

# Chapter 1

## The Beginning of the End

<https://youtu.be/P4LxzSK3u0w> High Enough, The Gray Havens

### Wedding day jitters

Cecelia stood in the mosaic tiled garden panting with her hand on her chest amidst stacked chairs and heaps of decorations. As she slowly spun around, her eyes followed the rise and fall of the iron dragon claws welded to the top of the fence. Each long curved claw cursed her heart saying 'you're trapped'. Her spin turned into a spiral path that led her crookedly around chairs, then following the up-sloped edge of the courtyard. Her hand ran across the iron hurricane fence feeling the waved pattern of the wires. The back wall was made of colorful broken tiles, on which hung passion vines of bright purple flowers for the ceremony. She thought it was beautiful and wondered how she could be surrounded by so much beauty and filled with so much dread.

Cecelia came to the gate that looked out onto d'Arago Street, her hand still running along the fence. When her hand ran across the cold, thick iron handle, she instinctively grabbed it, which pulled her to a stop. Her flitting inspection also stopped becoming very focused on the handle where the lock and chain were hung to the side, and the stairs lead down to the alley. Then her eyes followed the path that was open between all the piled wedding supplies past the delivery truck to the mopeds and the door that was locked from the outside, but had a push bar inside. Her heart raced with the thrill of being on the unlocked side of a door. The street was just beyond. Maybe her freedom was just down the street.

Her sister Dalia, leaned over the gothic arched railing 4 stories up and called down to her, "What are you doing? You need to be up here getting ready! Hurry up!"

Cecelia turned, looked up at Dalia, then down to face the open doors; she dreaded entering the house again. When they arrived earlier that day, she had looked up at the large window which formed the shape of a gaping mouth in a grimacing face, bone pillars for the teeth, with two windows above for eyes. In the center was a triangle shield that looked like a nose long rotted away, and angry eyebrows were made of the balconies. But these balconies running up to the top floor also resembled skulls, the skulls of women eaten by the dragon, which added to her fright. Hollow eyed faces inside of more hollow eyed faces stared directly at her. She had had to run into the house as quickly as she could to get out of their gaze.

They were at the famous Casa Batlló by Gaudí. She was told it was quite the privilege to have her ceremony here in the House of the Dragon. She heard the staff call it Casa Dels Ossos —the house of bones they said to her, pointing to the facade's pillars. Then they had waved their hands pointing at the block, telling her this was the Block of Discord because of all the different Modernist buildings. They gave her a tour, showing her the blue, green, amber and burnt umber broken glass exterior wall, with tile circles to look like water lilies. They pointed to the roof, explaining that that was the dragon slain by the prince Jordi, and 'see that rose rising up out of his wound'. They explained that was the rose that grew out of the dragon's corpse. Cecelia had laughed that her future husband had the same name.

Now she was feeling the same discord entering again through the back at her sister's beckon; driving herself forward with practiced obedience she walked straight into the twin dragon scale pillars that stood just inside the back door. A curious Spanish tradition of putting pillars right in the middle of a door or window to show off their wealth, had now become her snare. Her arms flailed around them, then she tried to push herself back and to the right to maneuver into the house. With a stumble she entered the room and headed to the belly of the house.

The image of the dead womens' eyes were echoed in the shapes of glass that brought light into the house from the central sky light. Cecelia felt unsteady, queasy, and reached out her hand to steady herself against the wall. Everything felt like it was pushing in against her and out from underneath her, but it wasn't just her perception. The doors framed their frosted windows with scrawled curves, the walls rolled around the corners into soft bends. The wall paint repeated the scale pattern. It felt safer to look down at the parquet floor with its straight lines and regular angles. Her heavy legs moved her forward toward the throat of the house, to the elevator that brought her up to her sister.

Her brother Zain was there: eyes closed, stepping his right foot forward and back, pulsing his fists. She wanted to reach out and touch his arm, but knew that would upset him.

"Zain, why are you back here?"

