her.

As Amelia splashed and giggled her way through bath time, DG chuckled as she found herself getting as soaked as the baby she was trying to bathe.

It was that sight that greeted Cain after he let himself into her suite, following the sound of laughter when his calls when unanswered. He stopped in the doorway for a moment, enjoying the opportunity to see DG so carefree and happy, without the princess mask she worked so hard to perfect in place.

Her skin was flushed, her eyes bright. Her hair curled around her face in reaction to the moisture in the air and the blouse she was wearing was soaked in places, clinging to her skin and outlining the curve of her... Cain swallowed hard and forced his gaze back up to her face. He observed her for a few seconds more before clearing his throat, enjoying the sight of a fully fledged blush spreading across her face when she realised he was there.

"I knocked," he said in lieu of apology, raising an eyebrow when she stared at him in silence. "You were obviously having too much fun to hear me."

Amelia shifted in the water, trying to move to see what had distracted her playmate. When her eyes lit on Cain, she beamed and squealed excitedly. The baby was oblivious to the deepening of DG’s blush but Cain wasn't, filing her reaction away for later as he moved further into the room.

"Were you bathin’ her or was she bathin’ you?" Amusement flickered in his eyes as he knelt beside the tub, not minding that there was a puddle of water beneath his knee.

"She just likes to share," DG answered with a shrug, focusing her attention on the little girl who splashed happily in the water, oblivious to the rising tension around her. "What are you doing here, Cain?"

He was quiet for a moment, not sure if she meant in her suite or back at the palace. He wasn't sure she knew what she meant, either. "Thought you could do with some company," he said eventually, watching her closely out of the corner of his eye.

"I've got company." DG created a bubble with her magic, blowing it towards Amelia. The squeal the
baby gave made her smile softly. "You don't need to be here, you know. I'm sure there's a million other places you'd rather be."

"A million? Can't think of one myself."

She glanced at him briefly, looking away quickly when she realised he was watching her. "I need to get Ami ready for bed."

"Let me help." Before she could protest, Cain scooped Amelia out of the bath water, turning deftly and setting her down on the bed of towels he'd spotted earlier. He wrapped her in the towel, gently drying her with a tenderness that surprised the stunned princess sitting beside him. He glanced at DG, quirking an eyebrow at the expression on her face. "You okay there, Princess?"

"Fine." She blinked quickly, and the expression vanished. "She likes you."

He gazed down at the baby on the floor, a half-grin quirking the corners of his mouth. "Someone has to."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw DG open her mouth to say something but change her mind at the last second, biting her lip as though trying to keep the words in. "I was going to get her ready for bed in my room. It's a little warmer than in here."

"Good idea." The marble of the bathroom floor was cooling quickly as the heat from the water faded. Without thought, he lifted Amelia into his arms and got to his feet, wincing only a little when his knees cracked in protest. Once he was standing, he glanced expectantly at DG. "Lead the way, Princess."

He slipped effortlessly into the routine she and Amelia had settled into, almost as if he'd been part of it from the very beginning. DG stopped her thoughts from progressing from there, telling herself firmly that to allow her mind to wander down that road would only make the goodbyes she was certain were inevitable in her future so much harder.

Cain wasn't helping, either. Even after Amelia was settled in her crib – a new cradle that one of her maids had managed to find in the servants wing of the palace – the former Tin Man showed no sign of wanting to retire for the night. Instead, he accepted her awkward offer of a seat by the fire in the living room of her suite, his blue eyes intent on her as she busied herself by tidying the scattered toys on the floor of the room.

"Have you eaten yet, DG?" He asked after having grown tired of waiting for her to break the silence.

She looked up, startled by both the sound of his voice and the question. The slight frown on her face answered his question, even before she shook her head. "I was going to get something after Ami was settled."

"She's settled now." There was an almost unspoken challenge in his tone, in the way he quirked an eyebrow at her. "I'm sure the kitchen won't mind sending something up if you wanted."

DG squared her shoulders, her eyes narrowing slightly. "I'll eat when I'm hungry."

His eyes travelled over her slowly, from her face to her feet and back. DG crossed her arms over her chest, willing her cheeks not to flush again. "Doesn't look like you've been doin' much of that while I was gone."

"I've been doing fine without you," she returned, tasting the lie on her tongue and hoping he couldn't hear it. "Speaking of which, how long should we expect you to stay? You didn't answer when I
asked what you were doing here."

Cain got to his feet. He started to cross the room towards her in small, measured steps. Like a hunter, DG thought barely managing to suppress a shiver, stalking prey liable to get spooked if he moved too fast. He stopped in front of her, his eyes focused intently on her face.

"I was always coming back, DG. I just had to take care of a few things first." His voice was soft, his expression serious.

Memories of another time, another conversation in which he'd spoken to her in that way made her shift her gaze momentarily. She didn't think she'd ever forget the way his voice sounded when he asked her to save herself if she couldn't save her sister in the lead up to her final confrontation with the witch, nor the way he'd let their embrace linger for a few seconds longer than she'd expected it to.

