

There's a dress in my closet that's nicer than anything else I own. It's tasteful, with a modest collar and silken sleeves that reach my wrist. With my tights and boots, I'm covered entirely, my pale skin the only part of my ensemble that isn't ink-stain black.

I called it the Mourning Dress when I was thirteen. My body hasn't changed enough in six years for it to fit any worse. Back then, it was my funeral dress, and it didn't get enough use to become worn.

Today, I'm wearing it for the fourth time in two months.

It's raining in the Grinlow's backyard, which feels too much like a cliché for my liking. Some bitter, angry part of me wants to argue with the clouds at crying for *Ishlee*, of all people, when no one else was allowed that luxury. But it's not like there are any winners here.

I inch closer to Ro's side, taking cover under his umbrella. It's black, too. Is there some code I missed, some unspoken agreement that we should all have black umbrellas for the funerals we'll attend?

Ro rubs a hand up and down my arm, but it's just a reflex. He's not focused on me, or the rain, or Poppy's speech beneath the trellis. He's just staring at the muddy ground.

"Ishlee will be missed." Poppy lifts her head, her jaw too tight to be natural. Nyrla, her girlfriend, is holding up an umbrella at her side, protecting Poppy's thick locs from the rainfall. As always, Nyrla looks fragile at Poppy's side, so slight, like a strong wind will blow her away. It's gotten worse these last months, but it's as if all of Nyrla's lost strength has passed along to Poppy.

I wonder if they remember when they weren't so horribly imbalanced.

"I won't lie to you. Things haven't been easy." Poppy bows her head, spreading out her hands in a pose of apology. "But we must stick together in times like these. When one of us falls, we all stumble. When one of us rises..."

*"We stand as one!"*

The shout rumbles through the small crowd, and I can't tell if it was Ro or me who flinched first. Neither of us say the familiar line, and I feel Poppy's eyes alight on us. Nyrla's frightened-deer expression follows.

I don't bother lifting my chin or matching her glare. I don't need any posturing to tell her how I feel. Ro tightens his arm around my shoulders, and this time I know it's a conscious motion.

Poppy lifts her gaze from us. "Let us return to our works. We will prevent this from happening again."

That phrase grows more and more useless every time.

With the crowd dismissed, everyone slowly starts to trickle away. Ro moves as if to follow, but I seize his hand on my shoulder. His throat bobs, and he nods quickly. We both remain in place.

Nyrla stays at the trellis, passing the umbrella over to Poppy as everyone gives her their goodbyes and sympathies. Her attention is purposefully avoidant of us, and Nyrla doesn't seem to be able to look away.

Finally, it's just the four of us. Poppy faces Ro and me, Nyrla hovering at her side. Poppy folds her arms. "Don't you look a picture."

Black hair, black eyes, black dress. If I just cried enough to make my mascara run, I'd be the perfect image of a grieving girl. But I ran out of tears weeks ago.

"I'm glad you like it so much." I slip out of Ro's grip to curtsy. "I'll prepare it again for the next one."

Nyrla visibly flinches at that, and Ro makes a warning sound in his throat. Poppy's eyes harden. "Come with me. Both of you."

She marches inside the Grinlow house, Nyrla scurrying after her. Ro hesitates, and I seize his hand. "Come on, Rose."

He used to argue about that nickname when we met four years ago. But I claimed that *Ro* was too small, too easy to miss. I drew it out to *Rose*, and when we made our first kill together he didn't have any more complaints.

We pass through the doorway hand-in-hand, Ro ducking past the polished wooden doorframe. Puberty was kinder to him than it was to me. One day, his dark tousled hair and long arms will make some boy or girl swoon. Until then, I'm happy to have him all to myself.

Poppy and Nyrla are already gone, but I know where they expect us to go. Ro's hand convulses around mine. "Yaga - "

"We owe her this much, Rose." I tug him forward, down the carpeted hallway and candle-lit stairs, and he reluctantly follows. "Let's not keep the mistress of Grinlow waiting any longer."