strings

by pathygen

Summary

The weight of the stone should be concerning, but it’s not. She’s never been unfamiliar with weight.
The weight of the stone should be concerning, but it’s not. She’s never been unfamiliar with weight. Responsibility, loyalty, purpose and place. Burdens were heavy. This was…

*Enough, Cassandra.*

The black rock shales against her skin, smooth as fired glass but strangely malleable; harder than steel. There’s a thrum of power in it that pulses and travels out from the point on her chest; that makes the shadowblade as easy to lift as her old shortsword. Blue light lances across her being as she leaps from dark spire to dark spire, making distance; overwhelming, intoxicating—

*Free.*

That first day she is alone; truly alone for the first time in months. Except for Owl, who wings above her at a safe distance, wary of the new jagged edges on her shoulders, trusting only to land on her arm when she is finally still. His talons; gentle as the bird ever was still used to prickle through the rough cloth of her tunic. Now there’s nothing; if she didn’t look at him she would barely be able to tell he was there at all.

Alone. She’d watched the balloon drift away; as convenient and as well timed as anything in the Princess’s life. Months of hard travel, undone in a flash. Still, it is difficult for her to keep her thoughts from straying to the thought of it; the potential conversation, the arguments and snickers shared in the basket’s cramped quarters. That is, until a jolt of pain travels up the arm she’s been building the fire with, and the flint slips, her fingers curled in a look of tetany.

It’s a searing reminder. She had been...there had been some hope that the Opal’s power would heal the wound. Make her whole again. Instead she curls over on herself, seething and trying to breath the pain away, as the ground cracks and breaks and small rocks sprout like sickly grass.

That night she curls up under the cloudy sky and forgoes the fire. She hadn’t really feel cold in the first place. It was easier not to feel anything at all.

*Cassandra*

She trains. She tries to. She has no plan and no destination but days after she betrayed her Princess and her friends and her kingdom and left *everything* she’s starving for some semblance of control; for a shimmer of blue light, any little shake in the ground. The first time had been so easy; so unbinding and natural but now even the slightest effort of trying to summon the stones exhausts her. It leaves her winded and the pain in her arm creeps in and out and leaves her shivering on the ground.

*Unworthy. The thought rattles. The handmaiden who tried to be a hero, and you couldn’t even manage that.*
It hurts. It hurts, why can’t she—

Cassandra

The wind whispers her name at night. She feels less and less like sleeping; has tried and found her dreams peppered with dark shadows, broken by waves of golden light. It feels like longing when she wakes, so it’s better to eschew it, bury the need and stay up and try, try to bring the power she can feel humming just underneath her skin back to the surface. Easy to ignore it when the polished rocks reflect the dark circles growing underneath her eyes and Owl’s worried, troubled hoots.

Her companion brings her berries still attached to the branch and small limp game which she only half pays attention too. She chews on the fruit when the thirst becomes too much to bare; but the owl’s movements have been growing ever more frantic. It makes her twitch; the motion out of the corner of her eye.

She’s been a bird before. He has the sky, and he can leave whenever he wants to.

I’m listening, she had said, over and over again. She had been, but Rapunzel had nothing, nothing to say, not really. It should have been her turn to listen.

She doesn’t trust the Spirit. Useful as it has been in helping her tap into the Opal’s power Cassandra knows someone trying to find an angle when she sees it. Even mysterious apparitions. Rage is more useful than the deep emptiness she has been struggling with; more motivating; warm and familiar. The Spirit doesn’t take kindly to it being directed back at her, but Cassandra knows that the kindly child visage was always some kind of a hoax. Still, it doesn’t help her much; when the rocks can’t seem to touch the damn thing.

The whispers return, in full force. She spends an evening lashing out at the landscape and testing the full range of what she’s learned until her arm burns and everything hurts, and the sun rises dully behind the Dark Kingdom’s thick clouds.

“Wondering about her?” the ghostly child stares impassively down at her while she lies dazed and distant on the ground. “Trust me, Cassandra. My vision spans far and wide. She; all of them really, are quite fine. Joyful really. They even quickly replaced you with their other little traitor.” There’s no mistaking the gleeful malice in the spirit’s voice this time.

She had wondered, foolishly. Wondered, as they flew away, if their (her) thoughts ever strayed back east. If they worried that she was dead; if she had fallen onto the black rocks, or if they had turned on her, or if any other of the dozen disasters they had faced together had crept up to consume her.

Foolish.

In the morning Cassandra takes the sword; the only single belonging she has left, and starts to move west.
The stone rockets from the ground and pierces the rabbit in mid leap. It’s small body slides a quarter of the way down the rock and stops, back legs kicking in a grim imitation of it’s previous bounding.

“Good.” the Spirit says, her wide eyes full of approval. “But maybe something larger next time, yes?”

_Traitor. Monster. Aberration._

She regrets it instantly; looking. The black stone falls away from her arm with the easiest thought, so different from the weeks before. The air burns so sharply she nearly bends backwards; but she makes herself look. Her arm is one long black scab; violent in it’s darkness; not a single sign of new growth of skin. It hurts, _it hurts_ and she swears that it’s more; that the black scars are twisting their way up past her elbow. The veins on her forearm stand out black against her paper skin. _Wither._

Eating her up—

There’s nothing left to do but move.

Cassandra has not seen Owl for days. She supposes she cannot blame him.

walk

She wakes up sputtering on a beach. There’s sand in her hair and salt on her tongue and for a moment she doesn’t remember what it is like to breathe. A cold chill works it’s way up her spine and she lurches forward, stumbling up the shore, and vomits seawater.

The spirit watches from a distance, it’s childish face kindled with curiosity. It’s playing with a shell.

_In her dreams, she finds herself kneeling at the Princess’s side, head resting against her lap. Rapunzel strokes her hair softly and tells her stories of the day; stories of people and paintings that coil and turn and change into tales of things with teeth and claws and the Princess’s eyes grow black and deep and her skin smolders and it takes everything in Cass not to scream and pull away, to keep smiling through._

“I don’t understand!” the scream bubbles up. “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be! I wanted to be free. I wanted—” the words catch in her throat. Freedom. Choice. Her fingers curl into the grass, tearing up handfuls of dirt. “Why..why do I want to be close to her?”

The Spirit has long stopped playing cute. Her eyes are cold, and there’s a sharpness to her features
that weren’t there before. “The Moonstone Opal seeks out the Sundrop. It desires to reunite.”

Eyes closed and bent forward, Cassandra feels the trace of small fingers lifting her chin. She doesn’t want to look, but she does. Her head is full of noise; a cacophony of stone grinding on stone. She feels heavy, and sharp.

“I’ve told you before,” the child says. “If you want to be free; truly free of everything, you need to end this. You need to end her.” She smiles, and Cassandra despises it, but in the moment it’s the only thing that she has left.

_Cassandra._

“You’re the only one who can.”

Chapter End Notes

I've never written fic before, but tumbled into the show after hearing Crossing the Line and was immediately disappointed at the lack of Cassandra-centric fics.
“No.”

“.No?” the spirit’s voice is deadly soft.

Cassandra pulls back and swallows a gasp; the air cold and fresh and salient. As if she’s moving up, up from a pit of black water. It’s only after a moment that she realizes a rock has formed under her hand, helping her to stand.

“No.” It feels so good to say. She’s so, so tired but something giddy, like wild laughter hitches in her throat. She throws her arms to the sides. “I’m through with this. Listening to you, day in and day out. I don’t know what you are but I want you gone.”

This was her destiny; one grabbed with her own hands and she’d done nothing but spend months trudging the road back to Corona dogged by this thing with the taste of iron in her mouth and black dreams behind her eyes. Enough. *She won’t; she can’t kill her, she can’t—*

She expects it to argue; to say that she needs it; that it’s the only reason she has any flicker of control over her moon-addled powers at all. But..

But.

The child-thing stills. Her/It’s features had long ago taken on a slightly stretched quality; spider-like and ephemeral. There is a great old temple in Corona, it’s upper ledges swarmed with a legion of smiling, snarling gargoyles. As a child herself she was terrified of them; as an adult she took satisfaction in their aesthetic; wild, dangerous, but protective nonetheless.

*Slip, slipping, through the city streets at night*

The Spirit’s expression dredges up the old fear, sudden and sharp enough that she has to push down the instinct to draw forth the crimson stones. Cassandra tries to set her teeth instead, and the earth trembles. The Spirit only sighs.

“I had hoped to spare you this, you know, Cassandra.” It’s head tilts, blinking up at her with wide innocent eyes. “But maybe you are right.” impatience, honey slick, slides into it’s voice. “All of this...struggling. There is a hard way. And you have always preferred that, haven’t you.”

Before it’s finished speaking she has already drawn the shadowblade and leaps forward, swinging the sword down with a scream and a movement and she hasn’t felt this good in weeks—

The blade slashes through cool empty air and sinks into the grass. The pale light fades. There’s a beat; and suddenly it’s like sound has flooded back into the glade; crickets, shifting branches. For a moment, it’s as if her fog has lifted; the walking, waking dream that has been her life for weeks. Her arm tingles; not to be left out.

She is alone, again.
“Captain, why have you returned? Who is this child? Where is my daughter!?”

they drape the castle in black and the man in the armor hands her to a woman, and says he will return. she screams and screams and then is silent and the servants whisper of witches and changelings from the wood

but the lanterns are pretty

The Spirit’s absence is an improvement; sort of, maybe. During the day the whispers are lessened; but night still brings restless dreams and an even more restless energy. Sleep comes in fits and starts and most often not at all. She’s moving towards something, somewhere, she just doesn’t know what. She misses Owl; she misses—

It’s like a pull, like the point of a compass, a homing. She has no need of maps, she knows exactly where Corona is, because that is where she is.

The rock is cool under her hand. She strokes a thumb across it’s glassy surface, longing, meditative. “Are you there?” Foolish, weak. She’s lost so much. She can move her arm but it’s gone completely numb; to the point where she’s not sure if it’s only the rocks now keeping it in motion. “I think I’m dying Rapunzel.”

Her fault, the wind whispers. The sundrop will save you. Make it yours, make it whole.

take take take

The cottage. It’s still standing; sunken in places and overgrown with tendrils of pea-flower and honeysuckle that buckle through the stone. Mint and hellebore crowd the grounds. The chimneys fallen into the river along with the crooked remains of the mill-wheel. The sound of the waterfall is deafening.

The stones take her across the river like they did the first time. The door has buckled in, and just inside are the pieces of the music box; scattered from careless feet and moldy with webs and dust. The room must have been tossed at some point; there a tables dashed to pieces against the ground, and the bed had been upended entirely. They must have been looking for trapdoors; hidden compartments; any clues to the lost princess. Shards of mirror glass dim with grim.

Cassandra buckles and sits in the middle of the ruined home for a long, long time.

she cradles a bird in her hands, soft yellow light and dull black eyes and her body is racked with horror. She’ll kill him, she won’t, but the teapot, maybe, just maybe please oh please

she cradles a bird in her hands, soft yellow light and dull black eyes and she brings her hands together around the soft body and empty bones and begins to squeeze

“Stop!” Cassandra wakes with a cry and throws herself forward onto the rotting floor, pounding her
fists so hard the cloud of dust makes her cough and splutter. She reaches for the shadowblade, spires of black stone ringing her like a faerie circle, protecting her or keeping her; she can’t tell which. A sob crawls up out of her throat. “Stop you can’t, that’s mine—” the memory wicks and flickers at the edges like a dying candle.

“Oh but I can.” the spirit’s soft voice breaks through the din. Cassandra can’t see her clearly, can’t see anything. There’s a pounding in her head; the crashing of the waterfall; sonorous, enough to wake the dead—

*break these earthly chains*

“But don’t worry. I’ll keep them safe for you.”

*stay close don’t leave me please*

*cass, are you happy here?*

*i don’t know what I’d do here without you*

Empty places behind her eyes; she reaches out through the spaces in the stones and grasps at ghosts. The dust swirls across the ground and the moonlight from outside casts a wide shadow that has curling horns and sharp teeth. “Please don’t, please—” she hates it, fights it, this helpless feeling; slipping, sleeping. The tinny sound of a music box fills the air.

“Shh.” there are cold fingers against her face, gentle and terrible. “It will all be over soon, Cassandra. And you will feel so, so much better.”