"That doesn't tell me how long you're going to stick around for." She returned her eyes to his, swallowing reflexively at the expression on his face. "If you're going to leave again, I need to know."

"I'm not going anywhere." Slowly, he lifted his hand. When his calloused fingertips brushed against her cheek, DG found herself fighting the urge to close her eyes. As she fought to keep her gaze locked with his, DG watched his icy eyes grow a shade darker with emotion as he took half a step closer, well into her personal space. "Deege..."

A soft whimper interrupted him.

DG moved away instantly, her heart racing and her cheeks flushed. Without a word, she turned on her heel and disappeared into her bedroom, following the sound of the whimpers. She'd only just picked Amelia up when she caught a glimpse of Cain entering the room out of the corner of her eye.

"Hush now, it's okay." Doing her best to ignore the former Tin Man moving towards her, DG focused on the child in her arms, sitting down on the edge of her bed as she spoke soothingly, rocking Amelia gently. "It's okay, little one. You're safe here."

The baby in her arms blinked tearfully, apparently unconvinced. It was only when Cain moved to sit beside them on the bed that Amelia's frown began to fade, her eyes moving from DG to Cain and back again before a contented smile curled the corners of her lips.

"Will you drop the spell?" Cain's soft voice startled her, almost as much as the request.

DG glanced at him, her arms tightening momentarily on the baby. "Why... Why do you want me to do that?"

"I just want to see her. The real her." His eyes were fixed on the child, his hand moving to touch the tiny fingers clenched into a fist. He smiled when Amelia opened her hand only to wrap her fingers around his, a gentle cooing sound escaping her as she stared up at him in adoration. "Please, DG."

She didn't answer with words; she didn't need to. She focused her light, allowing the glamour spell she'd cast to unravel in front of him. Within a matter of seconds, Amelia's features softened into those recognisable of her mother and her dark eyes lightened to the cool shade that was an unmistakable match for her father.

Beside her, Cain was silent for several moments. Wordlessly, he reached for the child, taking her from DG's arms and cradling her in his own. Only after he'd completed a full, intense study of her did he lift his gaze from Amelia and look at DG. "She's beautiful, just like her mother."
Her lips quirked even as a blush crept into her cheeks. "Thank you." She made a concerted effort to look at Amelia and not the man sitting beside her, a sigh escaping her. "You can see why my mother insisted on the spell, though. There's no mistaking who her parents are."

Cain tensed for a moment. "Is that something you'd rather people don't know?"

"Me?" She glanced at him quickly, a shy smile quirking the corners of her mouth when she found him looking at her and not the baby. "No. But I thought..." Her smile faltered and her gaze dropped to Amelia. "I wasn't sure how... how you'd feel about it. How you'd feel about other people seeing her and knowing... And then I thought about Jeb's reaction, if he were to accidentally see her without warning..." She bit her lip. "I didn't want things to get awkward for you so I agreed to go along with Mother's idea."

"I don't care what most people think, Princess." He shifted the baby in his arms, cradling her against his chest as she cooed softly and closed her eyes. "You should know that by now."

"I thought I knew a lot of things," DG admitted quietly, "then everyone left and I figured I didn't know anything."

As DG sat staring at her hands, Cain stood and set Amelia down in her cradle. The baby seemed to content to lie there, looking up at the ceiling and having a one-sided conversation only she could understand. With his arms free, Cain returned to the DG, kneeling on the floor in front of her. He reached out a hand to touch her cheek, forcing her to look at him.

"If I could have stayed, I would. Leaving you was the last thing I wanted to do, DG, but I had to." He held her gaze and covered her hands with his free hand. "I needed to speak to Jeb, about what happened when I was in the Suit and about what I hoped would happen in the future. I swear I was always going to come back, Princess. Regardless of whether I'd be welcome."

"It would've been nice to know that." DG dropped her eyes to their hands, toying her bottom lip between her teeth. She sighed, squaring her shoulders before forcing herself to look at him again. "You don't need to stay out of obligation, Cain. If you're here because you still feel you have a promise to keep to the Mystic Man, please let me absolve you of that."

"The promise I'm here to keep wasn't made to anyone but me." He let the hand at her face move, a finger lightly touching her lips. "Tell me if I'm out of line, DG, and I'll go. If you have no need for a rusty old Tin Man –"

"You're not old," DG interrupted. Her eyes were bright but there was a shadow of doubt in them, scepticism it broke his heart to see. "But I don't... You... You don't have to say this because you think it's what I want to hear. I don't want you to –"

Cain surged upwards, closing the gap between them because she could continue. He pressed his lips to hers, silencing the fears she'd yet to speak aloud. After a moment of stunned stillness, he felt DG relax into the kiss, her hands moving from her lap to hold him closer, her lips parting on a sigh beneath his.

When they parted to share a breath between them, he let his forehead rest against hers. "I'll never lie to you, Deege, I promise." He pulled away to look at her, his heart aching anew at the expression on her face. Her eyes were still closed tightly and a tear slowly made its way down her cheek before he caught it with his thumb. "Hey now, Princess. There's no need to cry."