"Too loud. They're too loud, and arguing. They're arguing about shrimp and fruit. Who cares about shrimp and fruit. Just eat it."

"It's OK," she tried to reassure him and herself at the same time. "It's all going to be OK. Go find your quiet place and you'll know it's time to come out when you hear the music."

"OK. The music. I can come with the music."

"Yes, but after I come out. Don't come out too soon, and get caught up marching down the aisle with me. Come outside right after the music stops."

"No!" he looked shocked, "No! I will wait. It'll be better when it's quiet."

"You can stand in the back, and no one will bother you."

"Will I be able to see you and Jordi? I think I like him now."

"Yes, you will. But I need to go now, or Dahlia will kill me."

"Don't be killed by Dahlia," he said as she boarded the elevator.

She pressed the button for the 5th floor, and watched the levels pass: first the solid floor that showed her her own muddled reflection, then through rippled glass to the unsteady watery blue world, a moment of clear, then back to her reflection. She couldn't figure out what her face said she was feeling, and tried to study herself in the next brief reflections of each floor she passed. She stepped off and headed toward her changing area in the attic. The narrow hallway was lit behind each rib that supported the roof. She passed doors that opened up to small utility chambers, and arrived at a tall narrow archway. Before her was the askew arches that crossed each other like a tall "X" and created dark shapes bending up the wall; this way led toward her sister. To her right was bright sunlight streaming down a tiled spiral staircase.

To the right she went. She hadn't visited the roof before on their pre-wedding planning tour. That day she had also felt the weight of the staring eyes on the façade, but had tried to brush it off to be happy as she had been told she should be. Today that weight of fever had fallen on her completely, and she hoped the sunlight could lighten her. At the top of the stairs rose the dragon back, a beautiful tile mosaic of white blending to yellow, then orange and crimson, topped with rounded celadon spines. Once again she reached out, and felt the smooth tiles, their sharp broken edges, and rough grout. A white rose tipped spire pierced the dragon's back—the sword that slew this dragon. She felt sympathy for the beast, trapped and defeated.

Hearing water bubble, she went through a short door into a dark room with small spot-lights shining on a pillar fountain. The simple shape stood at the center of this empty room, water bubbling over a silver dome, reflecting ripples onto the smooth dome ceiling. She wondered what this room was for, a private baptismal of sorts, she mused. Feeling the need to wash off the turmoil she was feeling, she stuck her face right into the pulses of water.

"Now what are you doing?" exclaimed Dalia. "We've been looking all over for you. Someone has seen you here, another there, and here you are here! Wet! Why are you wet?"

"I, uh, well, I wanted..." Cecelia's face was drenched and dripping, hair clung to the sides of her face.

"No matter now, we'll just have to clean you up no matter the reason. As if I don't have enough to do already! Seriously, Cece, get your head together. You're getting married today! And boy is that boy handsome!"

"Yes," she replied blankly, "he is."

Dalia grabbed Cecelia's hand and pulled her back down the spiral staircase. Cecelia looked back through the door at the dragon's back, and then forward into the attic. She realized that the ribs that supported the roof were *the ribs* of this dragon. She pulled back from her sister's hand, afraid to enter the belly of the beast. It felt to her to be a symbol of her impending marriage, but what she didn't realize now was that this was a symbol of a different impending doom. In her heart, the heart that wanted to escape, she was already trapped and sealing her fate. She was moving forward toward marriage out of obedience, but in her background thoughts was planning her demise under the premise of creating her own freedom.

Another tug from Dalia, and she cooperated and let Dalia pull off her street clothes and wrap her in the silk robe. Cecelia sighed as she thought of how she had succeeded in making sure that Dalia, her trusted sister, was the only one in the room other than the makeup artist and hair dresser. Not a one of her mothers was allowed.

"You're so beautiful," Dalia cooed.

"Umhummm," Cecelia tried not to move a face muscle as the thick concealing foundation was spread on. She wondered why the makeup artist didn't just use a trowel.