Chapter End Notes

looking at you, hiatus
There is a crack in the door. In the world. Emerald light seeps through the void of dreams and flows into the cracks that were left in her heart and she allows it, because to leave them empty is unthinkable.

empty

empty like the space between stars

who?

it’s a secret, a secret but i’ll show you, only you, only

cass an dra

In the blue haze of morning Cass wakes, and she stands, because it is necessary. The black stones have retreated; leaving pursed marks in the rotting floor. The cottage is silent except for the gentle splashing of the waterfall outside. Just a place; a place receding into the earth in its slumber, forgotten by time. Worth even less as a memorial than the tower, for a woman whose only known legacy in the end was persistent cruelty, and a lonely pile of ash.

Cass shifts through her thoughts and it’s like wading through a pit of molasses; moments stick to her and then release and settle in a thick pool. She feels..lighter. Vacant; made passable. Good. It’s such a sudden change from the way she’s been feeling for who knows how long now that when she releases a relieved sigh it comes out more like a whimper.

“Are you ready now, my dear?”

The spirit stands in the broken doorway, looking up at her with wide eyes. The dawn light makes her seem more translucent than Cass has ever remembered her being; soft around the edges. Her brow furrows for a moment, and the honeyed thought slips away. “I...yes.”

She crosses the room to the ghost, who lifts a small gloved hand. Somehow, Cassandra curls her fingers around it, with the dull understanding that a child should not be left alone. Not here.

“Then let us be on our way.” the spirit says. Her small grip tightens. “There is still much to be done.”

“A guard,” her father says, “A guard must always be willing to put his life on the line for those he serves. Our creeds come from the knights of old; long before Corona was the great Kingdom it is now.”

The sword in her hand is cold; heavier than the simple wooden waster she has become accustomed to. Still a training sword; it’s edge dulled, but with a heft and weight that makes the muscles in her arms twinge. She likes it; what it represents, the possibility of her future. She can serve, and be strong, and protect her home. She can show everyone just how much she deserves to be here. She will.
“Whatever it takes.” Cassandra says.

She drifts through the next week in a cloud of soundless agreeability. There are days when the spirit speaks more; conversations Cassandra cannot recall the next day no matter how hard she tries. There are days of utter silence; where even the birds and the bugs hush the moment she steps off the path and into a glade. Summoning the stones now feels as natural as wiggling her fingers; a hundred, no a thousand monolithic phantom limbs fed on a cool stream of her rage. It’s not an anger like she’s known before; it is something unfettered by fear and so releasing —

so quick to temper, she feels things so strongly and keeps them buried so deep that they burn and smolder like a fire in a coal mine, for years and years unseen

So when the spirit speaks, she finds herself nodding. She spars with the shadows that leap from the corners of her eyes and grows quicker.

She cannot pinpoint exactly when it was that the spirit began to change.

In one of her rare still moments, when she lies down not to sleep but just to stop moving, Cass curls on her side and feels a weight against her back. She opens her eyes and the thought comes unbidden; don’t look, don’t look, not yet and there is a feeling like cold pitch sliding against her neck.

Cass closes her eyes.

It changes. A child no longer, it’s weight rests around her shoulders unbothered by the spiked pauldrons; layered between the gaps. Small and almost solid and strangely fragile; the size of a cat and fox-faced with a crown of curling ram’s horns. It’s ferronnière drapes between them and sinks into the fur scales skin, a pelt laid over out over a frame bone. Blue, but growing blacker around it’s edges, more and more each day.

It repulses her, for the first few times that she notices it. But it’s voice is so soft, so familiar, the only voice she’s heard for months besides her own. Like her hand, like thirst and hunger, the worry slips away. Thin vines scratch at the edges of her neck where the armor peels back, at the hard stone; each delicate strand ringed with thorns, pushing—

“— putting down roots.” Rapunzel says. She holds up one of the many tiny cuttings that fill pots and cups around her room. Flowers have never really struck Cassandra as anything more than pretty hassles; ones that wilt and dry and need to be collected, swept up and replaced every other day around the palace.

“You know you can just have fresh plants ordered, Raps.” the handmaiden says, holding up her hands to avoid taking the little sprouting thing that the princess tries to hand her. Tiny, wet white fibers spin down from its end. “You don’t have to grow them yourself.”

Rapunzel laughs, a high warm sound that settles somewhere unfamiliar, and places the cutting back into it’s painted vessel. “Yes, but this is so much more interesting! It’s how I used to grow them all the time, and they would get so large. Even separated from the main plant, each little one still wants to keep on living. Oh, look, there was this book — ”
At night, Cassandra sits under the pale light of the full moon and drinks it in. She places her hand over the moonstone and she imagines she can feel it beating in her chest, a pulse all it’s own. She imagines obsidian tendrils worming their way under her skin, into her heart, sliding up through her veins and *hardening*.

She’s so *lonely*, and she can’t choke the sob back, can’t swallow down the shame of it.

“*Not alone.*” says the whisper in her ear, so close it makes her twist forward and back. “*Never again, alone.*”

*Cass —*

“*Hold still.*”

The cut-purse is larger than her by half but it barely takes any effort on her part to pin him against the tree. The couple he was robbing may be the first people she can remember seeing in months; easier to avoid towns, avoid questions, avoid having to *handle* people with questions.

They don’t stick around for long, once their bag of coin is tossed back towards their feet. Faceless, up and away in a flash, with frightened looks for her and the thief. Cass had stepped out of the shadow of the forest and sent the man flying with a spire. She holds him now, spluttering and pathetic, as blood oozes from a gash in his cheek. The stone at the tips of her fingers sharpens into hooked claws and he screams in fear more than pain.

*kill him*

Cass tilts her head, and slides her fingers against his throat. The weight goes out of him and he drops to his knees, begging.

“Please, I have a family, please I’m *sorry*, I won’t do it again please—”

*liar, lying, kill him, do it now*

“*I.*”

“*honor.*” her father says, grinning, and helps her to her feet.

The man leans forward and gasps when she releases him, staring up at her with terrified confusion.

*why?*

“..Can you see it?” her voice is quiet and rough with disuse. The spirit tightens around her neck, it’s breath hot and fetid.

“I..see what?” Confusion, fear. His eyes dart wildly from side to side, a thief looking for an exit.

“No, I’m sorry, just please—”

*the power of sundrop lies in the blood, you must, you must, do it now*

Cass sneers and turns her back. “Get out of here.” he scrambles to his feet, hand raising to his cut. “*Go, now!*”

*TAKE*
There has to be something left of her, there has to be. She has to be something, at least.

Cassandra

“Oh darling.” the voice in her ear *purs.* “What are you trying to *prove*?”

It hurts again. The pain in her arm flares up as hotly as it did the first time; lighting the night on fire. Not just her arm; her body, her *head*. The shadows, sweeping in from the sides, masked and *grinning*.

There is the sensation of teeth at her throat, and warm whispered words spoken softly into her hair. “You wanted purpose and it was given freely. Even after all this time, why do you resist it so?” *(it’s killing you)*

Cass whimpers, her head nearly touching the ground, buried in her arms. The moonstone can’t shield her from this, not when it’s so close now, always close.”W-what are you—”

“A friend.”

“I don’t want a friend like you.” She coughs and spits and her nose is bleeding; the familiar salty tang of it thick in her mouth. A smile curves against the back of her head where she can’t see it, but she can feel it.

“You pass on your defeats so beautifully in your attempts to overcome them.” the spirit sighs, and it’s so *affectionate* she’s nearly sick on the ground.

to the next, and the next and the next

“We’ll take a little more, then? Just a little. Just enough. We’re so similar, you and I. Love breaks you apart, Cassandra but I..I will show you for you.”

*seashells and the reek of salt; tumbling through the waves. buildings upon buildings made of spiraling shells; plates and prisons of chitin ruuuuubbing together. a creature so small, hollowing out a home, hollowing, hollowing, and each grain of sand is a star with the light gone out

*rapunzel*

her anger hemorrhages, and it’s years and years of *waiting* and bending and scraping only to be rewarded with pain and discarded like the servant she is. *duty*. Jealousy bubbles up like black ichor, like the rot consuming her body, and a scream breaks forth from cracked lips and it’s every hidden, treasured resentment; the unfairness of it all. cassandra hates her, her resplendent princess, and she’ll rip the light from her center and make it whole.

she’s sick with love, a longing that spans centuries, older than the land and time itself. it’s been so long that she can’t even remember *why* she needs it, but the pull in her chest is stronger than any force, and she’ll rip up the very earth and everything on it to get back and take what belongs to her; to reunite, the way it’s supposed to be. cassandra loves her, and she’ll join her, and make it whole.
again, forever.

you don’t even know what’s been taken from you

**This time**, Cassandra doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t flinch. The shadowblade slips into her grip and the thug dies choking on the ground, black rock in his throat. She takes his cloak before it has the chance to stain and drapes it across her shoulders, over the reassuring weight of her passenger. The hood is large, which is good; the people of Vardaros know how to avert their eyes but her hair still stands out against the gloam and the last thing she needs is more attention.

She’s so close, now.

“...You don’t look well, Short Hair.”

Adira looks the same. She stands in the center of the road, flanked by Hector of all people, and his snarling rats.

yes, the spirit hums.

Cassandra grins widely, and it’s enough to make at least Adria pause. Hector looks pale, more so than he did before, diminished from the struggle at the Tree. She lowers her hood and reaches behind her back for the blade and the hackles on the beasts go up.

“..Finally.” she breaths. “A challenge.” Her senses, so long without a proper fight, exhilarate. The moonstone sparks and light arcs to her sword.

“Shor— Cassandra please listen to me.” The larger woman places a hand out in an attempt at... placation? “Rapunzel; she’s looking for you. I know, I’ve seen it before; and the moonstone is too much for anyone else to carry.”

The smile slides off of her face and folds into a sneer. “Is that what you think.”

Hector steps forward despite Adira’s warning look. “Idiot girl; enough is enough. Return the moonstone to us so that we may return it to the Sundrop, and she will put a stop to this insanity, once and for all!”

Cassandra balances the blade across her shoulders, and when she laughs it is high and loud and sets them both back a step as the ground trembles.

“No, she won’t.” Cass purrs. “She’ll never eclipse me again.”
Chapter 4

She’s perfect. She’s monstrous.

She has always loved fighting. Young; she had lifted her father’s sword and had known with absolute certainty that this was how she would prove herself, that she would take this symbol of action and efficacy and make it hers. Always smaller, but faster. Always slighter; rawboned, but she had pushed, scraped and bled through waking days until her frame grew lithe with corded muscle, and the delicate, constricting sleeves of her dresses had stretched wide at the seams.

*(crowley had complained to her father, and taught her to mend the stitches herself)*

and still—

still

The ground opens up around the wayward brotherhood with a roar; a voracious maw of angled pitch-black teeth. Cass leaps into battle, the greatsword singing; and she and Adira clash in circles, tempered-steel on gleaming moonlight. Adira is larger, agile, but the black rocks upsurge violently around them, a roiling mass, hungry; *like the teeth in her head and around her neck* and shake the warrior off balance as she tries to keep out of their space.

Hector; separated by the wave shouts something and Cass feels a blow glance off the back of her armor, shredding through the cloak. The bearcats bellow and snap and in less than a blink there is a… motion, an inkling of recognition as something unseen *snaps back*.

The beasts wheel backwards with twin whimpers, but there’s no time to parse their confusion before a sudden, sickening *splitch* slices through the air. Like a shrike to mice on blackened bramble the bearcats yowl and thrash and then are still, their heavy bodies sagging on a syrupy slide of red.

Cass, busy, cannot see, but she can *feel* and through Hector’s scream and Adira’s shout the sussarus *rises*, emboldened.

With renewed vengeance, the shrouded brother darts forward, weaving between the stones. Adira brings down the weight of her broadsword and Cass parries up; the shadowblade swings high above their heads. Glacial light arches off her stroke and illuminates the warrior’s face; harlequinn and grim.

Cass smiles with all her teeth.

She keeps smiling, even as Hector buries the length of his blade in her side.