Her eyes opened, luminous blue meeting his. She moved forward and clung to him, crying quietly as he sank back to the floor, pulling her off the bed to sit on his lap as he rocked her gently. Weeks of
loneliness and insecurity were released as he murmured reassurances that he wouldn't leave her, that he was sorry but he was back now and wasn't going to go anywhere without her again.

When she eventually settled, Cain stood with her in his arms, ignoring the protest in his knees as he did so. He carried her to the side of the bed and set her down gently, following her before she could mistake his intentions and think he was going to leave her again.

She cuddled up to him, her head tucked under his chin, and he was content just to hold her for a moment or two longer.

"My mother won't approve," DG warned, her voice rough from her tears. "She might try to send you away again."

Cain dropped a kiss to the top of her head. "I won't let her."

"She could make it an order." DG shifted backwards just enough to look up at him, her hand coming to rest against his chest. "She is the Queen, after all."

"Not even the Queen could make me leave you if you want me to stay."

DG rewarded him with a small, shy smile and dipped her head again. Cain pulled her closer, a heavy arm over her waist keeping her anchored to him. They fell asleep in that position, and it was in that position that the Queen's consort found them in the morning.

*
Chapter 7

Ahamo opened his mouth to speak, anger clouding his vision at first. A small whimper from the cradle reminded him why he'd opted to visit his youngest daughter and he took an instinctive step towards it.

The click of a revolver being cocked stopped him in his tracks.

The Consort froze and looked up to meet the icy blue eyes of the former Tin Man.

Eyes that were the exact same shade of blue staring up at him from the cradle at the foot of DG's bed.

"Let me take the baby to the other room," Ahamo found himself whispering, his gaze flicking to his daughter the noticeably softening. "DG needs to rest, Mr Cain. I daresay so do you."

Cain considered him for a moment before lowering the gun. "You go no further than the room next door."

"You have my word." Ahamo gave the smallest inclination of his head and bent down to swoop up the fretting baby in is arms. Cradling her with the experience of a father, he carried his would-be granddaughter into the lounge area of DG's suite.

It was no surprise to the Consort that Cain followed him minutes later. The only surprise was that GD didn't appear over his shoulder and take the little girl into her own arms.

Amelia smiled up at him, her features so much like her mother's as a babe that Ahamo found himself smiling back. "We had no idea you'd come back to the Palace," he said, addressing the hovering man and not the baby in his arms. "I'm glad you're here, Mr Cain. Your absence has been felt."

Cain snorted. "Not by Her Majesty, I'm guessin'."

"No." A flicker of a grimace ghosted over Ahamo's features. "You must forgive my wife. She feared that, had you stated, we would have lost our daughter again before we had a chance to get to know her."

"Doesn't look like there's been much of that." Cain made no attempt at hiding his disapproval. "With all due respect to Her Majesty, if she's worried about losin' the Princess, she needs to start acting like she cares. From what I've heard, DG's been mostly left on her own since I left. It's not somethin' that'll be happenin' again any time soon."

Ahamo nodded. "I expected as much." The two men were quiet for a while, both gazing at the infant sized elephant in the room. "Id' wondered," Ahamo began, "if I'd misread the situation when I first saw you with my daughter. When you left, I thought I must have been mistaken in my belief that there was something between you. I see now that I was correct in my initial suspicions."

"I won't be leavin' her again," Cain told him. "I know I'm no one's first choice of a partner for DG, 'cept maybe hers and for me, that's most important. AS long as she'll have me, I'm not going anywhere without her again."

"I can't think of anyone more suited for my youngest than you, Mr Cain." Ahamo lifted his gaze

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
from the child. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that all a father wants for their child in their happiness. I truly believe DG will be happy with no other, and I have no doubt you will keep her safe and treat her in the manner in which she deserves. You have my blessing, for what it's worth."

Cain covered his surprise after a moment. "The Queen –"

"I'll speak to the Queen." Ahamo's jaw tightened for a moment. It relaxed as Amelia cooed up at him. "In the meantime, I trust you'll be here to help DG with this little one, both till her parents return for her and after."

"I will."

The Consort didn't need to see Cain's solemn nod. "Good." Gazing down at the child, Ahamo smiled again. "She truly is a beautiful little girl. So much like her mother was at this age." He sighed a little wistfully and reluctantly passed the baby to Cain. "Please tell DG I came by to see her. And let her know... Let her know my door is always open to her, should she need her father."

"Of course." Cradling Amelia against his chest, Cain watched Ahamo go and hoped it wasn't too late for DG and the Consort to start rebuilding their relationship. Glancing down at the child, at the face of the daughter he had no claim to but who felt undeniably like his, he smiled to himself and thought of his own relationship with her half-brother. "I suppose it's never too late, is it, my little Princess?"

Amelia waved her tiny fist as if in agreement.

