

Outside the palace doors, the crowd roared for her. Rose twisted her shaking fingers and tried to keep the smile on her face. This was the part of the story she'd been dreading.

At least the throne room was quiet. It was a lot like being in an old church. There were huge circular stained glass skylights set in the ceiling and they beamed light down onto the mosaic floor, which reflected onto the mosaic walls. The entire room was almost too bright to look at. There were prisms worked into it somewhere and they threw light onto Rose's skin, lighting her amber arms up with rainbow flecks.

At the end of the room sat the princess. Her freshly-cleaned fur was white as cream, and her face looked drawn. Rose figured princessness was kind of a heavy thing to put on so suddenly. Her friend looked up at her and sweetly waved a paw.

There were lots of different kinds of Cats in the kingdom— cats of flesh and bone, like the princess, sure, but also cats of cloth and cats of porcelain, all from different places with their own customs. They all mingled together here in the capital. The Good Fairy, who stood next to the princess, was a cat of cloth. She was a handmade plushie probably, once upon a time, but now she had intention behind her button eyes. Her thoughts were as readable as someone wearing a mask.

“Step forward, Rosemarine, hero of Pell, who restored the princess to her rightful throne.”

Rose stepped forward, her body lighting up red and blue and gold and green as she passed under each stained glass skylight. Finally she stood before the Good Fairy, who clutched a thin golden wand in one paw. The wand had a star at the end— a *real* star. It burned the eye to look at it, and when you did there was the sense that it was actually billions of lightyears away. Magic in this place had never quite clicked into sense for Rose. The wand made her palms sweat.

“Now that the hullabaloo and hurrahs are through,” the Fairy rhymed in her whispery voice, “It's time to send you home, as we already did with your mother.”

The fairy turned and touched an enormous piece of blue glass behind her on the dais. Its edges were cloudy, like sea glass, but its center had been polished clear. Rose could see shapes forming inside of it, coalescing into an image of her living room. Her mother was asleep on the couch, the same way she often slept after work. She even had a book laying open on her chest. It was exactly as if she had never been wished away, exactly as if Rose's selfishness hadn't gotten her kidnapped.

Rose felt the relief in her chest. This wasn't like shattering the prism her mom had been trapped in. It was something different to really see her home. If she were staying, this would be all she needed to be sure her mother was safe at home without her. Well. *If* she were staying.

"She won't remember," the princess said softly.

Rose looked over at her. "That's how it always is, right? They never remember at the end of a story."

The princess rose to her feet, her shimmering white gown trailing down onto the floor. It was still so funny to see her dressed like that after traveling together for so long, her fur turning pinky russet with road dust.

"Come out, everyone," the princess said, smiling genuinely for the first time since Rose had walked in.

Rose's eyes filled with tears as her friends walked out from behind the dais. Navdeep, the tiger, slunk forward in the front. Her body turned from a slow liquid to a rushing wave as she slammed into Rose, cradling her body to the ground with her big paws. Navdeep nuzzled her big, hot, heavy face directly into Rose's nose. She didn't mind.

"I'll miss you," she purred.

With that simple affection done, she stepped back for the next friend, who turned out to be Kay. A tiny, pale little cat made entirely of porcelain. Kay opened up the glove he wore as a backpack and handed Rose a handkerchief that was smaller than her palm.

"Keep it," he said, "as a reminder of our time together. And for goodness' sakes clean Navdeep's snot off your face."

Rose giggled. Navdeep *was* crying, after all. Big fat heavy tiger tears.

When she reached out to take the handkerchief, Kay took her finger in his paws. "I have lived for many ages, but I have never forgotten my friends. Don't forget me, either, will you?"

Rose smiled. "Never."

Then came Professor Oboe, the old cat clock, who rattled in his chair. His face tick-tocked into a smile of shocking warmth.

“Come closer, my darling,” he said. Rose kissed his cheek and felt the mechanism in him click under her lips.

“You’ve taught me so much, Professor. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“And yet I feel like I can never converse with you enough,” he sighed.

And he stepped away for the last in their gang. Trotting up to her like everything was normal. Like he was seeing her in the kitchen in the morning again, his ginger fur glowing like neon in the light.

Toby climbed her body with his claws and she held him and held him. He was the most comforting thing to hold in the world. She leaned her head down into his cat belly and listened to him purr.

“Kid, you’re killing me. All I want to do is claw your head off when you do that.” He said, so gently that she sobbed for real.

“I’m saying goodbye to you too, aren’t I?” She whispered.