The metal *scraaapes* against the fine and formidable layer of armor and catches there; in the furrow just underneath her ribs. There’s a pause; a flinch, as Adira glances down to look as the brother pulls the sword back, eyes widening. With a painless laugh, Cass takes the opening, and turns quickly around, turns low, and *cuts*.

There is a flash of pure, primal terror on Hector’s face; before the bottom part of his right leg shears away in a ragged, bloody twist of pain and discord.

“*NO —!!*”
The brother crumples to the dirt with a wet, rattling gasp. Cassandra’s eyes linger on the scene, lips parted in surprise, and Adira’s large hand closes tight around her throat, tugging her back. The sister is a tried and tested warrior; the Dark Kingdom spurned soft edges and sought to sharpen them like the markers of their homeland; these terrible teeth.

And yet, when she feels the foreign, impossible sensation of points moving beneath her fingers, Adira doubts.

you thought that you could hold me?

Cass makes a strange, choked sound, and something claps like thunder inside her head. The moonstone glows, and a screaming crash of lightning bursts them apart and sends both women rolling across the cleaved forest path in a cloud of dust.

Ca — Adira wheezes, and her back finds purchase against the base of a tree. The sister reaches up to the unpainted side of her face, her neck; down where a crescent of blackened plasma-burn grieves against her touch. She can’t stifle a cry when a spear of black stone ascends from the ground beneath her; too close, too quick; to pin her arm against the tree by the cloth, followed by the other.

Across the path, Cassandra shuffles to her feet, panting, her movements strange and tremulous. The cloak drags and rips on wayward stone. She tilts forward and spits something dark onto the ground before reaching for the hilt of the fallen greatsword; drags it upright. Her blood is singing screaming drumming and the spirit writhes ecstatically against her shoulders, fanged jaw clicking, and strangely warm.

the blood-smell
    and the teeth

you’re doing so well, dear-heart. I knew you could

Cass walks forward, dragging the shadowblade behind her.

Adira’s eyes flick from the stone-clade fighter to the ruinous path; where Hector’s limp form lies on the ground, still bleeding.

Well… well.

“C—cassandra.” the older woman says first, her breath sharp. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Why?” Cass slurs, still slowly loping forward. She stops in front of the kneeling Adira and stares down, her back straightening. Her fists clench and unclench, tipped with black points. “Because you realized your mistake one-second too late? Or because you lost? I’m not weak, like.. like I was before.”

Blinking, Cass raises a hand to her side where one of the larger black rocks had erupted. She brushes her fingers over the burnished surface, pressing her palm resting flat against the stone. Her reflection is hollow and fierce, her dark eyes ringed with bruises. Her lips twitch, just once, before the feral smile slides back into place. She turns back to Adira, who watches her with guarded alarm.

“Do you regret it? The years you spent wasted, in service to something that didn’t even care you existed?”
“...That’s going to kill you now?” She raises the shadowblade up with one hand, and places the pointed tip under the woman’s chin. Take.

Adira grimaces and breathes out. “I saw you, that first day, before the Tree.” she says, “You knew back then what it was like to protect something— protect someone, with everything you have. No one is that foolishly stubborn when they don’t care. Whatever...whatever your reasons are now—”

“Because it was easy. Opportunity presented itself. Why not.” Cassandra hisses, fingers tightening on the hilt. Adira doesn’t know her, no one does, no one except—

“—that’s not what Rapunzel says.”

TAKE

A vicious snarl tears its way from her lips. She goes to lift her hand from the stone, to push with both against the blade and against Adira, but before she can static hums under her fingertips, and a voice, like light and life and so terribly afraid fractures through the din. Calling—

CASS PLEASE —

Cassandra recoils back as if she has been struck, the shadowblade slipping from her fingers. The violent wave of emotion makes her buckle; her heart palpitates with sudden ripples of fear. Fear for Adira, for the blood, and the anger, and for herself and Rapunzel’s plea reverberates throughout her skull; a warm flame banked in shadow, a bird trapped in a looking glass that beats its wings so hard against the walls they break and the feathers fall and curl up like candle wick and turn to ash.

And the sorrow.

When it finally ebbs mere minutes later; like the tide being drawn out to sea, Cass comes to alone. In her fit the stones have shifted, and Adira is gone, and the only thing left of Hector is a reddened plot of soil and a half clothed lump of flesh.

She sits up in the cracked earth, cradling her arms against her chest, and she screams.

Her passenger makes a soothing motion against her back, but Cass cannot help but feel a kind of subtle disappointment seep from it’s mercurial form, and it grates against the embers of her rage.

golden feathers

There’s a gentle tug across her shoulders, and after a moment she can hear the sound of padding across the path, towards the remains of the bearcats. Followed by a scrape, and then crunch, and the sound of chewing.

(don’t look)

Cass obeys, and she waits, and the thorns within her grow and blossom like a hollow fed on despair.
in the light of dawn she walks through a field of sunflowers as tall as she is, brushing her fingers across the solid stems. crowned in orange-gold and red the flowers croon and bend, and stretch their faces up towards the sun. she moves, but each step becomes harder as her feet try to root, and the flowers shake and when she can't move anymore she bends forward and coughs, coughs hundreds of tiny seeds onto the ground

In the dark of the night Cassandra stands atop the boundary wall, and looks out into the Kingdom for the first time in nearly two years. It seems impossible now that it was that long ago, but any sense of homesickness she may have had before has been tempered, and all she can summon now is vague, distant sentimentality. Feelings without memories; memories without feelings. Corona followed herd behavior; and like a sheepdog left wandering too long in the wild Cass only feels hungry.

and the light, the light in the distance, spinning lonely in the void, like binary stars

Janus Point.

The soft crash of waves and the smell of salt on the air follow her up the precipitous path. Cass steps onto the hallowed ground like she’s walking into a cemetery; the same quiet respect for things long past that borders on unease; the subconscious risk of disturbance. The ruined henge sinks into the sandy soil; tangled with dead bramble and long twists of silver-burgundy ivy that curve courteously around horned reliefs. It is a strange place.

She walks slowly past the massive jardiniere in the center towards the cliffs edge. The air is crisp and cold and the sea-salt breeze sighs through her hair, whipping at the worn remnants of her cloak. She stops short at the precipice, and stares out over the seemingly endless sea, the water slate-gray in the clear moonlight. The gentle shush of the rolling surf is strangely relaxing; her body rocks slowly back and forth in time with the waves as they break upon the jags below. It would be easy to forget she almost met her end on them; pitched off by another witch for reasons that come up misty but leave her feeling sullen.

She’s sulking.

“Yes, now wouldn’t that have been a waste.”

The spirit’s voice lingers in her ear, playful and silky. Cass closes her eyes, and brings a hand up to rub at them; spots of dark color swim in her vision (in the water). Cupping her elbow, she holds her right arm against her chest and sighs. Her march has led her here; following on the waking dreams and whispers that reached out to touch the corners of her mind and oozed certainty.

It was the abyss at the edge of all things, and she knew if she were to move forward and fall the world would tip up and she would dangle there on strings of monstrous thorn.

And...yet..

“You.. aren’t the moonstone. You never were.” The words slip out of her mouth before she knew she was going to say them. So soft, nearly drowned out by the surface hiss of the waves. There’s something simmering under her skin since her fight with Adira; petulant in a way that’s familiar; and dreadful, in a way that is also.
“No.” the voice says tenderly; conspiratorially.

Cass sways, the old fear swelling up against her curtain of complacency. Her thoughts tick over slow and her hand clutches at the moonstone; cool and smooth beneath her fingers.

“Is it...it’s still here?” One little choice. One choice that meant everything; that exposed her greed and split her open from possessive and embittered tip to tail. All the worst parts of her spilled out onto the ground, the terrible love and shadows, and the power, the—

the veins of opal ore, that form in fissures and cracks and burrow their way into her chest and her meat and

her choice

our own separate ways

(i’m so sorry)

“Oh yes.” the spirit says, after a moment. A sing-song timbre that says; I know something you don’t know. “.. It always will be.”

Cass swallows, and it nearly hurts to speak. “I know you.”

The ocean drones, a rhythmic thum thum that snakes it’s way up her spine. Distant amusement; laughter, fills her head. She flinches, as something cool, like a hand curls over the back of her neck. She’s frozen, on the edge of everything. The fingers move absently; too close to a caress for comfort.

The weight on her back shifts. The dark shape that’s draped her in these last weeks slides off, like so much ink, tugging. From behind, half-unseen, a pair of thin, bare arms drape across her shoulders and curl there, intimate; the hands blackened as if with ash. Clawed. A voice; hot breath against her ear. Cass’s own catches in her throat, and she tastes iron.

“Say it.”

you have always known

And the worst, the worst part is.. she does. Months of whispered conversations; buried deep in the black matter of her brain; the teeth, the teeth in her and the colors. And Cass knows, part of her does; she knows that she is weighted down against her own will. That it’s too late to turn the demon out of her own heart; that part of her

lives there


“Zhan Tiri.”

Zhan Tiri

zhan tiri

And the knowledge, the knowledge of what she has to do, what’s brought her here tonight.
Laughter curls in her ear; high and honey-sweet.

“I… I can’t. I’m not — ”

not a hero, not handmaiden, but maybe a monster. there’s nothing left except what’s at the bottom of her.

(and they’ll never forgive her, not for what she’s done, what she’s about to do)

“You don’t have to be good, Cassandra.” the demon says; and like every other time the veil dribbles across her thoughts; into the holes in her memory. Cassandra lurches only once, a single inch closer towards the point’s end. The creature holds her close, tsking, and continues;

“You don’t have to be anything other than what you allow yourself to be.” Drip, drip — the words move through her, and with them all the light in the world. “And when we have the sundrop… oh the things that will happen, my dear.”

“We?” Cass hates how her voice breaks; the tremble in it.

“I said I would show you, didn’t I?” There is a tug at her shoulder; the arms slip back, claws tapping, and Cass shivers. “You can look, now. It’s time.” The sound of crackling branches, shifting; and a strange, almost musical clink, like chimes.

Cassandra turns.

The cliff’s edge is bare, empty, silent; except for her quickened breath. A rustle, through a patch of limp sweet-grass.

The henge looms; and the moonlight permutes across the point; a curtain call of thick vermillion. The ivy lifts, writhes, and its leaves are dull red thorns; swollen thick like sores (like a hand, forgotten and left, left to rot), and the horned bas-reliefs grin fanged grins with eyes lashed by leaves made of teeth.

Cassandra whimpers. She walks forward, compelled, one heavy step at a time.

The faces on the jardiniere tilt up at her with an animal-curiosity; and Cass cocks her head to the side in imitation. The stone under her hands quavers like a body as she climbs into the container; the soft soil depressing underfoot.

And Cassandra digs.

And above her, linked by strands of twisting thorn; the demon looms; her passenger elevated. A recurved mouth left open; an ebon pelt stretched across a skeleton of marrow-wood. Her chest slits open at the ribs; and the inside hangs with gems and chiming shells of whelk and seeping blood cockle that dangle on strings of sinew-vine.

Cassandra digs, and at the bottom lies a skull; cracked and crowned with horns. A tiny sprout winds up through one empty eye socket; reaching for the air. She gasps —

there is a tree, a patient and proud tree. her leaves are brilliant fangs, and her brilliant roots streethetch the length of the world and beyond and underneath. one day she lowers her gaze to the ground, and the little creatures there; and sees a great ram dead at her feet; torn from throat to belly by something stronger than itself. and the patient tree drinks deep of the blood that settles against her roots; and
CASSANDRA

*(she craves so much)*

Her fingers wrap around fistfuls of dirt and Cassandra jerks, her cheeks wet, her eyes hot. The thorns in her; within and without; that steer her waking body. Bent, and broken to heel.

A hunger learned, and had she ever really expected to escape from it?

who are you, who are you, who

A hundred tiny needles of piceous ore crack through the skull and around the sapling and twine up towards the sky (*the first altar*); bending, stretching, in ways they never had before and were never meant to. It’s the first real, shocking sense of confusion she has recognized as solely from the moonstone; wordless; troubled. But it’s too much. The black rocks germinate, and the trunk spires off into gnarled branches, and trunk that is a filagree web of spirals and bivalves.

And at the end, there is no great shattering of worlds; no gaping arcane portals. A flower; night-blooming and white as snow bursts from a knot in the petrified roots of the tree-idol.