"So much dark circles, senyoreta, and such puffy eyes. You should have come earlier; this is much work," complained the makeup artist.

"And he's so handsome," Dahlia stopped, "Why the dark circles? Have you been crying?"

"Yeah," Cecelia's voice trailed.

Dahlia stood arms akimbo, "I think he's good for you. I know he seems weird, but I think he's sweet. It's like he was tripping over himself with excitement at seeing you."

"Or he's an awkward clutz that will step on my feet when we dance. He's just so weird and cheery." The contouring was being smeared along her cheeks, then on the sides of her nose, around the curves and edges of her features. Cecelia looked at herself in the mirror and saw herself as a painted shell, her soul drawn deep inside.

Dalia went on, "Oh, no, not at all. I saw him practicing your dance and he was quite graceful."

"Graceful like a jellyfish?" snorted Cecelia.

Dalia laughed, "Oh, stop it, Cece. This is a happy day. Be happy. Try smiling!"

"OK, Dal, OK. Look, I'm happy now." Cecelia turned toward the mirror and showed her teeth like a growling dog. Her eyes now had deep black outlines, and the false eyelashes were so large she could feel the weight on them on her copper colored lids.

"Stop talking," said the makeup artist who went to work on Cecelia's lips.

Cecelia turned her eyes toward Dalia, who already had her makeup done and looked like a plastic painted doll. She grunted at her sister, "Mmmm mm mm mmmm mmm mmmm!?!!"

Dalia laughed, "Just behave yourself and let her finish your face. Think of all the pictures that will be taken. You need to be perfect."

Cecelia gasped through her nose at the thought of being perfect. She had tried so hard to live up to the family standards, but was always shamed for being so rebellious. She convinced herself that the handsome Jordi wouldn't be any different. She looked back at herself in the mirror; she didn't recognize herself in this woman painted to china doll perfection. Behind this woman the walls appeared to be moving in and out.

They were getting dressed and Dalia cinched up the laces on the back of Cecelia's corset. It was so tight that it made deep breathing impossible. Cecelia tried to take a deep breath and let out a little moan with the shallowness. She couldn't breathe, but once again it looked to her that the walls were breathing. Inside this dragon she was, the

walls were coming to life as the dragon filled its lungs, the floor heaved under her feet as its stomach churned her about. Dalia bustled up Cecelia's dress so that the train would fit in the elevator. She only did a few of the buttons, then carried the rest bundled up in her arms.

"Wait! We have to take a picture!" exclaimed Cecelia.

"They're waiting," pleaded Dalia

"I don't care. I want a picture of us two on this balcony."

The staff member from the house came in from the side room, "I can help you with this. Just step out on the balcony."

"Come with me," Cecelia pulled Dalia out onto the upper most balcony.

"Oh, I don't know if we can fit. Our dresses are too big."

"We'll make it work."

The girls gathered up their full skirts and wriggled themselves out onto the little balcony. They were the top of two women rising up out of a sea of tumbled fabric that filled up and poured out over the balcony. Dalia was the frothy sea green, and Cecelia was in the breaking white foam. The camera flashed, and they looked at each other. Dalia wrapped her arms around Cecelia and squeezed, not noticing the second flash from the camera. Cecelia pursed her lips and bit her cheek trying not to cry again.

"No, no, don't cry," exclaimed Dalia, "Don't start crying! You'll ruin your makeup!"

Cecelia squeezed her eyes, took in as much air as she could, and turned back into the house.

Cecelia's entourage had been gathered by the wedding planner and was waiting on the Noble floor by the elevator. Her mother, her real mother, gasped and ran over to hug her when Cecelia came out of the elevator. Cecelia gave her a grateful kiss on the cheek. The woman who raised her patted her hand and stiffly told her that she was beautiful and to stand up straight.