She lowered him in her arms and he twisted his body up the other way and knocked the top of his head into her chin.

“I think so, yeah. If I go back home with you, after a couple months I won’t remember how to talk anymore, you know? I’ll be a regular old cat again. And it’ll only be a few years before I kick the bucket.”

“I don’t want that,” Rose said, squeezing him.

“I know you don’t, hon. But I don’t regret one second of the time I spent as your cat, you know that? I couldn’t have asked for a better kid to grow up with.” He smushed his face into her jaw. “Plus, maybe someday when you’re old, you’ll come back here and I’ll still be around, waiting for you. And we can pee in weird places together again. We’ll be too old to know better. Remember when we both peed in the potato patch?”

Rose was really laughing now. “Of course I don’t. I was three.”

“Well, it was one of our shining moments.”

As glad as she was that being in the cat world had made Toby young again, she wanted to ask him to come back. She wanted to be able to talk to him about Pell. She wanted to remember everything with him by her side.

Toby jumped out of her arms suddenly, and Rose was shocked until she saw the Princess in front of her. Rose could hardly look into her warm, strange eyes. One amber, one bright blue.

“Did you find out what your name is, Princess?” Rose asked. The princess giggled, which Rose wasn’t expecting. She hid her face with one paw. Rose leaned in closer.

“Oh no, was it something embarrassing?! What was it?!”

“Well,” the princess said conspiratorially, “I *did* go to the royal archives and look it up, and it just didn’t fit me. So I decided to just use the name I already—”

“No!” Rose gasped. “No you’re kidding. You can’t. I didn’t know when I met you that it would *mean* anything!”

The princess doubled over laughing. She grabbed Rose’s hand with one shaking paw.

“You can’t. You CANNOT let me do that. You can’t let me name you. You— you can’t be *Princess Princess!*”

Princess Princess croaked in a breath of air and honked out another laugh that echoed around the throne room. “That’s *Her Highness, Queen of the Realm Princess Princess to you.*”

All the heavy reverence of the room had drained away. Rose realized she’d been holding the princess’ hand for a long time. She started to let go, but the princess pulled her back.

“I’m going to miss your room,” the princess said softly. Rose closed the distance, laying her head on the furry shoulder in front of her.

“I don’t want to go,” Rose whispered. “I was always waiting, my whole life I’ve been waiting for that door to open. I just didn’t know it. And now that it’s over—”

“When someone goes to another world and saves it,” the princess said, “they have to go home at the end. You worked so hard to get your mom back.”

Rose had always been embarrassed to cry. And she’d always been quick to tears. School had been a nightmare of trying not to show her feelings, of hiding in bathroom stalls trying to calm down, of trying to splash cold water on her burning face before anyone saw her. But she didn’t mind crying in front of her friends. It

felt right to cry. The princess held her for a while and everyone crowded in, leaning against her and holding her up.

After a little while, Rose took a big breath and turned to the Fairy, who was waiting patiently to the side. Rose nodded, unable to speak.

“Wait—” The princess gasped. She took Rose’s hand again and brought it up to her lips, holding Rose’s gaze with her own. And then suddenly, so quickly that it was over as soon as it happened, she *bit* the meat under Rose’s right thumb. Rose yelped and snatched her hand back instinctively, but even though her blood dotted the white fur around the Princess’ mouth, she saw that the wounds had already closed and scarred over, leaving what looked like two white stars on her flesh.

“Now you can’t forget me,” the princess said, licking her mouth.

Rose grinned at her. “Thanks.”

The fairy took her hand as if she were a little child and walked toward the blue glass. Rose held herself there, like the moment before a boat goes over a waterfall.

And walked through.

The surface only resisted her a little, like walking through a bead curtain. Rose tried to look back, but the glass was already closing over her sight. Her friends wavered before her, distorted, underwater—

Then she fell.

It was like falling in a dream. And then it was like waking up again.

Rose dug her fingernails into the wet dirt. That was already too much. When she stood up, everything would be wrong.

But the ground was cold, and she was wearing the pajama shirt and shorts she’d been wearing when she stepped through the door instead of the Pellian shirt and trousers with the dancing cat embroidery.

She looked up first, half expecting the glass door to be hovering over her. But there was nothing there, just the half-bare trees of early November against the stars. Then she looked down at her palm, her heart pounding, and saw the two little stars there. She ran her opposite thumb over them, feeling this tiny new shape in her body. It was real. She had been altered.

She had the fresh feeling of having just been very warm, and then having been thrust out into the chill November air. She looked through the trees at her house. Her mom hadn't gotten the woodstove lit yet, it looked like, even though it was cold enough.