And something, something fundamental

    slips

    *sideways*

The flower booms, and Zhan Tiri *basks*; her form shifting, shifting, in a returned rush of *power*. A wonderful, terrible joy.

Exhausted, Cass cannot summon the will or the energy to stand. Her eyes dip. She rests where she is; collapsed, cradled among the tree’s hard roots. Against the petals of the great blossom, that sway in the renewed calm; the sea air. The gentle susurrus of wave. Tendrils brush against the sides of her face; strangely affectionate.

flower, gleam and glow

She thought she was empty, but she’s *not*. She is...she is...

let your

*power*

*shine*

“..Am I going to die? Cass murmurs; barely able to hear herself. She’s not sure what answer she’s looking for, either way. It’s not quite what she meant to ask. She’s so tired. She can’t remember feeling this way since...the last time, the last tree. The..other spell. But it's different. The sundrop still *calls*, and she has the only answer.

*make the clock reverse*

“ Everything dies, eventually.” Zhan Tiri says, fondly. “But you’ll be *mine* first.”
Chapter 5

Cassandra drops down on bended knee, her head bowed, and she waits.

Zhan Tiri circles her in the center of a courtyard that wasn’t there the day before; person-shaped, leisurely... predatory. Janus Point is warping; twisting, growing itself in ways that Cassandra cannot fully grasp; too fast, too slow, too formless. The tops of the henge writhe with heavy, snake-like vinewood and the black sand spirals and carves itself into intricate, sinuous shapes that make her vision blur.

Her focus is drawn to the crimson hem of the demon’s gown as it trails along the ground; spiderwebs of golden filigree that pool into a red so dark it’s nearly black. The way it flickers and shadows against the sandstone, sticking dripping; the lingering stems of a hundred tiny thread-like mycelium that spindle out of the fabric and then blink into darting, slit pupils—

Fingers in her hair, begrimed and gentle, brushing it back. On her chin, lifting it up.

A woman’s face; all angles. A scroll; a crown of horns. Green-glass eyes that float in a penumbral sea, abyssal; Zhan Tiri laughs and the sound travels all the way down her spine into the ground. A miasmic scent lingers, like fresh irises and decay; salt buried in iron-soaked loam.

root\textit{ed} set into flesh, petals curved at an upward tilt, her collar of thorn. seeds, planted so delicately between hidden strands of striated muscle; a pull

“You have bloomed rather beautifully, Cassandra.” Zhan Tiri purrs. Her fingers curl against Cass’s chin, tenderly; the tip of a claw resting against a corner of her lip. “A warrior; forged in blood and storm and tended to in the service of the art. It’s the way of things; to grow. So you have.”

A barbed grin; the cat-who-ate-the-canary.

Has she? Cass feels sick with wonder. The sliver of praise makes her shiver involuntarily; a roiling, confusing stir of pride and shame. It’s all she can do to continue kneeling; listening, one arm crossed against her chest. The dull beat of her heart is a hollow comfort. The moonstone, cold. Warmer, is the woman’s voice; gentle with understanding.

“You denied yourself.” Zhan Tiri says, softly. “As others have so denied you. Your choices, your station. Your freedom, and your love.” A stained claw glides down her throat, tracing her jugular; the steady oscillation of the vein. It comes to rest, pressed against the scilliant surface of the opal.

“..Your impulses. An instinct, older and lower than any language, any spoken word. ”

her violence, that comes so easy. her need, her ambition, how she covets. her spite and her solitude

“A cycle of destruction.” The demon murmurs, “That, my dear Cassandra, is the true beauty that lies at the heart of this world. Of all worlds. The suffering lies in ill-considered resistance.”

Zhan Tiri crooks lower then, a sudden liquescent shift, until her face is level with Cassandra’s. The demon’s sooty hands trace the corners of her shoulders, soothing the bramble that twists into her touch, cradling the sides of her face. So close, too close, always. Benighted; Cass cannot move; and a part of her, fascinated, does not want to. Zhan Tiri’s face dips close, and there is a brush of blackened bone against her cheek, her ear. An inky mane of dark hair; vacuous sockets gorged with creeper. Horns, dripping with cedar.
“But you, darling; you were able to overcome. And you will have vindication. Reward. Because inside.. you know that to take true power in this world, all you need to do—”

closer

“Is rear up—”

hungry teeth, against her throat

“—and take a bite out of it.”

There is a beat. A whisper, like crackling leaves. It takes Cassandra a moment to realize that it is the sound of her own breathing. Zhan Tiri pulls back and Cass swallows for air; has to focus to mask the tremble in her knees, the slow ache from bowing for so long; keeping still.

She hasn’t been told to move, yet.

“You have a question.” The demon tilts her head, because of course there’s nothing hidden left. The black tree behind her stretches towards a velvet sky; it’s base newly strangled with thin shoots that emerge from the ghostly flower. It’s strange.. but Cass can’t feel the presence of it any longer, not like the opal’s other stones. Not..quite.

A question. She—

“I want to know what I’m for.” A whisper, a release, a plea. The long buried, ugly truth of it; the years and the deference; lost light, leaking hope. Her thoughts picked over like so much carrion; macerating, pooling through her fingers like red oil. The spider-pawed hand outstretched; the promise:

gold spun silk, ripping; and release

“You will, Cassandra.” She half-expects the demon to laugh, but Zhan Tiri’s voice is low and tender and Cass is grateful. Something in her chest flutters, peculiar.

you are

“Your final test is upon us; a proving, our covenant.”

to serve me

“A secret, between.. friends.”

a flower imbrued, a bond broken and formed anew. a kingdom in bloom

“Rise.” Zhan Tiri says, and Cassandra stands in one motion. The demon smiles slyly, and gestures toward the path, permeated with thorn. Expecting. Cassandra moves in shadow, bound by a weight that cannot be denied.

Accolade. A knighting. She can only think, as she walks. Of a sort.

yet
a part of her wonders; a doubt like blasphemy

all this terrible, wonderful power

lying in wait

(she remembers the look of the prisoners; finally released after years of captivity; held by the law of the king’s lowest point. sunken, starved. weak.)

a hunger, a hunt. the wolf, eating the sun

and she, a ferry

(a scorpion, a frog, a fairy-tale)

an affirmation

It’s snowing, when she finally reaches the bridge.

Corona is dark smudge against the blue-black night; the arboreal towers unlit, a silence pervading. There was never any question that they knew, that she knows that Cassandra is coming. The warrior can feel it in every raw pulse of her heart; the opal yearns, and the sundrop calls and Zhan Tiri wears her like a flayed skin; tunneled through with veins made of bramble.

And of course,

of course;

The sky is full of light.

if you ever

lose your way

Thousands of paper lanterns swim and careen in the air above the bay; dancing in the powder snow, weaving beneath the arches of the viaduct. Their glow is reflected in the sea like a swirl of stars; manifesting hundreds, and with them, a dozen or more ships and galleons float away from the island towards the mainland.

Corona; the kingdom abandoned on a lambent wave of faith; suspicion and spectacle.

Cassandra breathes in;

“How precious.” Zhan Tiri drawls behind her ear; a fanged and amorphous mantle around her shoulders once again. “..Sentiment.”

And out.

One of the beacons drifts close, dry despite the cold. She raises her hand and the paper brushes against her fingertips; a flickering shard of starlight. Painted with wild suns and moons, flowers and feathers. Cass furrows her brow; lips parted in surprise. It’s warm.

It is... it is...
it’s—

take

—a past. One built on words and promises she couldn’t keep, and can scarcely recall.

dance, a fading glow

Her fingers spark, and the lantern quick-catches in a burst of cool white flame. The paper flickers, and smolders, eating at the shapes, before the candle falls and the wind carries the flaking ash away.

“Rapunzel.” Cassandra murmurs to the air. The artist, who seeks a way out. A princess, a servant, a wound. A hand wreathed in flame and shadow; congealing into a black sun. She knows what she is here to do. A quest, a pull, a contract. A voice of clacking fangs and seeping thorn.

And Cassandra, trapped, pining in the vicious tiered circle of herself.

She steps onto the bridge, casting stars aside.

(raise the city, and bury her beneath it)

“Look.” The demon hums.

Out on the bridge between the gaslights, a heavy shape moves. A lone figure stands in the center of the bridge’s summit, waiting; plumed helmet clasped in hand.

“Cassandra.” Her father says, stepping forward. He clutches at his helmet like a lifeline, and Cass has never seen him look so haunted. Armored and armed still; but she would have expected nothing less.

let it straighten your back, soldier

“Sir.” she intones. Cass watches him watch her; the way his focus darts to the uncanny blue of her hair and her eyes. The opal, and the torn tail of the cloak wavering about her knees. Changed, within and without.

The silence is deafening; the ripple of waves against the arches a low roar. He raises one hand towards her.

“Honey. Please let me—”

“Get out of my way!” Her voice cuts through the frigid air, a spark; the smell of ozone. Don’t, do not.

“I want to look at you.” the Captain says, fervently. Two years, nearly, since they last saw each other, since he last laid eyes on her. Time spent frantically searching for the caravan with sparks of rebellion blistering at his back; hollowing out the kingdom piece by piece. Only to come up empty, to return and learn..

“I wanted to see my daughter. I’ve been..I’m so worried, Cassandra.” The concern in his voice is so stifling that she longs for the old authority. And that part of her; exhilarated, to stand against it. The floating lanterns cast long, misshapen shadows; arcs of dusky starlight. The sea hisses.
“..You don’t have to be.” Cass replies, dutifully. She reaches down and brushes her fingers against the stone border of the bridge, bringing up her hand to inspect the clinging dewy frost. Where she touches, tiny black spines hook and curl up and out, chiming. A sharp grin, a flash of pointed daring. She spreads her arms wide, more a bend than a stretch. “It feels good to let yourself go.”

are you proud?

(good girl)

The Captain’s eyes go wide. A swallow, a shift in posture; taller but no less shaken. A man with a post; a guard with a sword. A father; faltering.

“Cassandra..” One more cautious step forward, pausing only when she visibly bristles. “There are..so many things that I do not understand about what has happened to you. So much time. And I am..I am sorry ; for whatever part I have played in them.”

“Is that what this is?” She breathes. Her eyes flick to his free hand, where it’s slid to rest against the pommel of his saber. She remembers sparring; the fierce delight, the desire to prove. “The Captain, taking responsibility?”

No one’s going to harm you, little one.

“You knew, you were there. And you never said anything.”

He flinches, and there it is; the kind of implicit, bitter pause that would have seen her sent away; forgotten, abandoned again. Disappointing, mediocre.

“Move .” Cassandra spits, squaring her shoulders. She feels an impatient, coaxing itchiness under her skin, and Zhan Tiri chuckles, nestled in her shadow.

The Captain closes his eyes. “You know I can’t do that, honey. I..swore an oath; to protect this Kingdom. Values; that I passed down to you.”

At that, she laughs harshly. “..I always was loyal to a fault.”

“.. I can’t let you hurt the Princess. Cassandra please. Stop, and come home.”

You’re safe with me.

Cassandra sighs. She’s so tired of words. Slipping, sussarant. Hollow, feckless. She’s so close to her goal, and she wants to move, and be moved, and he doesn’t understand and never has; never will.

(but I do)

“No. I suppose you can’t.” She looks up at her father, can see the protector in him searching, desperate for options even with his hand already on the sword. But they both know. The only thing that matters is the here, and the now. The helmet clatters to the ground.

“But who knows.” She drawls, drawing the shadowblade from her back. “Maybe.. after some time has passed, we can revisit the arrangement.”

Movement;
like,

lightning

trapped

Cassandra leaps back from a silver swipe, turning in the air and landing on all fours. The obsidian greatsword scrapes against the stone deck, and she stands uneven, a cheshire-grin. Her father pants; holding his stance; golden armor pursing open in places with snow-melt messing his hair.

She lunges, blue light splintering, and he raises his saber to block. It clashes against the greatsword again; one time too many. The steel shatters in a spray of metal, and the Captain stumbles back against one of the parapets, grimacing, clutching at his hand. With the other, he fumbles for a hold on the low stone wall. A glance down at the dark water below, the lanterns winking like a legion of fireflies.