#

Ahamo kept his word and spoke to his wife. The Queen formally invited DG and Cain to join everyone for a family lunch in the private dining room. Amelia, of course, was in attendance but the glamour spell was back in place, much to Azkadellia's disappointment. The older Princess finally had a chance to hold the baby as her sister sat stiffly at the table opposite her mother, and spent most of that time trying to see beneath the spell DG had carefully rewoven.

"I owe you an apology, my angel." Lavender said it with a sigh, holding out a hand for DG across the table. After only a short hesitation, DG reached out to take it. "I have handled this rather badly, haven't I?"

Deciding her mother meant the situation with Amelia, DG bit her lip. "I know it must've been a big surprise for you to have her suddenly turn up here. I didn't realise the magic my other self cast to get here isn't usual. Az and I couldn't find a trace of it in any book."

"Well, yes. Amelia's arrival was a surprise but I meant more than that, DG." The Queen was gone; the woman in her place was definitely just a mother addressing her daughter. "I haven't considered how you are with everything that's happened since your return to us. I allowed myself to lose sight of all you've been through, my angel, of the very different life you must have lived on the other side. I remember the difficulties your father first had adjusting to the OZ but spared no consideration to how difficult it must be for you returning to a home you barely remember."

"It's..." DG's voice trailed off mid-lie. She'd been about to say that it was okay but couldn't. It wasn't okay. "I just wish I could remember," she admitted eventually. "I still don't, other than the memories I unlocked in the search for the Emerald."

The confession clearly came as a surprise to her parents and sister. As DG lowered her gaze to the table, she felt Cain's leg move to rest against hers in an unseen reminder that she wasn't alone.

"Then that's the first thing we should do." Lavender tightened her hold on DG's hand, her grip
remaining firm as she stood gracefully and brought her youngest daughter to stand with her. "Come and sit with me by the window, my darling. It would appear we have some work to do."

Confused, DG cast a look at Cain to see him shrug, as much in the dark as she was. She then looked at Azkadellia, who gave her a small nod and reassuring smile. The little girl in Azkadellia's arms made a sound of contentment, so DG followed her mother's instructions.

"Now, my angel," Lavender continued, settling in the window seat and waiting until DG did the same. "Close your eyes."

"If you're going to tell me to let the light flow through me..." DG warned, earning a badly disguised laugh from her sister and a delicate smile from her mother. With a sigh, she closed her eyes. "Okay."

"Now, think of one of the memories you do have," her mother instructed. "Where is it, DG?"

The first memory that came to mind was the vision Raw had shown her in the mirror at the Northern Palace. Pushing that one away, not wanting to relive her death, DG focused on being at Finaqua. She kept the bad memories at bay and focused on the lake, on the ripples in its sparkling surface as she and Az skipped stones under their mother's watchful eye. "Finaqua. Skipping stones with Az."

"Good, my dear. That's good. Finaqua was always a favourite place of yours. Can you picture the palace, DG? Your room there?"

DG tried but her memory was hazy. Her brow furrowed and she started to say no when she felt her mother's hand tighten over hers. She kept her eyes closed but sensed someone move towards them, knowing in an instant it was Az when her sister's hand covered hers and her mothers and their combined light began to warm her skin.

Images formed in her mind, a little blurred at the edges. Pale blue walls with a lemon trim. A canopied bed beside a dolls house almost as tall as she'd been. A rocking horse with a soft mane of white hair.

"That's good, Deege, keep going," Azkadellia encouraged, making her realise she'd been speaking out loud.

It was hard work and slow going, but slowly the palace at Finaqua came into her mind in crystallised clarity. After recalling a specific day spent there with both of her parents and her sister, a picnic followed by a ride over the lake in her father's hot air balloon, DG opened her eyes to find her father standing beside the three women in his life, his eyes glistening with tears as his youngest daughter recounted her first memory of him.

Tears shone in Lavender's eyes as DG slid her hand out from between her mother's and her sister's, only to jump down from the window seat and embrace her father.

"Hey, Spitfire," Ahamo murmured against her hair.

DG couldn't speak past the emotion in her throat, closing her eyes as she clung to him. If it weren't for Amelia choosing to cry from in Cain's arms, DG would have been content to stay within her father's embrace for a while longer. With an apologetic smile, she went to retrieve the baby, murmuring soft assurances to the little girl who wasn't hers.

When Amelia continued to cry, DG became aware of her mother moving to stand beside her. Lavender cleared her throat and held out her arms. "May I, my angel?"

DG glanced at Cain, who gave her the barest of nods. "Okay."
Smiling, Lavender took the baby and gazed down at her. Amelia gazed right back, her crying coming to an end as she studied the new yet familiar features of the woman who would be her grandmother. "Perhaps you would drop the spell, my dearest? Your father tells me she looks remarkably like you did when you were young."

Biting her tongue against pointing out that Lavender had already seen Amelia without the glamour spell, DG did as she was asked. The gasp came not from her mother but from Azkadellia, who had hurried closer to get a glimpse of the little girl's true form. If not for the nervous butterflies taking flight in her stomach, DG would have laughed at the way her sister looked from the baby to DG to Cain and back to the little girl in their mother's arms.