Rose tried to wipe the cold mud off her bare feet as best she could on the kitchen mat, then tiptoed through the kitchen, avoiding the squeaky parts of the floor, until she could peek into their small living room.

There was her mom, asleep on the couch, exactly the way she'd been in the glass. Rose crept down the hall into the only bedroom, which was her own.

Her room. She plugged in her fairy lights and turned on her ceramic sheep lamp, which had survived from all the way when she was a baby. There was just enough space here for her closet, her bed, and a little room in between to dance around. She expected it to be covered in a layer of dust. But, of course, no time had passed since she'd gone. It was as if she'd gone away only a moment ago. She collapsed into her bed, letting the silence fill her ears. The first frost had come and gone and the night bugs were dead. There was nothing singing beyond her windows, not even crickets. Her mind felt staticky. She held the palm with the two stars on it against her chest.

After a while, Rose got up and took off her muddy pajamas and put on warm socks, a long shirt and overalls. She put on her mother's heavy gloves and went outside, broke the crust of frost off the wheelbarrow wheel and filled it with wood from the woodpile. She was actually surprised at how much easier it was— but of course, she'd gotten good at using a sword. Her arms and her chest had strong muscles now. She'd gotten a glimpse of herself in the mirror earlier— before leaving to come back here— but had ignored it. She looked the same in passing, a heavy 14 year old girl. Black wavy hair and hair on her arms. But hidden under her coat and baggy clothes were the strong arms she'd had in Pell.

Rose opened the screen door and stacked the wood inside, trying to be as fast as she could. Her mother stirred on the couch, whimpering in the cold. She finished stacking, covered the wheelbarrow and tied down the tarp, and then went inside to try and get the fire lit.

As she was working on this, her mother made a muzzy sound.

“Rosey?”

“Yeah mom, I'm just getting the woodstove lit, okay? You can go back to sleep.”

“You can’t light the woodstove by yourself...”

“I do it all the time. Go back to sleep.”

That was the first conversation Rose had had with her mother in maybe three months. Her mother smiled and then laid her cropped head back down onto the pile of pillows on the couch, wrapping the stack of quilts and fuzzy blankets more securely around herself.

Rose got the fire the way she liked it. Her face was too warm and her back was too cold, so she turned in front of it to try and roast herself properly, which never really worked. Her mom was already asleep. From this side, Rose could see her face bathed in the firelight. She wondered what her mom had dreamed inside of the crystal. She had looked very beautiful inside the crystal prison. She had looked serene. Rose wondered why, after so long asleep, her mom still looked so tired.

School felt like dreaming about school. Back in Pell, Rose used to dream about school sometimes. She’d wake up inside the Carry-Van and see Navdeep’s huge body curled around the stove in the center of the cabin, the fire flickering in strange shapes on her already fiery fur. Rose would wake up with her heart hammering inside her and then she’d remember that she wasn’t all alone anymore. And if someone was sleeping too loud or if she needed some air, she could step out onto the little porch in the back and look straight up at the sky, the stars glittering in every color, not just white. That was where she and Rin— she and the *Princess*— had gone the first night they’d met the professor and hitched a ride. The princess had been small enough to hold in her arms back then, still shaped mostly like a regular cat but getting bigger.

“Did you dream?” The princess had said.

“Yeah. Just boring stuff.”

“I dreamed.” she slithered out of Rose’s arms and walked smoothly onto the railing. Even though the cart was still bumping along the road under its own power, she was completely sure of her footing.

“I dreamed I was somewhere that was all blue glass. Like the inside of a bottle. And I dreamed I was wandering around looking for someone. And then I found a room full of all these glass bottles with all these strange stoppers. It was like I was inside one of the bottles, but the bottles were inside that bottle. You know? And I tried to

open one, but just when I opened it I realized that I was in that bottle too. And opening it would let out a horrible curse.”

“What kind of curse?”

She wanted to ask, *like the curse that put everybody into crystals? Like what happened to my mom?* But she found she couldn’t ask.

“I don’t know,” said Rin. “I woke up.”

She stepped back into Rose’s arms.

“I dreamed about school,” Rose admitted.

“What’s school like?”

“Bad.”

A teacher whose name Rose didn’t know anymore was snapping in her face. Rose started.

“Are we paying attention? This side of the triangle? How do we find this?”

Rose shook her head, silent. Some people behind her giggled nervously.