The wedding planner arranged them in proper order, sent a text to her assistant who was by the pillared door, and led them to that room. The music started and Cecelia's mind went into her grey place. She felt like she was going blind as she was led by her father and other mother down the aisle, she could only see with pinhole vision; the aisle and the altar. In what appeared to be the far distance was Jordi and the priest with a pulse of purple behind them, the Passion flowers showed themselves clearly to her. Cecelia's eye's trailed around the scene trying to distinguish where she was. Everything else was in a haze, except these flowers that shone crisp like hopeful stars.

Jordi was delighted to see her, but the makeup took him aback. He looked startled when she first appeared, but his joy of seeing her took over. To Jordi's eyes she was glorious no matter what. He also had tunnel vision, not noticing the parents at all, just his beauty walking towards him. He was looking at her face, not noticing the tight strapless lace corset with a billowing skirt, nor the train that they forgot and was still partially busseled. It felt like an hour for her to walk the aisle as he pulsed his knee and thigh in anxiousness; he looked like a little boy who needed to pee. All around them fluttered red, purple, and white rose petals that had been thrown from the balcony by the children. They had forgotten to wait for their cue to throw them after the kiss. But the effect for Jordi was to see Cecelia framed in rich colors of honor.

Without realizing it, he had extended his hand, reaching out to catch her and pull her in close. When she finally arrived he grasped her hand causing her to jolt forward on her last step. With his other hand Jordi handed her a single red rose, which she was to add to her bouquet. They awkwardly fumbled with each other's hands as she tried to figure out how to hold her bouquet, hold his hand, and take the single rose from him. Her fingers felt fat and useless and her eyes still couldn't focus. She couldn't find the capsule in her bouquet made to hold the rose, so she grabbed both the bouquet and the rose stem together. The rose stuck out from the side of the bouquet.

Words were said, she could hear voices through the greyness. She could hear her voice too, saying yes. And

it was time for the kiss.

Jordi lifted her veil and leaned in slowly in an effort to be gentle and compensate for his abruptness before, to Cecelia the greyness had closed in around him, leaving only a vision of his lips pushing themselves towards her. She felt them touch her lips and then slide across her left cheek as her feet took over. Her lipstick was smeared across his cheek, her shoulder smashed into his as she ran past. She was running and not looking back. She couldn't look back because she had to look out for all the feet that were sticking out as if to trip her, and decorations to navigate around. The poor guests in the front row were surprised to have the bride rushing past them, and didn't have time to pull their feet back to let her pass. She stepped left into a pedestal with flowers to avoid some large feet that were stretched out and crossed and the ankle, then heard the crash of that flower vase. The collective gasp of breath to her right came from the right. She made it to the unlocked gate, found the iron handle, struggled to slide it open. Pop opened the door, and she was gone leaving Jordi calling out to her.

Her hearing felt muffled like her vision; with the train of her dress piled in one arm, she made her way down the stairs mostly by memory. A-tink-a-rink, a-tink-a-rink, a-tink-tink-tink-tink-tink-tink slapped her high heels quickly down the metal stairs into the fenced alley. The bartender had felt it was safe leaving the keys in his moped behind the locked door, not realizing that it could be stolen by someone on the inside. Cecelia pushed the moped wobbling into the garbage cans, and pushed open the heavy door, struggling to roll the moped through it at the same time. Behind her was the shocked collective murmur of voices, with Zain's rising above the other, "Cece! A-A, B-B, Cece!"

She gathered and twisted the remnants of the train of her dress, tucked it between her legs and barely kept balance. Turning it on and she revved it with the wheel turned, her dress ripped. The quick start snapped her neck back, and she fish-tailed as she turned right onto the road into oncoming traffic. She thought she heard Jordi yelling her name, but the wind in her ears quickly carried that away. The trail of her torn dress dragged on the road, a rose from her bouquet lay at the top of the stairs.

An oncoming car swerved to her left, she swerved to her right almost hitting the huge public garbage cans. Then she took another right up onto the sidewalk, thinking she was on the side road. People dodged left and right as she weaved around planters and back to the driving lane. The Casa Lleo Morera caught her attention, the door was open, the doorman looked friendly; maybe she could duck in there to figure out what she was going to do. However, she didn't have control of the moped, and kept speeding on. She tried to glance back at the door as she headed South to the Gothic District.