"She truly is a beautiful baby," Lavender said, rocking the little girl in her arms as she retreated back to the window seat. Her husband sat beside her, both gazing down at the child. "Hope for the future, perhaps." She lifted her gaze and it was the Queen looking out from behind her lavender eyes, taking in the former Tin Man who'd moved to stand beside her youngest daughter. "I'm sorry I made you hide her face, DG. Please believe me when I thought it was for the best. I thought I was protecting your reputation but having seen the way the household have taken to her, I realise now that perhaps the truth would be best."

Not knowing what to say, DG chose to say nothing. She bit her lip, relaxing only a little when Cain moved closer and put his hand against the small of her back, a subtle gesture but one not missed by her parents or anyone else in the room. Azkadellia's eyes widened again, Glitch almost fell off his chair and Raw merely smiled in approval.

"Since we don't know how her parents are faring in their battle," Lavender continued, "perhaps it would be prudent to keep the glamour spell at bay for now. It must be quite tiring to command your light to maintain the spell for so long and, for that, I commend you." She gave her daughter a proud smile. "You must be tired, my angel. Perhaps you would like to rest for a few hours? Your father and I can take care of Amelia for you?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that. I --"

"Please, my angel." Lavender gazed down at the babe in her arms. "It's been such a long time since I had the chance to take care of a child who actually needs me, instead of trying to see my grown daughters as the children they once were. Besides," her mother added with a touch of mischief in her eyes DG had a vague memory of from her childhood. "It might good for us to get some practice in. You never know when we'll be called on to take care of grandchildren."

It was Az who spluttered a protest, her cheeks red when DG glanced over at her curiously. A quick glance at Glitch saw the Queen's former advisor had taken a sudden interest in the ceiling and the pieces clicked into place.

Lavender merely smile serenely, while Ahamo's eyes narrowed at the pair. DG felt Cain's hand against the small of her back again and nodded mutely, allowing the former Tin Man to guide her from the room.

#

Chapter End Notes

The Queen's change of heart will be explained, I promise.
Ahamo brought Amelia back to her room later in the day, the Consort clearly wrapped around the little girl's finger as he cooed and reluctantly handed her back to her substitute mother.

"I hope she wasn't too much trouble," DG started, gladly welcoming Amelia back into her arms. She was glad Cain had left to give Jeb a heads up, though she still wasn't clear on whether he was giving his son a head's up about the potential-kind-of-almost shift in their relationship or if he wanted to tell him about Amelia before the palace's network of behind the scenes gossip get to him first.

"She was a dream, Spitfire," Ahamo told her with an easy grin. "But I've no doubt she's going to be a handful when she's older."

Shifting the baby in her arms to get her comfortable, DG smiled a little wistfully. "That's something her parents will have to deal with."

Her father looked at her seriously. "Are you sure they're going to come back for her?"

"I would," DG said honestly, glancing up to look at him. "If she was mine, there's nothing in the Zone that would stop me."

"I get that." He stared at her for a moment longer, his expression thoughtful. "Well, I should be getting back to your mother. I thought Cain would be here..."

"He'll be back." DG squared her shoulders and held his gaze. Though she was confident in her feelings for the Tin Man, she wasn't sure she knew her parents well enough to judge their reaction to the shift in their relationship. Sure, they'd seemed welcoming of Amelia despite her parentage but how much of that was because they knew the little girl couldn't possibly be hers and Cain's in this reality, she didn't know. "Jeb got back to the palace earlier. Cain's gone to tell him about her, just in case someone else tries to get in first."

"Seems sensible." Ahamo hesitated, half turning away towards the door only to turn back to her. "I don't know if it's my place to ask, DG, but are things okay between you?"

"What do you mean?"

"It must've been quite a shock, suddenly sharing a daughter with him." His gaze dropped momentarily to Amelia. "I know you're close to Mr Cain but wasn't aware you had that kind of relationship with him."

"I don't. Well, not really. Not yet." She shrugged, her face growing warm. "We've not really talked about it. We... It's complicated, Dad. I know he left but he said he'd always planned to come back."

"I thought as much." Ahamo nodded knowingly. "And if you love him...?"

"I do," she replied, realising he was waiting for a response. She bit down on her lip. "I know that might sound a little crazy, we've not known each other for long, but I can't pretend there's not something there. I've never been in love before, but it's the only way I can describe how I feel."

Ahamo was silent for a long moment. He seemed to be studying her, though DG didn't know what he was looking for. Eventually, he seemed satisfied with what he saw, a small smile curling his lips.
"In that case, it's not complicated at all. Follow your heart, DG, and be happy. That's all your mother, and I ever wanted for you."

"Speaking of Mother," DG said, stopping him as he turned away again. "What did you say to get her to change her mind? She did a complete U-turn, and I have to admit it's completely thrown me."