Cassandra prowls forward. She raises the sword and presses the tip of the blade just-so against the sun in the center of her father’s armor. He grimaces up at her. A half-step, a nudge against the wall. The beat and rhythm of battle, drumming in her blood, in her head. Power, imperious, inebriating. She feels exact.

(do you like it?)

“Cassandra,” her father says, stricken. “I love you so much, honey.”

(it comes from you)

“Captain!!”

A shout, the clattering sound of hoof-beats on carved stone. Cass seethes and glances up and over; and in that moment she feels a pair of arms wrap tightly around her torso.

Poised over her shoulder, her father shouts, “Get back to the—”

snick

A pain noise. A cough, splutter. Cass stares down at her hand where a sharp dagger of black glass has manifested, crooked. Slid neatly between a torn gap in gold armor, leaking red.

“Cap!!”

She moves, moves out of the way of the charging warhorse, the dagger slinking in her grip, shadowblade sealing against her back. She stumbles against the bridge wall. Something crashes against her shoulder; a shatter of glass and the sharp stink of resin. Crick goes the amber, as it fastens her arm to the wall. Crick as it travels up and down her elbow.

Maximus gallops to a halt, and a blur of figures slide from his back. Eugene, Eugene, Eugene, kneeling by her father, who spits red onto the ground and clutches at his side.

“Cap, what were you doing; Rapunzel told you to go with the ships. Here—”

Cassandra stares at her arm, fingers still wrapped around the knife. Droplets of crimson fleck onto
the snow, before the amber ripples it’s way around her fingers.

“It’s alright.” Zhan Tiri murmurs against her neck. “I have you.”

Transfixed, Cassandra watches as her mantle of thorns shivers and snakes down, the dark green tendrils, touching, searching against the surface of the amber. They wrap, and wrap slow around her arm, until the resin sizzles. The amber begins to goo and slip; reduced to sap.

“Oh, Eugene.”

She yanks her arm free with a wicked shatter, flexing her fingers around the onyx hilt. They’re all watching her; Eugene as he helps her father, pale, into the horse’s saddle; Varian; young and frozen and looking for direction, poised with another yellow vial. Eugene tries; gesturing.

“Cass—look at this, look at everything you’re doing. You have to stop.”

“.Stop.” she whispers, touching the opal. Eugene’s eyes widen.

“ varian, do it again, quickly—”

The bridge quakes.

And the maw opens.

Between them, a forest of pitch-black teeth erupt from the surface of the road, up from the water underneath the viaduct. The bridge rocks and the entire structure shifts as bricks begin crumbling into the sea.

“Eugene—!”

“Max, run, Max, go, go—”

Like a wave of fixed night the black rocks sweep across the surface of the bridge, glowing, keening, and Cassandra runs towards the shore. The teeth follow her, the arches splitting and falling into the surf and the grand gated abutments rupture as she flees past them, ducking under falling rumble and onto the island. The shore splits, sand and dock and shack fracturing under the force of a hundred erratic tusks.

And then,

and then,

It’s still.

Cassandra lurches into one of the hidden entrance ways, stumbling over her own feet. The ground trembles and settles and she gasps and hiccups and then she’s laughing, laughing and the tunnel swallows it and answers her right back.

“Shh.” the demon soothes, an aberrant pressure on her back, rubbing small circles. Cass leans forward, fingers tipped with claws of stone and she slashes them against the tunnel wall and drags herself up straight, shuddering.

“We’re here.” she rasps. Here, at last.
Like a bell, like a beacon, she can feel the moonstone heave against her heart; the invisible siren song that will lead her down the labyrinth. The capillaries that run throughout Corona.

*here, here, here*

Up through the tunnels, up through the paths that she has marked since she was a child; seeking to break free. Up, under the palace; tracing her way along the walls, vines curling down her arm and searching, prodding against the dirt for *something*.

*Affirmation.*

Above, searing light and golden feathers, and Cassandra; Cassandra below, alone-together with every single shadow that’s been uprooted from every umbrous, feral corner of her being.

*here now, closer, closer*

*cass*

“I hear you.” Cassandra says, breathless. “I’m coming.”
The palace swallows her up, so as she walks she chokes it with livid teeth.

Thoughtless, Cassandra abrades the decorated halls with malignant growth; the crack of polished stone, the splinter of wood and glass. So close, and the stones shine so brightly, so beautifully; a swan-song lullaby that fills her head and her chest to bursting with zealous light.

calling, calling her home

Home is a ruined cottage, abandoned and hidden away from the world. Home is a gilded cage of towers and lines and lies. It’s the open sky and the moonlight that follows her and chases away all shadows of denial; it’s a briar-patch, warm and fetid; the knife-edge, the chase, the breath and the break in the skin—

I want.

The sun stares down at her from the center of the throne hall doors; an eye unblinking. The rocks grind like crepitus to a halt as she places both palms against the carved wood, tracing the grain. The opal keens.

“Take what belongs to you.” Zhan Tiri murmurs; stroking up the length of her spine. “Your star.”

Ours.

Cassandra leans forward, and pushes.

“I wouldn’t worry.” She once hears one of the older guards say to a trainee, in passing.

“The first test is always fixed.”

She stands before her father and the King with bloodied knuckles and can’t meet either of their eyes. The tension in the air is stifling. The ache in her shoulders, the bruise blooming under her eye. Her hands sting.

“You are privileged to be here, Cassandra.”

Attention from the royal family was rare. It usually left her...ambivalent; embarrassed, or rather, striving to please. On occasion the Queen would grace her with a wistful smile; an offer of tea. The King, well. He never did quite meet her eyes, the first few years.

changeling

“This… conduct is unbecoming for the daughter of the Captain of the Guard. There are rules, and there are systems; and the palace courtyard is no place for childish scrapes.”

She is silent, she does not speak. She listens and she doesn’t say that they should see the other guy;
who couldn't keep his grimy hands to himself. Her father is silent; but she knows the conversation will repeat later. She is young, and so desperate to prove her worth to these men who have already judged her.

A voice, raised. “—visiting diplomats! These incidences will not continue. There are places enough outside of this castle for that. Do you understand?”

The convent; the proper place for stray young girls, scrabbling for a foothold. Thoughts for her well being. Doubt. Daughter of the Captain of the Guard, indeed.

“Yes, your highness.” Cass says, through the fear and indignation. She looks up. “I’m—”

The apology fades on her lips. The light turns, slowly. Shadows ooze from the windows, pooling onto the floor in shimmering slicks. King Frederic opens his mouth and jerks, ever so slightly. A verdant green vine spindles from the corner of his eye and bursts into bloom.

Cass steps back, with mounting horror, and something else. The monarch gives a great shudder as his mouth fills with soft mushrooms. A great swelling of bone; the skin bursts and the skeleton bends, held together by wraps of necrotic hawthorn. Arms spread wide and welcoming, like a scarecrow.

Cass turns, and her father falls, bleeding and sprouting on the carpet.

safe

From behind the thrones a shadow coagulates and steps down before her; a regal glide. Curled horns dripping green light, a gown worming with shapeless shadow. A smile; razor-sharp and full of promise.

The crown slips from the straw-king’s head and bounces down the steps; rolling to a stop at her feet. The night licks at the tips of her toes; searching, watching, waiting. Waiting, for her.

And Cassandra—

Cassandra leans down to brush her lips against the hem of the dress and the tendrils creep in past her teeth; down her throat and she is happy she is loved she is perfect

The song ceases at last. One last whistling, winding note that fades into hushed silence.

Rapunzel stands barefoot between the thrones; hair slipping through her fingers like water-gild; glowing. Royal. Her green eyes snap forward at the sound of the opening doors; a righteous spark that flickers low with instant doubt; a damp shine. Shoulders set; standing tall; on her lips are practiced words that dissolve into a slow, whispered release at the sight of her friend.

“.Oh, Cass.”

Through the peaked stained glass, the evening gloams the room in shades of blue. Outside, the lanterns float, casting seething shadows. Cassandra steps into the hall and comes to a stop in the center of the long carpet, where she’s stood dozens of times before. Pale and sickly, eyes bruised;
dark veins just beneath the surface of her skin. Her hair, longer now and disheveled.

Rapunzel, waiting. Rapunzel, searching; her eyes flickering over Cass, her lips parted in silent shock, or maybe pity. Pity. Beneath the stone, she can feel the veins in her withered arm pulse.

*look at me, look what you did*

Loathing claws its way out of her chest. Cassandra tips her head down and lets out a sharp, wild bark of laughter that echoes in the din. The princess cringes.

“And here I had hoped you’d lead in with missing me.” she drawls, sly and slick with venom.

Rapunzel blanches. She takes a hesitant step forward, one hand outstretched as if attempting to calm an animal. “Cass, of course I do.” Green eyes, searching. “What—”

“You sent everyone away.”

“It was a choice I had to make.” The princess says, immediate, sure.

“But you stayed.”

Rapunzel, softly; “I’m not leaving you again.” No running; not from this. Another step, and she pauses when the rocks barb lightly around Cassandra’s feet; hackles raised. A growling silence. Rapunzel continues.

“Cass this isn’t you.” So many things to say between them, so many potential pitfalls, mistakes. Sleepless nights, and her own nightmares. “I know you’re not acting like yourself, because you’re not yourself.”

Cassandra’s lips twitch, once.

“I don’t know if it’s the moonstone or if it’s..something else.” Rapunzel says, hedging another step.“But I know this isn’t you, Cass. You are brave, strong, and kind, and so much more.” She swallows. “More than..more than I knew.” Her face betrays the sorrow; the hope. Please please please. Rapunzel reaches out. “But you’re not a monster. You’re my — you’re my best friend and I love you.”

Lightning crackles from her armor like a spitting snake. Rapunzel flinches; and the noise roars.

“No.” Cass hisses. Shouts. “I am—I was a servant, a buffer; replaceable, discarded. I’m not going to be shunted to the side; left to rot. I was rotting!” she screams. “You don’t— you never knew me, no one; no one does.”

*enough*

She wasn’t content to simply exist any longer. She won’t be forgotten, she won’t be caged, won’t be denied. And if the light scorched her; ruined her, than at the very least the darkness it — chose her. It wanted her. Oh to be wanted, and how she gave of herself, if not freely than eagerly. She knew what she was for; she would claim her right to use this power, she would prove herself worthy.

“She chose me.”

*Liar, liar, lying.* Such pretty words from her princess. Her pockmarked memories are full of bitter smiles; easy condescension and mistrust; golden feathers, pain and fire and a hunger for the light
inside. A possessive love, a tender hate.

And Cassandra doesn’t know why she’s speaking. The words don’t mean anything any longer, but she spits them all the same.

“This place— the memories. They come for me, and choke me, and I can’t breathe. Rapunzel, you don’t know what I’ve done.” Terrible, wonderful; lives reduced to bloodless dust and tangled bone. A laugh; sharp and grisly climbs up and she wraps her arms around herself. “You don’t know, and you’re going to die not knowing.”

“Cass please.” Hurt and worry well up within the fear. “I want to talk, we can talk together; please—”

Cassandra shakes her head. “You don’t listen, Rapunzel.”

The shadowblade releases easily from its sheath, a low crackle. The ghost of her reflection in the blade. The opal crawls apprehensively in her chest and she grimaces, tightening her grip. Her power. Mine.

TAKE

Rapunzel stops. She’s so close now, a charge and a swing away. Her long hair wisps with golden light, movement without a breeze. The princess stands taller, her fists clenched at her side, eyes wet with unshed tears and bold determination; an anger not directed at her but for her.

“I’m listening now.”

Cassandra lunges forward.

Black rock claws curl at the ends of her fingertips. Hissing, she grips at the princess’s shoulder, the blade arched out. There is a flicker, an animate curl of gold at the edge of her tunnel vision.

A sound; an electric snap. Like a cascade of shattering glass. Or maybe they’re both screaming.

There is;

Light.

When Cassandra opens her eyes she is on her knees underneath a sky of endless black. The silence is sharp, resounding. A blink, a glance down. Dark water laps at her legs, gentle and still. The only movement is a ripple when she lifts her fingers; a noiseless drip.

Her reflection stares back, gaunt, and fractured against a sea of stars. The sky above is empty but the water swims with multitudes; stardust spun nebulas, an unfathomable astral expanse. Tiny flowers with stick-thin stems and tightly sealed blossoms bud up from the water like lilies, and stretch on forever.

