

I can't remember the last time I was this close to Mom, the last time her arms were around me. She doesn't really like being touched.

I pick a cicada from her hair. Its legs twitch convulsively, abdomen swollen and glowing with fluorescent light.

Lying this way—foreheads pressed together—I'm struck how well we match...toe to toe we line-up: same height, same slender-limbed round-chested build. But my arms are golden-pink against hers, pale and gray. She is cold. Too much gravity holds her to the couch.

Shouts, snarls, crashes, thuds, and the clash of metal on bone rain down in the room behind me. Claire hurls insults and curses I've never heard at the crimbal, along with Mom's collection of books and paperweights. Jacob and Aidan beat them back from the couch with their enchanted weapons.

But me. I'm inside a barrier of stillness on this couch with Mom. She smells anemic, like dried leaves. The smoothness of her cheek mesmerizes me. Each pore is tiny and perfect. She's ageless, posed for a painting.

"Hurry Emily!" Aidan's leg smacks into me, jarring me back to my task. I move Mom's blood-stiff hair off her neck, lean forward and touch her lips with my own.

How to explain? She tastes buried. Unbreathing. The breath in her lungs is stagnant. When I inhale it comes at me in a rush, flooding my cells with her desperate need for circulation. I have to pay close attention so I won't lose myself in the simple task of exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide, something asthma makes me not great at even when it's just for me.

Jacob said to absorb her Blaze, but it's not that simple. Have you ever tried to take the milk and leave the cream? It isn't impossible. The cream separates. But you can't just stick in a straw and suck.

I try to siphon only the Magic. I sip and pull. It races from her wings through her bloodstream before hitting me with a surge of cellular respiration. I choke, fighting back the urge to sever our connection.

*Don't take anything except the Blaze.*

The White Faerie's glittering voice helps me focus. She's right. Mom has already lost so much blood.

That's not what she means though. I'll take Mom's wings to save her life and I'll hide them inside as long as I can so the monsters can't get them. I don't want anything else. Not her addiction, not her suffering, not whatever rationalizations she has for leaving us.

Anguished tears prick my eyes. I can't do this.

*Yes you can.* The White Faerie's words effervesce in my ear. *You have everything you need inside you to do this hard thing. Trust yourself. Close your eyes and create a circle of calm in your middle.*

I don't know how to do that!

*Listen to my voice. Imagine a single speck of light sparking within your chest.*

*Concentrate only on that speck.*

I do as she says. Where my ribs meet over my heart I see a single sphere hovering, emitting soft golden light, just like the Spark in the grocery store parking lot before it expanded and overwhelmed me.

My consciousness drifts down until I float weightless in my own chest. It is close and dark and full within. It is safe and quiet. The chaos around me recedes into the background.

The speck shimmers, daring me to come closer still, so I do and realize that it isn't just one sphere. There are countless points of light...so many, so uniform, so evenly spaced and equidistant from one another that they appear as a smooth, solid, single surface.

Gravity holds me just outside the curving planetary wall. Moving all around it in awe, I'm unable to comprehend the perfection of what I'm seeing. Tentatively, I reach out with the fingers of my mind, brushing against the closest light.

An unseen force yanks me down...

... down ...

...I'm falling ...

...I'm shrinking ...

... I'm on the other side of the wall of lights.

Whoa. What I thought was a wall was just the first layer. There are endless layers and I am at their center. Infinite light radiates from me in a way I have never—could have never—seen before. It isn't seeing, really, it's BEING, in all directions at once. No front, no back, no up, no down.

Only everywhere.

Brilliant light streams from me. Light surrounds me. Light *is* me.

I am Light.

And suddenly, as if I just learned how to taste, I recognize the distinct flavor of my mother's Blaze.

Bathed in light I begin to pull her Blaze into my own body.

It hurts.

No part of me is in control as terrifying energy saturates my cells, filling me up to overflowing. I can't stop it. I don't know where else it can go or how much more I can expand. A swelling everywhere increases until I know my blood vessels, my lungs, my skin will split and spill onto the family room floor.

*You're almost there, Emily, just a little more*, the White Faerie encourages.

Needle-sharp blades strain against the skin of my back from inside me until it's paper-thin. The force threatens to knock me backwards while merciless hooks anchor my lips to Mom's. I am being riven.

The White Faerie starts to howl.

"She's taking the wings!" A crimal shrieks. "STOP HER! SMASH HER! HE'LL KILL US!"

Something hits the back of my skull with a thunderous crash. Claire screams. Crazed, I gulp the last of Mom's Blaze and tear away from her. Propelling myself off the couch I trip and fall over what's left of the ruined coffee table. Splinters and glass crunch beneath me, blood oozes through my tank top.

Jacob pins a crimal by the kitchen, one knee on its chest, the other subduing its flailing arms. He twists the glowing dagger hilt-deep in its eye socket.

At the end of the sectional Claire kicks and screams at the crimal on top of her, its pointed fangs gnash inches from her neck.

And Aidan. Aidan is next to her on the floor folded under his shield, the third crimal draped over him. Neither of them is moving.

A new energy electrifies me. I pick myself up and run at the monster on top of Claire. My kick lands squarely in its ribs, sending it crashing into the piano.

Instantly, my murderous hands clench its throat. I slam it back against the wall, pinning it just above my head. I want nothing more than to make its eyeballs burst.

The thing grins at me, pulling at my fingers, kicking at my waist. “You stupid little bitch,” it hisses. “Don’t you know what you’ve done? Your mother is useless now. A husk. But you...look how pretty you are. See how you shine. And the little freckled one, too. What nice pets you’ll make for our Master. What lovely little playthings.” Spittle foams at its lips.

I press harder with my thumbs on its windpipe. Its kicks grow feeble, its voice a broken clatter. “Yes, that’s it. Kill me. No matter. There are plenty of others. This will not save you. Look at your arm. It will lead him to you like a vulture to rotting meat.”

I stumble back, releasing my grip on its neck. The brands in my arm radiate phosphorescent light. I claw at the runes that spell my last name, desperate to scrape them off, knowing that if I don’t he’ll find us. He’ll never stop searching until he finds us.

“Emily, behind you!”

At Jacob’s warning I turn. The crimal raises its arm above my head, a geode paperweight clutched in its fist. My hand snakes out. Grabbing its wrist I slam it down against the ivory keys on the piano. In a dissonant minor the paperweight falls. I catch it in my other hand and drive it into the crimal’s skull.

Bone crunches under rock. I’m pressing harder, grinding harder, smashing HARDER, pulverizing solid into sludge. Viscous blood dribbles between my fingers, heavy like mercury. Welts rise on my flesh where the blood touches me. It eats through my skin, spreading up my arm, exposing muscle and cartilage. I hear myself scream at the pain. I can’t stop screaming at the pain.

“Emily. It’s alright, your mom’s going to be alright...”

Gabe. Jacob must have untied him. But someone is pulling him back away from me.

I'm lying down staring at the ceiling. There's a needling pinch in the crease of my arm at the elbow. Something presses around my mouth. It smells like lilac.

A beautiful black void settles across my shoulders. Jacob, Aidan, and Claire gaze down at me, their faces stunned and more than a little scared, but none of them is covered in crimal guts, and after the night we just survived, that's a win in my book.