In her distraction, she found herself riding down a ramp that had appeared in the middle of the side street. The parking gate was down, but she was able to slow and swerve onto the walking path past the gate and through the parking garage. Sunlight ahead showed her the way out, and back onto the walkway she maneuvered to avoid another gate. Up the ramp, she was thrown out into a traffic circle. Beyond that was the Plaça de Catalunya, where the road turned into a walking path only, and she entered a tangle of pedestrians and narrow crooked streets. This unintended detour into the parking garage was the key to her escape as cars filled with family members tried to chase her, driving above her while she fled like a mole in its many burrows.

Cecelia was moving from the relatively modern city grid built in the late 1800's into the earliest streets made by Roman's. I like to guess that being their vacation town, these "weekender" Romans had put little effort into city planning, building wherever they wanted their vacation home to land. Like many ancient cities, this oldest part of Barcelona is a jumble of narrow streets that feel like back allies to us modern people. These streets were made of smooth cobble stones, the buildings rising up on each side 3 to 5 stories up. There is no distinction between sidewalk and street, and small vehicles and people weave in and out with each other. Wheeled traffic is limited to bikes, mopeds, and the most darling little trucks no bigger than golf carts that barely fit two men in them. Cecelia passed from the wide open streets with sidewalks, and side lanes, onto what looked like sidewalks. But she had followed another moped this way, being unsure as to where else to go.

It's hard to feel like you're running away when you're going so slow, but Cecelia had to roll along at nearly a crawl as she wove in and out of the pedestrians. She wasn't sure if she was allowed to drive in these narrow streets which seemed like nothing more than alleys to her, but then she had seen some other mopeds and the cutest mini trucks parked in an open plaza intersection. It was hard to keep her balance going so slow, and the abundance of fabric she had been sitting on was sliding out from under her. The flag of torn fabric kept blowing under the tire, which would pull at the rest of the train and yank more and more out from under her seat. She looked like a sprawled mess with her train half dragging on the ground, her legs stuck out straight for balance, her mouth agape and eyes wide.

The narrow passage opened up to a stone paved plaza with a scrubby little tree. She dodged around the tree and found herself turning right onto Via Laietana in order to avoid a bus passing in front of her. In her surprise she sped up almost into the back of a little white car, then swerved to the left in front of the bus to avoid the car. The road was crowded with vehicles, the bus pushing her onward from behind, the car still to the right, and she wanted to get off. Instantly there was an opening ahead, and she cut across the traffic to the left down another narrow way.

She slowed back down, but couldn't stop the haphazard back and forth. The weaving caught the lace of her dress completely in the wheel, yanking her back in the seat, and stopping all forward motion. One hand went out to brace for impact, the other grabbed the train. By this point she was going so slow that she just tipped over on her side. Cecelia was awkwardly sprawled on the ground, the first hand scraped the other wrapped in lace. She savagely pulled at her dress ripping the train at the seam and simultaneously catching her soft, thin fingernails, flipping them over half way down the quick. She looked down at her hand in horror at the nails sticking up at a 90° angle, and quickly slapped along the back of her hand to turn the nails right again. Her fingertips throbbed, and now had a bloody half moon that could be seen through her sheer pink polish.

Cecelia rolled onto her back, arms out. Before her rose what appeared to be a narrow black pillar on a stand; it was a face, but a face compressed into flatness. Cecelia was exhausted and confused. She uprighted the moped, parking it haphazardly next to a pole, and stumbled up to the sculpture. Just a few feet away she went around it, seeing it transform from the flattened face to a seemingly 3D profile of a girl with her eyes closed. The face looked peaceful, then she walked to the narrow end at the far side, then to the back of the head that appeared normal, then to the flattened portrait. Cecelia circled around this sculpture a few times looking into it like a mirror. Cecelia certainly wasn't peaceful like this sculpture, but she did feel flat. She sat under the nose and looked back down the way she had come. Every few minutes she craned her head back, looking up and behind her at the flat face that was above, contemplating her lack of emotion in this moment.