“We studied this last year. We reviewed it last week. I *asked* if anyone had trouble understanding before we moved on.” The teacher pushed her classes up and massaged between her own eyes. “You *promised* me you understood it. Were you lying, or do you just not want to solve it?”

Rose shook her head again.

“No? No *what?* No you just don’t want to solve it?”

Rose shook her head again. Some more people in class laughed.

The teacher sighed loudly and continued down the row. Another girl— she and Rose had been kind of friends, Kanisha. It took her a second to remember. Kanisha scowled at the teacher, who had someone else at the front now and was watching his progress on the whiteboard. Kanisha looked at Rose and shook her head, her

big colorful bobbles on the ends of her braids knocking together. She pointed at the teacher and mouthed a really rude word that made Rose blush.

After the bell, Rose slipped out with the crowd right behind Kanisha. If the teacher wanted her to stay back again she didn't catch Rose in time. She was so focused on getting away that for a while she realized all she was doing was following Kanisha.

She stopped in the hallway. The other kids just walked around her.

"Kanisha," she whispered.

Kanisha looked back at her.

"Um. Where are we going next?"

After a moment, Kanisha walked up and put the back of her hand against Rose's forehead. Rose suddenly remembered that Kanisha had three little siblings.

"You don't feel hot. What's going on with you?"

She leaned in and whispered, "You have your period?"

Rose shook her head. "I can't remember some stuff. I'm sorry. It's weird."

Kanisha mulled it over. "Why can't you remember stuff?"

"I just can't. And it's stuff that I should know. I can't remember what classes we have, or what the homework was, or what the teacher's names are. I can't remember and nobody can know about it because if they find out about it they're gonna ask me what's wrong and I can't tell anybody that, ever."

Kanisha looked really lost now. She took Rose by the hand and pulled her away from the busy part of the hallway, tucking them next to an open door.

It was probably really nice to be one of her younger siblings, Rose thought.

"Okay. Look. You have your planner?"

"My planner...?" Rose sniffled.

"Yeah. Go ahead and get it out."

It was pure luck that Rose had remembered where her locker was. She'd grabbed every single book she owned and put them in a big stack and had been carrying it all morning. Kanessa pulled her planner out from in between math and science.

"Here, see? It shows every classroom and every teacher and what time. And the other day you wrote down the homework. You can just take really careful notes and then you won't need to remember, alright?"

Rose nodded. Her blush was prickling and burning.

She walked to the next class in a daze.

She was made to hold a sword in her hand. She'd thought after everything they'd been through together Rin would make her the royal knight or something. She'd thought that she'd be asked to stay. Given a room of her own in the palace. Or even just a place among the guards. She hadn't liked all the celebrating after everyone came out of their prisms, but what was it all for if she was just going to be thrown away?

She missed the leather armor that Navdeep had made for her, with the big sun embossed onto the chest. Navdeep had looked at her with her big, drown-you eyes and said that the sun was because Rose was always looking into the deepest corners, showing everyone everything. Like pure Noonlight.

The shirt she wore to school felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. It felt like it had been washed in someone else's detergent. It was too itchy. She wanted to tear it off.

The school called Rose's mom's work phone because she was hiding in the bathroom through two classes, but Rose's mom didn't answer.

It didn't exactly get easier, but she learned to pretend and she learned all the steps that she was supposed to do again. It was like remembering every single part of an unfamiliar, embarrassing dance. And each day when she woke up at dawn, which she'd done every day in Pell, Rose put her palm with the two bitten stars against the glass of her mirror, hoping it would open up.

When no one was looking she wrote in her notebooks next to her schoolwork, using a secret code she'd made up, asking to go back. She never should have come home. She didn't care at all that that's how the story was supposed to go.

Someone had to hear her. Someone had to notice. They had to realize she couldn't go on like this. She wanted to go back.

Every so often she'd see a cat and stop, slowly lowering her body down and extending a hand to it. If she was lucky and the cat was friendly, it would come up and smell her. If she wasn't, the cat would run off. And each time, as soon as it got close, Rose would whisper an urgent message to the princess. Sometimes the look she got in return seemed like it might be secretly smart.

Everything made her hope. Every strange pattern she saw in a wall. Every hole she saw in a line of bushes. She got scraped all along her arms walking through a raspberry bush and had to wear long sleeves for a while. The world grayed into December.

Every gray day folded into the next gray day until all the days became a line that carried her toward nothing. Sometimes she told herself it would be Christmas soon to see if that would help, but it didn't help. Each moment churned slowly on towards the next. One two, one two. Gray and gray and gray.

Until one day, it didn't.