Her father sighed softly. "Your mother's never intended to hurt you, DG. She's only ever wanted to keep you here, with us, after so many years without you. I simply pointed out that her method of keeping you here, of sending away those she feared would take you from us, was pushing you away from us instead. She loves you. She just doesn't want to lose you."

DG gave him a thoughtful nod as he left, gazing down again at the child in her arms. She thought she could kind of understand her mother's reasoning, though she thought she'd maybe of handled things differently herself.

To DG's surprise, Cain wasn't alone when he returned to her suite. Jeb followed his father into the room, a curious expression on his face that eased into a small smile when DG saw him.

"Princess DG," the younger Cain greeted her, bowing a little.

"No Princess, please." DG smiled at him and, after only the slightest hesitation, moved to hug him in greeting. "It's nice to see you, Jeb. How've you been?"

"I can't complain. We're making good progress tracking down the last of the Longcoats; I don't think it'll be long now before we've got the majority rounded up." His tone was serious but his stance was relaxed; there was so much of his father in him that DG found herself comparing the two men, her lips twitching to form a smile. "I hear you've not been without some excitement here."

She couldn't help it, a bubble of nervous laughter escaped her. "You could say that. It's certainly been an interesting few days."

"Dad did mention something about it." Jeb's gaze shifted to Cain, who met his stare evenly but looked a little flushed. "I would've come with him and Raw but had to stay behind to wrap up a few things up. I'm glad it wasn't the situation they were expecting."

"I don't think it's something anyone could've known to expect," DG admitted. She caught herself wringing her hands, stopping only when Cain moved a little closer and put his hand on her shoulder. "Would you like to meet her? I'm guessing that's why you're here."

Jeb's eyes widened and he lifted a hand to run it through his hair. "I... I don't want to disturb her if she's sleeping."

"Jeb's going back out on the road at first light tomorrow," Cain told her, his hand tightening over her shoulder. 'And if Amelia's parents came back before he did, he might not get the chance to meet the little girl causing such a stir,' DG's mind filled in the blanks. Instead of letting the turmoil she felt at the thought show on her face, she gave a small nod of her head, all the permission Cain needed to let go of her shoulder and venture into her bedroom to get Amelia.

It struck her as a little odd that he'd felt the need to ask her permission; he did, after all, have as much of a claim to the baby as she did. She watched as he returned, cradling Amelia carefully against his chest, and introduced her to the man who could be her half-brother.

Jeb held himself stiff for a few seconds, the initial sight of her a jolt to the system. It was one thing to
be told that his father from an alternate reality had fathered a child with the youngest princess, another to see the child in person and realise... and realise that the baby being carefully placed into his arms might one day come to pass in their world, too.

As he held her, Jeb looked up to see his father take up position behind DG once again. He saw the flicker of confusion on DG's face; the Princess didn't yet understand the importance of the moment but Jeb did, as did his father.

This was his father showing him where his heart lay, and asking for his blessing. Having a conversation about it and getting Jeb's blessing was one thing; having Jeb see it in reality and know it was happening was another.

He stared down at the baby in his arms and felt his lips curve up in response when she smiled up at him. Feeling something in his chest soften at the same time as a strong resolve to fiercely protect the little girl with everything he had, his sister, Jeb nodded. He lifted his gaze to his father, saw the hope and fear on his face, and nodded again.

"She's beautiful," Jeb managed, emotion making it hard to speak.

DG looked between the two men, sensing a shift in the room but not knowing what to make of it. Cain relaxed behind her while Jeb appeared to have made peace with something. "She's got everyone wrapped around her little finger, that's for sure."

And Jeb was no exception.

He stayed with them for an hour, only relinquishing the little girl when she started to fuss and DG pronounced it was past her bedtime. As DG took the little girl back to the bedroom to settle her for the night, the Cain men said their goodnights before parting ways.

"Did I miss something there?" DG asked when Cain joined her in her room, closing the door behind him to make it clear he wasn't going anyway. "Between you and Jeb?" Her voice betrayed her nerves and she straightened reluctantly when she realised Amelia was sound asleep. "Is everything okay, Cain?"

"Wyatt," he instructed, his eyes locking on hers as he covered the gap between them to take her in his arms. "My name is Wyatt, Princess."

"Then mine is DG, not Princess," she returned, lifting her arms to wrap around him. "What's going on, Wyatt?"

"Nothin'." But the way he kissed her, the way he lingered, his breath against her lips as they hovered over hers, said there was something.

"There's definitely something," she gasped against his lips after he'd closed the gap between them again. "What did I miss?"

Cain pulled away from her just enough to look at her. His lips twitched into what passed as a Wyatt Cain grin. "You didn't miss anything, darlin'. Jeb just gave us his blessing is all."

"His blessing?" DG repeated. It took another moment for the penny to drop, her eyes widening when it did. "You told Jeb about us? Not that there is really an us, not yet really, but... Is he okay with it? I don't want there to be any awkwardness or for him to be upset or..."