She tries to breath, tries to stand, but something tugs her down. Cruel thickets of thorn; red and dripping, bind her legs, her waist, and sink below the surface, down, down to a place she cannot see and cannot bring herself to look.

“Cassandra—”

A voice, an echo, across the unsounded sea. Rapunzel stands across the water, eyes wide in shared
shock. Her hair radiates golden sunlight; and it spills beneath the mirror surface of the lagoon and continues on and on and on, pulled along a milky-way river like petals in the tide.

“Rapunzel.” she whispers.

Like a drowning woman swallowing her first breath of fresh air; Cassandra *gasp*. A sensation, like surfacing after a long time under cold water; water so cold it could have stopped your heart and still kept you alive. The opal shudders in her chest; a long lost harmony, a sad song, and she is *awake* on a sudden wave of terrible, wonderful, overwhelming *clarity*.

Cassandra reaches out, and she *screams*.

“*Help me!*”

Her obsidian claws scrape across a shield of spun gold, and Cassandra *snarls*.

A cord of hair tries to curl around the wrist that wields the blade and pull her sideways. Rapunzel yelps her name again and ducks out of the way as she tugs the sword free and brings it smashing down against the floor, shredding the carpet.

She curls her hand into a fist. Black rocks jags out of the polished marble; searing with moonlight; and Rapunzel, a golden glow, tries to weave between the teeth. Her hair snaps against the stones and the opal jitters madly; a want, a longing; *whole*. Perturbed, excited; in two minds. *Listen* it cries, and she *is*. Isn’t she?

Thorn tickles at her throat as she growls.

They dance across the throne room; stone splitting the room in half; a messy corral up towards the steps. Rapunzel is quick on her feet; capable; but she’s not a warrior. No weapon, no *intent*, not to harm, only to *still*. *No shield, no sword*. Her eyes flick towards the windows, the doors; more often as the sound *grounds*, up through the flowerbeds, through her shouts for Cass to *stop*.

The princess, one foot balanced on a tier; wraps her hair around her hands like cable, stretched, to intercept the overhead swing of the shadowblade. The gold flares and holds strong against the cold iron, (strength that belong to *her*) but Rapunzel’s knees and arms buckle under the force of the blow. Her foot slips, and she goes down hard against the steps; arms raised in struggle, shaking. A grimace of her own, a desperate serpentine tug of hair around Cassandra’s wrists; and the light *flickers*.

Lightning surges; the gold *rips away*, and with a crash the shadowblade flies from her grip and embeds itself into the floor feet away, shining.

Rapunzel’s eyes widen.

Without pause, Cassandra claws down at her shoulders and pins her princess back against the steps with a pained cry. Power dances across her skin in sparks. She feels like she could combust at any moment. She feels like she could do *anything*.

A purr rumbles; predatory, in the back of her mind.

They’re both panting. Cassandra’s hands slip up, against Rapunzel’s neck. Her right hand twitches, the fingernails digging in and drawing blood. The vines cinch tight against her shoulders, in taught anticipation. A shudder.
Sparks; and dagger of cool stone crackles and slides it’s way out of the armor at her wrist. It fits perfectly in her palm.

Rapunzel darts across the surface of the sea; leaving behind noiseless ripples in her wake. She drops to her knees in front of Cassandra, gasping, and without hesitation pulls her into a tight hug. Cass reaches up, clinging to her shoulders, head bowed. Her hands tremble.

“I’m so sorry, Cass. For everything.” Rapunzel says, head buried against her neck. “I never meant for any of this to happen; and then I hurt you and even with everything else I didn’t want to see, I was so—”

The princess leans back, tears dripping down her face, wincing at the bramble as it sinks into the firmament. Cass holds her there. She breathes out.

“I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

“That’s not true.” Rapunzel says, but there is less confidence behind the words; a different kind of hurt. Cass understands, she does.

“Yes.” she says firmly, because this is for herself. “It is. Not for..everything. But for..a lot. For this, for now .” This space; this flash of..lucidity. Her own thoughts, untethered. A separation; and she can feel the demon still, clawing at this sudden divide; a door suddenly slammed shut. But she’s not blameless, and she doesn’t want to be. A garden still needs to be fertilized first. Time, missing; memories scraped away like turpentine on oil canvas. Her memories. She knows.

Cassandra cringes, a sob welling up. “I’ve lost so much.”

Her pain, her past, her mistakes. Her choice. Betrayal. That part of her that is still angry, still so unsure of herself. A wild longing; in that even this brief contact is nearly overwhelming. So much between them; how could they say it all? Cass shivers, and rests her forehead against the princess’s. Rapunzel curls a comforting hand in her hair and she almost breaks. “Rapunzel.” Cass whispers. “..Do we regret each other? Deep down, do you regret me?”

“No.” Rapunzel says, with certainty. “Never.”

They’ll never be the same again. Nothing will. The future is still clouded and riddled with thorn. But maybe they can do better. Maybe she can. Cass smiles into her hair, a smile that cracks as she hiccups, the tears spilling out. Rapunzel holds her tighter. The opal wanes, brightly. The flowers twitch, petals opening and releasing little motes of dusty light.

“I’m afraid.” Cassandra murmurs, as the stars begin to swallow them up. A changing tide. Monstrous choice.

“Me too.” Rapunzel strokes the side of her face. “But not of you.”

She rests the tip of the dagger against the patterned sun in the center of the princess’s chest. So close. The light singing underneath. One hand, two. Pressure against the pommel.

Glory. A destiny snatched, a seed planted. An end to the eclipse.

Who is she?

Now.
why?

Who does she want to be?

“Cass, please.” Rapunzel lifts her hand; the lightest touch against her cheek. Even now; Cassandra has never understood how she could be so bold. Blood wells up in the scratches on her neck and beads down under her collar, pooling.


For a moment, every single piece of black stone flickers red and the room is cast in a bloody, crimson aurora.

Tears run hot down her cheeks, and spatter against the fading glow of Rapunzel’s hair. She tightens her grip on the knife; so tight she is sure it would break if it was made of anything else.

“I see you.” Rapunzel whispers. The ache in her eyes reaches beyond pain.

Cassandra’s vision swims, and she nods. A rattle of thorn and teeth, a desire. Immense. She takes a deep breath. Her voice doesn’t waver.

“I know.”

And Cass spins the dagger backwards, angled up, and plunges it into the space beneath her ribs.

*You foolish girl.*

Cassandra gurgles. She stumbles back from Rapunzel; the princess shouts; a rising wail.

“*No, no no, Cass, no —*”

A twist and a pull. The knife slips out, and Cass watches the blood spill across the ruined floor in bleak fascination. Red, still, at least. But there’s no time. The pain is enough to jolt her into action with purifying sharpness. With wild, ragged movement Cass brings the blade up, shredding the clasp on her cloak. A *snick* as the tip slides under the vines, the sticking burrs and the thorn.

*She cuts.*

She cuts and cuts and *cuts and cuts —*

Cassandra shreds the tendrils that crawl under her skin and drink deep like a parasite, she pulls at them with her fingers, digs in with the dagger; the black rock giving way like bits of ribbon-shale. She screams and she slashes until the *weight* lifts and *tears* away, and the crawling ceases and she is left gasping on the ground, her back arched and she *laughs*.

It’s like respite. It’s like loss. Air hunger and grief. She is so *tired.*

Rapunzel collapses beside her, shocked out of tears; pulling her hands away, her own pressing firmly against the wound in her abdomen, trying, *trying."

“Cass why did you *do* that—”
How to explain? How to even start. She’d really rather just lie here, breathing. Faintly, she can hear something that sounds like birdsong.

Oh.

There is a twitch of movement at the edge of her spotted vision. Cass flies up and shoves Rapunzel to the side with all the strength she has left, spitting red, as a large dark claw snags into her shoulder and drags her bodily across the ground.

“Well, well, well.”

Zhan Tiri looms over her like half-rotted corpse; black fur sloughing off her driftwood bones, dripping swamp-water. Tendrils and tentacles twitch at the end of her transient form, whips of wire-thin thorn. Recurve horns that seep red sap; her skull-maw open wide. When she speaks the growl of it digs so deep inside her head Cass feels like she might come apart again right there.

“Now, isn’t this familiar.” The demon purrs. Her talons dig deep against Cassandra’s shoulder, making her stay. “Another fickle declaration of independence; your miserable egress.”

A long green-black tongue flicks at the blood-vine mess on her shoulders. Zhan Tiri shimmers, and the pitch of her body reforms; the striking facsimile of something human and lovely. Less lovely now, oozing, infectious. Her mouth is full of serrated teeth, her hair shedding black feathers. She sneers, jerking her grip a little. Cassandra gasps in pain.

“This...nascent little rebellion in your twilight hour.”

“Get away from her!!” Rapunzel, standing, scratched and bloody (alive), fists clenched at her side and a look of fury on her face that Cass has never seen before. Dizzily, Cass appreciates the effort. She wishes she would run, finally. Just go please.

A begrimed hand slides up the side of her chin, none too gentle. Sharp claws tangle in her hair. Cass has the faculty left to grimace.

“Rapunzel.” Zhan Tiri purrs; like gravel underfoot. “Darling, I’m so sorry we haven’t been properly introduced.”

A painting, a lotus-dream. The demon gestures, a jerky, mocking little bow. “Best laid plans, you know.” A sharp little smile. She yanks, turning with fluid grace, and Cass hisses.

“But Cassandra dearest and I need to have a conversation. A little tête-à-tête. I’m sure you understand.”

Rapunzel’s eyes widen in sudden, terrible understanding. She shoots Cassandra a look that’s somewhere between perplexed and panic-stricken. “You...you’re Zhan Tiri — ”

Lantern light curls over her horns in weeping shades. She grins wide over her shoulder at the princess. A musical bounce. “The one and only.” Her head cocks to the side, then down at Cassandra.

“Now.”

“No —”

Two things happen.
Cass reaches out, and calls up some of her waxing power (the opal is *screeching in her head, in her chest*, trying to figure out how to staunch the life leaking out) and black rocks slam up haphazardly between Rapunzel and the demon, a paltry barrier, a chance.

Somewhere in between starting and finishing that, Cass finds herself airborne.

Whatever breath was left goes out of her as she slams past gossamer curtains and into the far wall of the throne room. Her vision goes black for what feels like a minute, and then she gasps awake when claws dig deep into her side.

“You’re hurting again, dear-heart.” Zhan Tiri says in her ear. A smooth lift, as if she were a child’s play thing; another toss. Cass rolls, smearing red, choking. Fresh clarion pain. No fair hand for this.

“And for what?” The demon pulls her head back by her hair to look her in the eyes. Pinprick green on vacuous black. “For this? A paltry cage of brick and mortar? Your sunlit princess?” Zhan Tiri jerks Cassandra’s head forward like a marionette, around at the desolated throne. Rapunzel, a yellow flash, trying to navigate frantically between the rocks. She gasps, wetly.


Cassandra blinks away spots that buzz like flies. She licks her lips and they taste like iron.

Zhan Tiri tilts her head.

“.We know. Deep down.”

Her sanity, slipping like warm honey. This base, primal hate; that carnal, primitive love. Craving, confused and desperate for attention, for power. *What am I for?*

“How it pains me to see you falter.” Fingers, soft on her chin. A gasp for air, a blessed pause. Cassandra blinks away spots that buzz like flies. She licks her lips and they taste like iron.

Zhan Tiri holds her aloft again, cupping her chin. Cass scrabbles at the hands on her throat, the sounds, the colors assaulting her vision. Black lips press against the shell of her ear, a hissing melody. “You took the moon, but only I can give you the sun.”

Cassandra, her feet on the ground again, tiptoed and still held. The demon curls over her, and there is a drag in her chest; an unseen traction. “.We know. Deep down.”

Her sanity, slipping like warm honey. This base, primal hate; that carnal, primitive love. Craving, confused and desperate for attention, for power. *What am I for?*

“How it pains me to see you falter.” Fingers, soft on her chin. A gasp for air, a blessed pause. Cassandra blinks away spots that buzz like flies. She licks her lips and they taste like iron.

Zhan Tiri tilts her head.

