

I wandered half in a daze past colorful tents and costumed people, my boots crunching on brittle grass. The yellowed ground captured the sun's fading light; it reminded me of a fairytale illustration in a children's book—stalks of spun gold that cracked under every footfall.

Though I planned to circle back to where I started after clearing my head, my sight grew fuzzier with each step. The shrieks and laughter around me became deafening, bodies pressing too close, now surreal and unrecognizable—walking fables of mist and smoke. Gowns and masks and cloaks swirled on all sides, a sea of fantasy sweeping me into the heart of the festival.

It happened again then—the sharp pain, the pounding in my skull. I stumbled, caught myself on the edge of a table. Distantly, I heard someone asking if I was all right, but the static soon overwhelmed it.

My fingers cramped around the solid surface in a vain attempt to center myself. *Breathe, breathe, breathe.* That awful humming worsened until it resembled frantic chatter. Tears flushed my eyes; my ears crackled. The person beside me went utterly still, their arm suspended mid-reach.

*What the hell?*

As though drawn, my gaze landed on a young girl who stood out from the masses, watching me intently. Ebony hair curtained an ivory face with a peculiar sharpness for someone no older than ten. I'd think she was a sculpture or doll if not for the near-imperceptible way she angled her head, and . . . her *eyes*. Even at this distance, they were

startling: two glittering amethysts that weighed the world as though she'd already seen too much of it and had come to pass judgment.

This couldn't be real. *She* couldn't be real.

In the next instant, the girl turned, breaking eye contact.

And the world flipped back on.