His lips cut off her anxious rambling. "There's no awkwardness or upset. He gave his blessing, sweetheart. He wasn't sure so I asked him if he wanted to meet Ami. He accepted her, DG, which
means he accepts us."

"Oh." Still feeling a little out of sorts, it took DG a second to realise he was kissing her again. "Um, not that I don't want this, Wyatt, but there's a baby sleeping just a few feet away. I don't want to start something we can't finish."

The reminder worked, and his kisses grew softer instead of passionate. He picked her up, eliciting a muffled sound of surprise from her and carried her to the side of the bed, putting her down gently in the middle before following her. As soon as he was settled, he drew her back against him and held her there as he kissed her breathless again. Though unused to the physical contact between them being initiated by him, DG had no complaints and happily clung on, her hands grasping his shirt.

As the kiss came to a gradual end, she sighed contentedly and settled into his embrace, her head tucked under his chin and his arms around her waist as she fell asleep.

#
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Almost two weeks to the day that Amelia arrived, DG felt a shift in the magic inside the palace. She looked up from the sketch she'd been working on and caught her sister's eye as Azkadellia sat up straighter on the window seat where she'd been reading.

"That felt familiar," Az spoke up when DG said nothing. Glitch and Cain glanced at them in confusion while Raw closed his eyes. "Do you think...?"

"Doorway opening," Raw announced, opening his eyes to stare at DG with an expression that was both pleased and sad. "Amelia's mother returns."

DG nodded, biting her bottom lip as she glanced at the little girl in Cain's arms. She was torn on how she felt about it; on one hand, she hoped her counterpart brought good news and was able to reclaim her daughter but on the other, she found she was going to miss having the baby in her life.

"We should check it out first," Cain told her, getting to his feet slowly so not to wake the sleeping baby. "Make sure it's safe for her."

"I know." DG stood to join him, her gaze dropping from his to rest on the contented child. "Would you mind staying here with her while I check it out with Az?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Princess?"

"If there's any danger, it'll be magic based. Besides," DG added, reaching out to smooth out Amelia's furrowed brow as she slept on oblivious, "you're the best person to protect her if something happens to me."

It was clear he was reluctant to let her go without him but when given the choice of who needed his protection most, DG or the baby, there was only one real answer. He might hate it but he knew DG could and would defend herself if she needed to.

Cradling Amelia against his chest with one arm, he used the other to draw DG in, leaning down to kiss her softly. "Take care of my princess," he murmured against her lips. "No unnecessary risk, you hear?"

Pulling away with a smile, DG nodded. "I hear you, Tin Man. We'll be back soon." She stepped away and reached a hand out to Az, who tried to pretend she hadn't watched their whole exchange with wide eyes and took it. The immediate glow between their palms helped settle some of her nerves.

They held hands on their way to the throne room, where the doorway between realities had first been opened. DG wasn't surprised to find her mother and father standing outside of the room, the Queen and Consort looking up from their discussion when their daughter's approached.

"The guards reported the same sort of fog in the mirror," Ahamo told them. His voice was calm but his eyes were concerned as they locked on DG. "It looks like someone's trying to come through."

"She did say she'd come back as soon as she could." DG felt Az send a wave of reassurance through their connection and tried to smile. "I suppose we should go and see if she made it or if someone else
is here in her place."

Queen Lavender motioned to the guards standing at attention in front of the throne room. "Open the doors."

As one, the Royal Family of the OZ entered the throne room. Purple clouds swirled in the panel of one of the floor to ceiling mirrors, just as they had done before. DG tried to move closer but Az's hand on hers kept her a small distance away.

"We don't know who's going to come through," Az cautioned.

"Raw did." DG glanced over her shoulder at her sister, a sad smile on her face. "He said Amelia's mother was returning. That's a good thing," she added, seeing the sadness cross over her sister's face, too. "Amelia doesn't belong here with us, not when she can be at home with parents who love her."

"Her parents love her here." Az's eyes shone but she gave DG's hand a squeeze in understanding. "I know we have to let her go, Deege, and if it's this hard for me, I can't imagine how it is for you."

"Someone's coming," Lavender announced, her pale eyes fixed on the mirror. "Stand back, girls."

They did, though DG felt no fear. The glass cleared a little and then a familiar figure stepped through, followed by another. They looked a little worse for wear, both sporting cuts and bruises, but both were alive.

"Hello again," her double greeted her, her smile tired but her eyes bright. "I'm sorry it took us so long to come back."

Trying not to look at the other version of Cain standing so protectively behind her other self, DG let go of Az's hand so she could take a step closer. "You came back as soon as you could. Is it over?"

"It is." A pained expression crossed over her double's face as she took in the three people who stood behind DG. "Oh."

The alternate Cain put a hand on his wife's shoulder, his wedding band catching the light. He, too, glanced from DG to the people standing behind her, his expression giving little away but his eyes full of grief. "We won, but not without some losses."