“.You’re furious.” Cassandra whispers. Her voice is raw, her body broken. Bleeding. But it’s her turn to speak. “Because I’m taking something away.”

The demon’s eyes narrow, lidded. Cassandra grins up at her, feral and bloody and *alive*. The laugh chaffs at her throat. “Because I surprised you.”

She closes her fingers around the ones that grasp her neck, tight. As tight as she can. It’s hard to think. Her words are slurried; the pain a growing fog. But it’s something. *She* is something, at least. Her choice. Her tirade.

Cassandra.

“I’m still here. You can’t erase me.”

The moment hangs between them; a garden of eternity.

And then Zhan Tiri smiles, oh so wide.

“Oh, Cassandra.” A gentle caress, a flick of talon. Her voice is so, so soft. “I was never trying to
erase you, darling.”

The demon begins to *squeeze*. Over her shoulder, edges dimming, Cassandra can see Rapunzel, coming closer. Dragging something heavy behind her, gritting her teeth. A fierce light in her eyes; a fire.

“You opened a door.” Zhan Tiri whispers. “And I gave you a gift. Our little secret .”

*A network of tunnels; the veins of a city. Ripe and fed on old conflict, a garden in waiting. A piece, nested in the black pit of her heart, supping on the coal of her rage.*

“I have shown you for you, my dear. The seeds of change, sown. Spreading, flourishing, deep inside. An instinct; *your* primacy, unleashed. Everything grows.”

An affirmation. Cassandra grimaces, wheezing, and then; a gasp. Zhan Tiri relaxes her grip. Blood bubbles out of the corner of her mouth, and the creature dips a tongue against it, so close. The words; old roots.

“You will always belong to *me* .”

Her vision has tunneled. Cass shudders, and rocks forward on her toes, so her forehead touches the demon’s, framed by her curling horns. A beat. A rest. She opens her mouth, and spits the words out with a venomous rattle.

“You love to talk.”

“—Way too much.” Rapunzel snarls from behind, and swings the shadowblade.

It takes some effort. The princess holds and heaves it with two hands, and the swipe itself doesn’t travel far; a glowing whistle that slices across the demon’s center like so much shadow.

And yet.

Zhan Tiri drops her and Cassandra crumples to the ground in a heap. The demon looks back over her shoulder again, her lips parted in a row of sharp fang. Her eyes slide down, and the cut writhes like shadow torn; dripping a red, viscous ichor that reeks of pine and smoke and stagnant water. Her legs appear to spindle out into vine; disrupted.

Rapunzel drops the sword, the handle still slick, and dives for Cassandra.

Zhan Tiri appears to fold over, her body unfurling; a clack of fangs, and shells. The skull splits open, rows of angry teeth and she *roars*, a hissing scream that makes both of them cringe. Dripping acrid sap; the shadow rises, until it’s claws are embedded in the walls and the ceiling and the rotting tongue dangles down from above.

Rapunzel pulls Cass close and her hair winds around them in a searing cocoon. Dazed, Cass can only watch the shadows narrow; agonize and distort, a storm inside. It feels like her lungs are about to burst; her head split open, a murky anger, a bitter tantrum.

*Parting.*

Every single window in the throne room shatters, inward.

And then, they are alone.
“Cassandra.” Rapunzel kneels over her again, her hands pressed down on the wound. The princess’s shoulders heave and shake; and she shouts into the night, for help, help now.

“I’m here, Cass.” Cassandra blinks up at her (alive, she’s alive) and remains still. This is fine; this is right; she’s so tired. A year, months of exhaustion; of pain and struggle and hate and this is. Fine. The opal croons, and she shushes it. Enough. She is tired.

Obliging, as it has always tried to be, the moonstone relaxes. The dark armor begins to crumble, and fold back into the stone where it can. It covers her like black plaster dust; brittle in Rapunzel’s lap. Too exhausted to be mortified; Cass whimpers in relief. It’s nice. A weight, lifting.

It’s..different.

There are voices now, other voices. Doors, thrown open; a veritable stampede. Maybe a literal one; with the horses. Her sluggish thoughts settle funnily. It doesn’t even hurt much, anymore.

Rest.

“Cass, hold on, please.”

Sleep. Cassandra’s eyes flutter closed. A bone-deep sigh, a tingling numbness where she’s being grabbed. Cold, then warm again in Rapunzel’s embrace. Someone’s embrace. Rocking movement. Sleep.

Her own dreams maybe, or if she has her way, none at all.

It’s been a long year.

She’s tired of sharing.

Chapter End Notes

next: epilogue
There are no dreams, no nightmares. Unconsciousness greets her like an old friend and takes her in. Cassandra goes gladly. A thoughtless twilight; with no hard edges. Time, passing and indifferent. A place of peace.

It is the thirst that wakes her.

Grit. A headache that blooms behind her eyes. Her body tries to grouse at the intrusion of sharp red light beyond her eyelids. A whine catches in her throat and escapes as a scratchy cough.

Cassandra opens her eyes. For a moment, all she can do is lie there.

Everything feels slow. She goes through a motion; an old training rhythm that sits sluggish in the back of her tired brain. One thing at a time, make an observation. The ceiling above, strut with heavy crossbeams, cobwebs collecting in the far corners. Cool, gray sunlight. Limbs. Two legs. Two arms. Fingers moving. Everything else...

“...ow.” Cass groans, and sits up.

Blearily; she realizes that she is in her room. Her room. Her bed. Head spinning, eyes blurry, out of the corner of her eye, a ceramic pitcher resting on a side table immediately catches her attention, overshadowing everything else. Ignoring the twinging pull; she scrambles for the handle and lifts it to her lips. Water, cool and fresh. The amazing, plain, taste of something. She drinks and drinks and drinks until water drips down her chin and her stomach churns in protest and then she sits forward, coughing, hand held to her cracked lips and tries not to let it all come back up. Stupid, idiot, gah.

Across the room, there’s a soft, reproachful hoot that sounds too close to agreement. And then she’s buffeted in the face by a ball of warm feathers.

“O-Owl?” she stutters, and her heart leaps in twists and turns. With gentle talons the small screech alights on her damp forearm, trilling softly, head bumping against her chin. Maybe she’s startled; maybe she’s too dry for tears; but Cass hiccups raspily and buries her face in the dusty smelling feathers.

She hadn’t even...it sinks in, an ache, how much she had missed him. Owl, who had stayed, longer than she might’ve asked of him. Who tried, who she took for granted, deep in her misery. And she’d just...forgotten. She had never blamed him for leaving. Cass blinks into the fluff, her eyes sliding down to a knobby, pale white scar that nicks along edge of his leg.

She breathes shame out into the feathers. “Oh buddy, I’m so sorry.”

The bird stares at her with large, unblinking yellow eyes. Owl coos softly; his beak nibbles at her finger. A sharper nip; lighter than she probably deserves, before he shakes and flutters up to the headboard behind her to preen. Her lips twitch.

The water clears her head a little but the fatigue remains, a bone aching...human tired. She sits up a little further, wincing. Observations, easy compartments. Cass stares at her hands. Her right is wrapped in crisp, cream colored bandage that winds its way up and past her elbow. Only the tips of
her fingers peek through, black against the linen. She’s dressed, loosely, in one of her old maroon shirts; peppered with dry dark stains. Where the neck slopes more bandages peek through, across her shoulders, down. On a second glance, the side table by the bed is laden with small opaque bottles, rags and rolls of cloth.

Gingerly, she breathes out, and pinches the bottom of her shirt, lifting. The linen around her torso is clean; freshly changed like the rest. A gentle press against her abdomen makes her flinch, but it’s not..it could be worse.

*black glass, sinking in, twisting*

She draws back. The shutters on the windows are open, and there is frost curling at the edges of the panes, giving the room a pale storm-glow. The hearth flickers, cheerily. Her eyes travel to the door, closed, and with a guilty thought she wonders if it’s been locked from the other side.

Across the room, the glint of the mirror catches her attention. There’s a moment of decision. A beat. Cass breathes out, slowly.

Grimacing, she tugs the heavy (*warm*) covers back, and tries to swing her legs over the side of the bed. Owl flutters and trills a series of troubled hoots as her legs tingle with pins and needles; hot and cold at the same time. Her ribs twinge in protest as her feet find purchase on the cold stone floor. Pain trickles down from her head like a cracked egg but she persists and the first dizzying motion *up* nearly sends her crashing back down to the ground. She grips at the headboard, trembling.

Owl glares.

Cass limps her way over to the mirror, slowly, using the furniture for balance. Her fingers scrape the edge of the wood frame. Her reflection stares back.

Pale, mottled with bruises. Dark circles, still, under her eyes. Her face is thinner; all angles, hollow cheeks. Underfed, lithe and rangy. Her turquoise hair stands out like a shock against her pallor and is so long now that it brushes her shoulders in loose curls. For an unsteady moment she sways against the mirror, strained. Cold sweat beads on her forehead.

It takes her a moment to realize that she’s waiting to see if anything else *moves*.

When nothing does, she pulls one hand away to tug down the collar of her shirt. Bandages stick to her skin and stop just underneath the angle of her clavicle.

The opal shines there. Bright as always, but instead of dark armor now she can finally see the way it sets against her skin. Small curls of black stone veined with blue spider-web around the edge of the moonstone; burrowed in the skin. Around it, like a little crown, the petal-like starburst of shale. Loose red threads from her shirt snag and pull against it. A sense of...presence, cool and placid. Familiar yet..not. Like someone you used to know, meeting again after a long, long time.

Cassandra sighs deeply. Relief, and..something else, something she can’t quite place.

She staggers back to her bed with all the grace of a hobbled fawn, shooting Owl a look that says *don’t you dare* when he trills discernibly. Because her life is unfair, the door chooses that point in time to swing wide open.

“Cass, *really*?”
Rapunzel stands in the doorway, holding a tray in both hands. Cassandra stares at her, half doubled against the bed, and the princess blinks slowly in surprise at her own tone of voice.

The opal warms.

And then she starts forward, quickly placing the tray down on the low table. Rapunzel reaches out towards her. “Cass, you’re—”

“Wait.” Cassandra throws one hand out, fingers shaking, scrambling back against the bed. She flinches. Rapunzel stops.

Cassandra pants with the effort; little spikes of pain lacing up and down her body. The gravity of the situation comes barreling down on her like a fleet of calvary. Rapunzel, alive. Cassandra, here in the palace, in her room. The opal, Zhan Tiri. Thorns and anger, fire and light, blood and pain and —

“My dad.” She rasps, grave, arm up and trembling like it will hold anything she’s done at bay. The water in her stomach threatens. “Is he..did I —”

The princess’s eyes lower, watching her. She holds out a gentle hand, the same way she did before. Her voice is soft. “He’s alright, Cass. He’s resting.”

Cassandra’s stomach flips again, hope measured against an acid guilt that boils there. Rapunzel, seeing her shudder, continues, stepping closer with a more mindful speed. “He’s ah, well. Unhappy about the..’forced’ bed rest? Even if it’s not really..forced.” A weak attempt at a smile, even for Corona’s brightest star. She runs a hand across the back of her neck. “He’s..worried about you.”

Worried, about her. Cass swallows a rusty laugh, her throat thick with shame and confusion. It’s a lot. It’s too much. The words spill out of her mouth, because it’s a wall too wide to try and speak through. She’s not even sure she really can in the moment; aching, tired, shaken. Awake. Too many things unsaid left between them, and;

“I almost killed him. I tried to kill you.”

And worse, out on the road. Nearly a year, a year. Cassandra stares up at the princess, who stares back. Her arms drop; her wrapped fingers curl tightly in the sheets. There is a palpable tension. A proverbial chasm. The fire crackles.

Finally, Rapunzel tilts her chin up.”..Are you hungry?”

Cassandra gapes, a little. Her jaw works. “...Yes.” she says, eventually.

There is a flurry of periwinkle movement. Rapunzel ducks down to pick up the tray, and struck-dumb Cassandra can’t help but wonder how many times in the last few days the princess has carried the same assortment of things into the room. The bandages, her clothes. Cassandra bites back another wince. Her arm, revealed again.

A little green blur leaps out from the princess’s hair and scrabbles up next to Owl, who glances at the lot of them with an air of easy exasperation. Pascal churrs, and watches her with narrowed eyes and pointed flick of his tail.