This escape was more spur of the moment than she would have liked, but she knew she needed to jump on it when the opportunity arose. Being her wedding day she did not have her purse or her phone on her. *Good*, she thought, *that way they can't track me*. But then how would she eat, where would she stay? It was later in the afternoon, and things were quiet around the city. She looked around at the tourists passing by with their backpacks and shopping bags, beyond them roll-up security doors were closed and covered with graffiti, and others opened into small glass front shops.

She didn't know where she was, she didn't know anyone. She had only herself and a moped that wasn't hers. Cecelia gathered up her dress, twisting it once again, and shoved it between her legs as she sat back on the moped, once again with legs pointing straight out to each side like a Barbie Doll that can't bend her knees. She hesitated as she looked around deciding where to go, then started back up with her front wheel swerving back and forth. A few people jumped out of her way before she caught her balance and started to move relatively straight down the cobblestone. There was no forethought, she just felt like she needed to keep moving.

Her path followed streets that kept turning so you could never quite see where they were going, or she turned down this way or that. She was trying to see what was in this neighborhood that was a mix of the ancient and old.

The canyon-like lanes closed in tight, then would suddenly open up into a plaza. The afternoon drew on into evening, and she found herself in a wider open area with restaurants that had tables outside. She was hungry. Grabbing for her non-existent purse, Cecelia felt defeated.

Past the Cultural Center, a large glass sided building with the octagon turret on top, she took a right and stopped at an island in the street with two rows of trees and benches. There were families walking about with ice-cream, and groups of young people loudly looking for a place to drink. *Must be Americans*, she thought as they yelled to anyone and everyone how funny and sexy they were, *or Russians*. They spoke English, but she didn't know the accents very well. She sat there a long time, hours maybe, not knowing what to do, where to go. The warm afternoon had grown cool shadows, her white dress looked grey except for the rhinestones that caught the light of the street lamps.

"You shou-d go back to him," slurred a voice behind her. Cecelia's heart jumped and she became very nervous, too afraid to look behind her. "I mean, wreally, he lowves you."

Was this person talking to her? Telling her she should go back to Jordi? Cecelia's adrenaline started pumping.

Another voice answered, "Yuh, I know. I'm just afraid of what hu'll say if he sees me like this."

"Oh, yeah, I know. Look at you. You're a mess," she slurred slowly.

Cecelia knew they weren't talking to her, but it still felt like someone was sending her a message through these two women who were speaking out loud what was in her head. She looked down at her torn dress, and wondered what her face looked like. Must be terrible, and her hair tangled and makeup smeared, she thought. What would Jordi think if he saw her now?

"I think you look just fine," the first voice blurted loudly, "though I can't see anything straight right now."

The second voice gurgled a laugh, "You look great to me too! But we're so trashed we think trash looks like a feast." Then she switched quickly to crying, "He's goin' ta hate me, and call me ugly. I'm too afraid ta do anything anymore. Just too afraid."

"You know wha' they say about fear, Ce'? You know Ce'? Fear, F-E-A-R! False Ev'dence Appearin' Real!" her voice projected, then she leaned in and whispered loudly, "I learned that at AA! I learned a lot there."

Cecelia jumped up and turned around. Was this woman really talking to her? She was confused: it felt so directed at her, even her name, but before her were two women leaning on each other for stability, talking with their faces two inches from each other. What did she mean by "false evidence appearing real"? Cecelia tried to inventory her own fear, but there was a cloud in her thoughts. She turned back and walked around the bench back to the moped. She wondered how much life this thing had left in it.

"I think you need to go get some more of this AA learning. We both do."

"Yeah, probably do. Ce', we probably do. Go back and get our acts together."