A choked sound escaped her double, and DG felt cold. She was suddenly very sure that at least one of the people standing behind her hadn't made it in the other reality. "Az," she started, glancing at her sister, "would you please go and ask Cain to bring Amelia here?" Catching her father's eye as Az nodded, she tried to signal to him that he and her mother should leave.

After only a moment's hesitation, Ahamo put his hand on his wife's arm. "Let's go, my love. We can say goodbye to Ami outside."

DG waited until her parents and sister were gone before looking back at the couple who'd walked through the mirror. "Is there a chance what you faced might happen here?" She asked quietly. "Is there something I can do to stop it?"

The alternate DG and Cain exchanged a glance, and she got the impression there was a whole lot said in that one moment. It comforted her, a little, to think that one day her already strong bond with Cain would hopefully be as strong as what she could feel between them.

"The first thing you should do is make sure all of the Longcoats are accounted for. Every last one of them," her counterpart told her. "Without them, there wouldn't have been an army."
"Get Zero from the suit if you haven't already," Cain's counterpart said, though DG thought he was addressing it more to the man she sensed walk into the room than to her. Both of their alternates seemed to freeze for a moment, then release a simultaneous sigh of relief as their daughter was brought into the room. "Keep him somewhere secure. If there's even the slightest chance of him escapin', kill him."

"I'll take that under advisement," Cain, her Cain, said as he moved closer with Amelia. "Anything else we need to know?"

"Look for a man who calls himself Jester," DG's counterpart told him softly, "and don't be fooled by his story," she added, a look of guilt on her face as she glanced at DG. "He can't be trusted. He isn't what he might appear to be." Her gaze fell on her daughter and her eyes softened. "May I?"

"'Course." But Cain passed the baby first to DG, who lifted her so she could kiss Amelia's forehead in a silent goodbye. "Jester. I'll remember that."

"See that you do." His counterpart watched as DG carefully passed Amelia to his wife, the last of the tension in his shoulders easing when his daughter was back in his wife's arms. "Thank you, for takin' care of our girl."

DG gave him a small smile, her arms immediately feeling bereft at the loss of the little girl. She leaned into her Cain when she sensed him behind her. "I'd say anytime but I hope it isn't necessary again."

"She's a good kid," Cain added, catching his counterpart's eye. Whatever question he saw there, he answered with a nod. "Take care of your family."

"And you take care of yours."

Their counterparts moved back to the mirror, with Amelia sleeping peacefully in her mother's arms, oblivious to the shift her little life was going to take again. With one last thankful look, the alternate DG and Cain touched the mirror and were gone, its surface reflecting DG and Cain staring into it. Without a word, DG turned away and buried her face in Cain's chest. No sound escaped her as she cried against him, his arms moving to keep her close.

Two annuals later...

The man who identified himself as the Jester sat in a cell in the basement of the Central City Palace. His expression was one of furious contempt as former Tin Man and husband to Princess DG of the House of Gale stared him down through the bars.

"Might as well make yourself comfortable," Cain told him, arms folded across his chest. "You're not goin' anywhere near fresh air for a long time to come."

"There must've been some kind of mistake," the Jester tried, hoping to appeal to the Tin Man's heart. "I swear I'm not the man you think I am. I know nothing of magic. How could I? I'm just a simple man, trying his best to earn an honest living."

Cain snorted. "There's nothin' honest about you, Jester. We know all about your plot, about your plans to summon the old Witch's magic." He smirked when the man in the cell tried and failed to hide his surprise. Taking a step closer, Cain's expression hardened. "You'll be tried for treason, for plotting against the Royal Family. You won't get a chance to hurt my family this time."

Confused, the Jester could only watch him walk away, the heavy door at the end of the dark hallway
slamming shut with a finality that made him seethe.

On the other side of it, two floors up, DG paced the floor of the suite she shared with her husband. Her palm glowed as she let it rest on her extended stomach, her unborn daughter kicking in response to her mother’s upset.

They'd searched the OZ for a man called the Jester since the day their counterparts had left with Amelia, only to find themselves thwarted by dead end after dead end. It was two cycles into her pregnancy that his name had come up, reported to them by one of the Guilds who served on her mother's council of advisors, and they'd been on high alert ever since.

"It's okay, little one," DG soothed, rubbing her stomach and trying to settle her own emotions. "Daddy's taking care of things. I'm sure he'll be back soon and we'll know –" The doors to the suite opened and she stopped pacing to greet her husband.

Cain crossed the room in an instant, his arms going around his wife and child immediately. "It's done, Deege. The Jester's behind bars. He won't be hurtin' anyone in this world."

All of the tension that had been gathering inside her since the day she'd found out she was expecting dissipated in a heartbeat. She relaxed in Cain's arms, their unborn daughter safely between them.

End.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so that was a bit of a rubbish ending, but I didn't know how much detail to go into with the epilogue. I figure settling on a happy ending was okay? This story has been so very many years in the making, and I think there's still at least two Tin Man stories rattling around in this brain of mine and I'm looking forward to giving them a chance to make it out of my head. Thank you to those of you who've supported this story; it means a lot :)

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