Right.
A small bowl of liquid is suddenly held out in front of her face. Cassandra blinks, and breathes in the smell of salt and herbs. A bone broth. Her stomach, intent on being heard today, finally, rolls again, suddenly ravenous. Her mouth waters and she grasps the warm bowl and tips it back with a searing swallow.

It’s the best thing she’s ever tasted. It doesn’t feel like nearly enough.

Rapunzel puts her fingers on the bowl with a worried sound, drawing it away. “N-not so fast! You’ll make yourself sick. We had a doctor come in, and she said that...”

There is a brief moment where Cassandra wants to growl and tug it back from her. She does not, and she decides not to think about it. She rests the dish in her lap, mulish. A doctor. “..What did she say?”

Rapunzel pauses, fiddling with a tea towel. “Can I sit?”

Cassandra nods, curtly. Her heart twists.

Malnutrition. Exhaustion. A litany of injuries; strange scars and punctures. Rapunzel’s voice gets more and more strained as she speaks, her hands shake. The carving job Cass had done on her shoulders. The..wound, tearing, and concern about her ribs. The panic of having to find someone, call someone back; when the island had been evacuated, the not knowing. Eugene, helping to lift her up. Days of careful tending; coughing up blood in her sleep.

It had been bad. The physician had been bewildered that she was still breathing, let alone optimistic that she would wake up.

“How long?” Cass says, after Rapunzel stops. Next to her on the bed, but not touching, the princess wetly says, “..a week. Almost.”

Cassandra reaches up, and presses the opal through her shirt. Rapunzel’s eyes follow, and she nods.

They sit together in labored silence.

“I was so afraid I’d lost you.” Rapunzel chokes, and leans forward, wringing the towel between her hands. Cassandra stiffens. “I’m so sorry Cass. I don’t even know where to start.”

She can’t, she can’t. Cass watches Rapunzel fold, and her shoulders tremble. There’s a bandage pressed cleanly to one corner of her neck. The fatigue swoops down on her, speckling her vision. She tries to speak but the words catch in her throat and Rapunzel sits up again, trying, blinking back tears. “What we said to each other, back with the..the caravan, and the teapot..”

But Rapunzel pauses, because Cassandra is looking at her with a look of panic and confusion so deep it borders on horror.

“..What teapot?” Cassandra whispers.

And she breaks.

Cass wants to be mortified. That’s always been easier. Soldiers, strong people didn’t cry. But she wasn’t a soldier, was she? And this wasn’t the first time. She just wasn’t even...she just wasn’t.
Tears, streaming hot. Another stolen past; a dagger, pressed against the sun.

(‘she’ll never eclipse me again)

Cassandra wraps her arms around her middle and buckles forward. The sobs shake her. There’s only a moment of fleeting hesitation, when Rapunzel touches her and waits to see if she’ll flinch away.

She doesn’t.

So there Rapunzel holds her, as tight as she thinks she can without upsetting her injuries. Cass doesn’t care; she bends until her head is nearly in the princess’s lap and she cries, for what she’s done, and what she’s lost, and what she never had.

( that future..that doesn’t exist)

Stillness comes, eventually. The opal purrs somewhere deep in her chest. Cass hiccups, pain fluttering around her abdomen. Rapunzel strokes her hair, lightly, fidgeting motion; yearning for the contact but a part of her still unsure. “..You don’t..you don’t remember.”

Cassandra shakes her head, silent. Later, for later. She can’t right now. Compartments; the here and the now. Breathing, feeling..expunged, stupid. Grateful, and even that is strange and leaves her feeling at odds with herself. Never satisfied. She doesn’t want to move, but she has to, gently, lifting herself back up with a wince and wiping at her eyes.

“She did this. To you.” Rapunzel says icily, tensing and staring with familiar green fury.

Zhan Tiri. The name rustles in her mind like a breeze through long grass, makes her shoulders itch. Cass nods. She tries to summon the brief feeling of triumph of that past night; the exhilaration of breaking away, but it’s mingled with sorrow and dread and shame. Shame for betrayal; shame for pain and damage; and even shame for..for.. failing to leave the shadow of the crown and make her own way. The shadow of Rapunzel.

Going in circles.

“She’s not..gone, is she.” Rapunzel states, looking at her. Looking, closely.

“No.” Cassandra says, because that’s the truth. She doesn’t..feel her, now. Anymore.

Rapunzel has questions, that much is obvious, and who wouldn’t. Cassandra has questions too, but the answers aren’t so easy to find. The princess tilts her head in contemplation. Absentmindedly, she rubs her thumb over the back of Cass’s hand. Rapunzel says, “You know it’s not your fault, Cass. What she did to you, what she made you do. She’s..it’s evil.” Dreams, nightmares, crowding her journal. Her voice is hard.

“I don’t know.” Cass says, after a moment. Guilt. “..Malice doesn’t even begin to cover it.” It summed it up far too neatly. All those months. (It chose her.)

“I don’t know how to..start explaining it.” She tenses, so suddenly and physically that Rapunzel starts. “I’m not blameless. It wasn’t just. There was a part —” Her hand, around the opal. Music, mechanical, ringing in her ears. Winners and losers, the chosen and the rest. Her anger, a force and a fuel.

What she was going to do.
“Cass.” Rapunzel’s voice is soft. She moves her thumb, quiet for a pause, searching for what to say. “People..are lonely, and they hurt, and they forget that they’re still people.” Her breath hitches. “And..because..because the people who should have been there for them, weren’t.”

Maybe, maybe. Cassandra winces, drawing her arms up, around her shoulders. “..I wasn’t exactly sharing.” She glances to the side, eyes lidded, watching the fire in the hearth sputter.

“That place..” she murmurs. The lagoon, the stars everlasting. An opening. “...Do you know what it was?”

Rapunzel shakes her head, slowly. “No.” She offers a small smile. “But I am glad that..it happened. Whatever it was.” She sighs. “It was..beautiful, wasn’t it?”

The cool wind outside buffets the windows, rattling the shutters. Snow flurries in the cracks.

“.I don’t want you to feel trapped here, Cass.” Rapunzel says, and Cass winces. She’s waning, tired. Emotionally wrung out. She’s happy to be stringing her own thoughts back together again, but it’s exhausting. The repercussions of her short wander are coming back to bite her in full force. By the look on Rapunzel’s face, she can see it too. “I think..” And the princess struggles here, “You should stay, for now. But we..I won’t force you. Once you’re better, or..whatever you decide. It’s your choice.”

Choice. Cassandra tips her head back, and breathes deeply. Stay or go. Get..well, enough.

“.Also, the bridge is destroyed. And. A lot of other things.”

Her shoulders drop and she groans, drawing a hand over her face. Traitor, part of her whispers. Freedom, breathes the other. “Then you should be putting me in a cell, Rapunzel.” Cassandra says gravely, looking back. Staying meant..she didn’t know what it meant. Assault the kingdom; lie unconscious in her room for a week. What could the King and Queen be thinking, what must everyone else. The thought of the expression on her father’s face makes her ache.

And leaving. Her, alone, with her thoughts and the road again. And the demon, in the wind.

She notices, finally, that all the weapons have been removed from her walls.

“I think we both know that locking people up hasn’t really done anyone any favours, Cass.” Rapunzel says with equal gravity. She bites her lip. “..Just think about it. Okay?”

Cassandra stares at her. Slowly, she sighs, and runs her hands up through her long hair. Cass chuckles dryly, and she.. smiles. Fine. For now; so much left unsaid. “Alright.” The expression on Rapunzel’s face is almost worth it. Her heart turns over again. Foolish, something like a promise. Scrawled in blood. Do better.

“.First though.” Rapunzel sighs. “There is something that I really need to tell you, Cass.” She reaches out, and grasps her by the shoulders. Ow.

Cass blanches, blinking, with her hands in her hair. Her stupid traitor monster heart kicks up again like a drum. “I..what?” she says, with trepidation.

“.We really need to get you into a bath.”
“No, I don’t..need help. With this. Right now. Really. I..next time. Please.” Cassandra says, and finally, Rapunzel acquiesces to holding post outside the bath hall door, because did you see, you almost collapsed down the hall, your injuries, if you drown in the bath Cass I swear —

She shuts the door and leans on it, sighing. Still, she murmurs, against the wood, “Thank you, Raps.”

She unwraps the bandages, slowly, methodically, wincing in places where they have stuck to her skin. Her shoulders and neck are mottled with bruises, small sticking wounds. The gash on her stomach she’s more cautious with, but when she runs her fingers over it all she feels is tender, knotted scar tissue. A fast healing. Too fast.

The water is hot, and lovely. She sinks into it, washing out her hair, watching it float on the surface. She had been..wiped down a little apparently (this was mortifying to learn) during her blackout, but Cass still feels like she’s washing away months of grime and dried blood. Palace baths, and she’ll never take them for granted again. The large stone tub is lined with bottles; little baskets of petals, slices of citrus and candied fruit. She’d never understood the need and had always been happy with the soap the guards were issued.

It’s nice. It’s normal, and it feels good.

(Shes really doesn’t deserve it.)

Sighing, she lets herself float. Cass lifts her hand. Unwrapped, there’s nowhere for her to hide from this. The opal is there, waiting, willing; each time she pains or staggers she can feel a distant inquiry in the back of her mind; to stop, to cease, to take away. It would be easy to let the armor fold out again, and shield her from everything. Try to. She wiggles her fingers, and there’s only a dull, sort of numb twinge. The skin is blackened up past her elbow, the veins stand out purplish and sickly. Sores, or flakes of skin. Rot, stalled, by the power of the moonstone. They’d been putting some kind of cream on it, apparently; kept clean to prevent infection, which is a thought that makes her lips flatten into a thin line. The idea of people touching it. She wanted privacy, to look. To see.

To check for roots.

Stay or go.

She’s going nowhere fast.

(You will always belong to me.)

Cassandra closes her eyes, takes a breath, and sinks below the surface of the cooling water. She opens them, and watches her hair waver and float past her chin, luminescent. Cass waits.

Eventually, she comes back up for air.

Back in the safe, quiet comfort of her room, Cassandra thinks.

Tucked into the wedge of the center window, she cracks it open and lets the cold air in. It rustles her hair, the loose pieces that escaped her attempt to tie them back. Owl perches on her knee, fluffing, comfortable in the chill. He watches her silent, one gold eye open. She can look out into the palace courtyard, beyond. Corona is caught in the throes of winter; but there are boats plenty out on the icy water. Far away, by the shore, the rubble of the bridge sticks out, even in the snow. The rocks went away when she passed out.
There are things she needs to do. People she.. the conversation with her father looms; and she knows why she hesitates. Because how could she? How could she stop for the princess, and not for him? The things she said. It’s paralyzing.

The here and the now.

Seeking forgiveness. And...forgiving. The thought makes her head swim, makes her heart pound and the opal stir. There’s a draw here, that she’s not ready to examine closely.

Because she can tell exactly where Rapunzel is, in the castle. And she doesn’t know what the means.

Changing and changed. To forgive, to do better. To..come to terms. She doesn’t know.

She can’t even remember pieces of her life. She doesn’t even know what’s missing.

A teapot.

“What do you think, buddy?” She asks, murmuring at Owl. “Sneak out the window, or just try for the door?”

The bird opens his other eye, and nips admonishingly at her knee. She grins, and bades him to hop up on her arm. “Yeah, I don’t like it either.” Cass rubs the top of his crown, the soft feathers. “Go get some exercise for the both of us.” she says, and tosses her arm up. He takes flight, winging out the window into the growing dusk.

Maybe she doesn’t need to figure it all out, just yet. Maybe she can rest, and heal and..prepare. She doesn’t feel..quite the same. Rapunzel has been approaching her carefully, but there’s a concern in her eyes that Cass knows doesn’t just involve her.

Flowers.

Alone, eyes cast towards the faint outline of the moon, Cassandra tips her head back and breathes in a fresh air. Fine. Okay. “What’s coming next?”

“What’s coming next?”

“Cassandra.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! Thank you so much, to everyone who’s read and left comments and
kudos on my first wild attempt at a fanfic. I've had such a good time writing it, and it's made me some new friends along the way as well. Stay on the lookout for some other things coming to this series, including some oneshots and probably a sequel.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!