The adrenaline had made Cecelia's body shaky, feeling the discomfort her hands gripped the handlebars loosely. There was a pressure in Cecelia's heart, an urging to go back to Casa Batlló and find Jordi. But she feared the condemnation from the house itself, or more so the anger that Jordi would feel. Part of her felt and hoped that he would be kind. Cecelia had never experienced understanding, so this idea seemed preposterous.

At that last thought Cecelia accelerated on the moped, though in her distraction she had forgotten what was left of the train. Initially it billowed out behind her as she sped along, but in slowing for the corners the train floated to the side and caught under the back tire again. Going much faster this time, the back skidded to the right, the front wheel turned abruptly to the left, and down Cecilia went scraping her left elbow on the road, and sliding her hip along with the skid of the moped until she slammed into the stairs of the Basilica de Santa Maria Mar.

There was no thought in her rising; she had just found herself walking along the narrow street, buildings rose up above her, her tears making them look like she was under water, just like in the elevator earlier in the day. She

felt protected by the buildings from her family, who was certainly searching for her, yet overshadowed by a doom, a presence.

The narrow roads, once major thoroughfare back in the medieval days, linked to one another in illogical ways. She took a left, then a right, thinking she was heading back north, but she was on the jumbled streets of the Gothic District. Turned around, she crossed back over Via Laeintana, through narrow ways then back into open plazas, past many people who either stared or averted their gaze. Up one of the narrow ways with her head down she ran into someone. Cecelia found herself looking straight into the blank eyes of a man with a grotesquely large head. Startled, she whirled around, caught her dress with the spike of her heel in a crevice of the drain grate, pinning the ripped shreds to the street. The large headed man stood unmoving, except that he was now standing askew. The cross brace that held his right foot was now lifted up on two posts, his neck was broken as his papier-mâché head had hit the wall. He stared at her blankly, even as his articulated arms continued to wave.

Not understanding what she was looking at, Cecelia screamed in fright, twisted herself away, but was unable to take a step. The pain from the shoe distracted her from her fright as she broke the heel off. One more jerk on the dress and she was hobbling up on one foot, down on the other, a huge scrap of dress left behind anchored in the grate with the lost heel of her shoe. Her dirty dress was now shorter in the back than the front, with strips of fabric hanging haphazardly. Tick tick, thud, tick tick, thud, she walked up on one foot, then down to the other heel-less shoe.

Ahead there was a short alley leading to a courtyard, and a narrow stair running up to the right. Sitting with her bloodied dress twisted around her legs, tatters caught in the heels of her other shoe, she closed her eyes and tried to take a breath. It stopped halfway in, air caught in her throat, causing her head to snap back and her mouth to open and bite at the air. She gasped with each bite, then gave a small cough that pushed out some of the stagnant breath she had been holding in. But with the next gasp of air, her stomach caved in a convulsion that propelled her lunch all over her legs and feet.

In this dim alley, she felt vulnerable and wanted someone to pat her shoulder and reassure her. Her own arm reached up and around her shoulder, clasp at her shoulder blade and rubbing. There was only silence. There was nothing, and no one about. Small lights were in the windows; all Cecelia could see was the shape of the building, the holes of the windows. Finally she heard what sounded like a muffled baby crying, a few small feeble gasps and shuttered breaths.

“Are you OK?” Said a thin woman, draped with an old shift dress, who swayed in front of Cecelia. “You don’t look OK, but you’re pretty. Very pretty, you’ll do.”

“I’ll do?” Said Cecelia blinking in confusion, “I’m fine. I’m just FINE!” She yelled in spite of how much she wanted help.

“Oh, oh.....I’m so sorry. Well, you don’t smell very good, you’re covered in blood, your dress is torn. Did someone kidnap you from your wedding? Your dress looks like it was so pretty, and here you are crying.”

“I was crying?” Cecelia stopped and realized that the cries she heard were her own. “Oh, I, oh, uh.” Looking down, she continued, “I’m a mess. There’s all this blood.” And seeing the vomit on her dress she passed the back of her hand over her chin and wiped away the dribbles that remained.

“Come with me, my dear. I’ll take care of you. See that sparkle of light over there? That’s where we’ll go.”

Limping along, Cecelia saw a hazy looking blob of light floating down an alley, “You don’t look like you can take even care of yourself, how will you help me?”

The shriveled woman grasped her hand with what felt like a claw covered in sloppy skin, and pulled Cecelia up with surprising agility. They walked hand in hand toward the alley. Cecelia felt a soft wisp against her cheek, and swiped it away. The wisp caught on her hand and tickled. The alley became rounded cobble stones that caught her last high heel and turned her other ankle. Now both heels were gone, so she kept moving, trying to walk on just her



toes. Her next step crunched and slid a little.

“What was that?” Cecelia gasped.

“Probably just a snail. There’s a garden here that they love to munch on the little plants along the ground. Ignore them, it’s nothing.”

But Cecelia kept crunching shells and slipping in the slimy innards of the snails, and her toes started to feel wet and sticky. Her gut tightened and pulled back, warning her not to go further. She thought she would wrench again from the fear of going forward, but was embarrassed by the thought that she might go back and then need her family’s help. No! She was going on, through the shadow, through the crunching, and through the curtain of wisps that hung before the two women.

“What’s all this stuff hanging down?” Cecelia balked and pulled back against the woman’s urging.

“Old shreds. They’re harmless.” The woman whispered, and turned her head away. “I need to get the broom out, that’s all.”

Cecelia hesitated again, “I don’t want to go.”

“You must. You need to get cleaned up, and fed”

“I,” Cecelia choked on her words, “I don’t want to. I don’t want to go in there. I can’t stay here,” she blubbed with spittle running down her chin, and her tears making the world look like a kaleidoscope. She noticed in that moment that there were more lights, little blobs of light swaying in the puff of breeze. There was one light further on ahead that fed these small lights. One blob of light blew into her and burst, a huge dew drop of viscous liquid that clung to her shoulder and arm.

“Uh, ugh! What is it?” Cecelia said swiping at her shoulder, and wiping her hand across the skirt of her dress. She succeeded in wiping some of it away, as a tingling sensation started on her palm, but she also swiped up some of her blood. It mixed with the thick dew and turned into a gelatinous mass that squished through her fingers. The reaction helped stop the tingling feeling, but grossed out, Cecelia tried frantically to wipe off her hand. She forced herself to breathe in slowly trying to feel if she was still alive, or had been frightened to death.

The skeletal woman pulled her forward, and Cecelia saw her pull a long rope along behind her. This rope seemed to be attached to her ankle, and as it dragged through the snails and over the cobbles it had become heavy making the woman’s leg drag behind. Some of the hanging threads caught on the wisps of hair that were tangled during her escape.

A gauzy voice greeted the women, “My dear, you’ve returned with a friend.”

“Yes, sir,” the old woman replied, “she was lost and needed help. May I give her something to drink? I think you’ll like her.”

It seemed strange to Cecelia that the woman asked permission to serve her, but she was thankful for the water, albeit warm. Cecelia looked into the darkness to see the man, what she thought was a man; all she could see was a bit of sparkle like a disco ball, and a swish of light reflected around the center of faint sparkles.

“Sit,” the woman said. “Sit here, where it’s soft and warm.”

Cecelia felt the velvety, and yielding surface as she sat, but her legs slid out from under her as the hammock was stretchy and dropped her lower than she was expecting. “Ahhh!” She exclaimed in fear of hitting the ground again. But the velvet hammock was cozy and warm. Her mind had been racing in fear as she had entered the room through the hanging strands, but now she felt strangely quiet, her thoughts became slow.

“That’s alright, my new friend, you may sleep. It’s obvious you’ve had a rough day,” crooned the voice, “and tomorrow you’ll meet your new friend.” And with that, Cecelia laid her head back and was soon asleep. The woman took back the glass, carefully washing it clean of the concoction she had given Cecelia.