

POV – Dash Darhk

(Beware this is unedited – enjoy!)

She blinked, and my heart stopped.

Her eyes were like a rainbow, a striking array of violet, blue, green, and pink. They were encased with thick, dark lashes. Ethereal. Never had I seen such a blend of color in a pair of eyes. It was obvious she had been touched by the mist.

Holy crap. She was...she was beautiful.

And I knew beautiful. After living in a world where beauty was often deadly, I was weary of things of absolute perfection.

Soft curls of deep red fell over her shoulders, standing out against the grey room as her unusual eyes scanned my face. There were clusters of cute freckles covering over the bridge of her nose. She blinked several more times as if she was trying to clear the haze of the deep slumber from her eyes. I suspected the last lingering effects of the drugs were wearing off.

I found myself unable to stop staring, and might have like a gapping fool if the sound of keys jiggling in the distance hadn't rang through the holding house like a siren of my doom.

“Shit.”

The Night's Guards.

I needed to get out of here. Panic stalled in my chest at the thought of being captured by Institute again. Never!

My gaze drifted over Sleeping Beauty. What was I going to do about her? I watched as a series of emotions tumbled over her face. The confusion had settled in, but I didn't have time to deal with her. Scowling, I glanced over my shoulder at the door as I weighed my options.

I don't know why, but I found I couldn't just run and leave her behind.

Why the hell not?

It wasn't like I hadn't done so before. This world was survival of the fittest. Only the strong thrived, and that meant thinking of me first.

As I was wrestling with myself, Freckles sat up and gasped. The color drained from her face. I was at her side, in case she decided to tumble over the side of the glass table. She leaned on me, and my entire body was taut with urgency.

“Can you walk?” I whispered, two seconds from sweeping her off the cold slab.

She nodded, swinging her feet over the side, a glint of stubbornness in her eyes.

The moment she touched the ground, I slipped an arm around her waist, taking most of her weight. It took time for the body to remember functions like walking after being asleep for over a hundred years. The nerves tingled, and the muscles could be like jelly. She was taking this whole thing in stride.

A series of questions tumbled from her lips, but I barely understood the words. I got caught up in the sound of her voice.

Shaking my head, I frowned. “I should have known your voice would be musically,” I grumbled. She could have been plucked straight from the pages of a fairy tale.

Her chin tipped. “What does that matter?”

It didn't. What *did* matter was getting out of the holding house alive. *Stop thinking*

about her and get moving.

I gave her the choice I'd never given another soul, to stay or come with me. I had no real good explanation for why I had this sudden urge to protect her, but I could see the fear and confusion in her eyes. She didn't know what to do or what was happening. Why should she trust a total stranger? She surprised us both.

Together we crept into the hall, our backs smashed to the wall. We came to the end of hall where the path forked in four different directions. I stopped, to peek around the corner. Two seconds later, I felt her soft body bump into mine. My gaze slid to hers.

She bit her lip, before giving me a smile that would make a weaker man tremble. "You said to stay close," she whispered.

I turned my attention back to the hallway and muttered, "Not that close. I need room to breathe."

I found it hard to concentrate on anything but her body pressed to my side. I could smell her scent like wild roses and holly. It reminded me of Christmas, when there had actually been holidays. She smelled too poetic to be traipsing around at night with the likes of me.

I pushed aside these silly, ridiculous thoughts that were running amuck. *Wild roses? Really?* Since when did I think about roses or holly for that matter? I needed to get my mind out of the gutter and back into the present.

The Night's Guards. Remember?

It was much easier to dispose of the Night's Guards on my terms and on my turf. The Forsaken Woods were like a second home to me. I knew them like I knew the back of my hand, but that didn't mean they still weren't fatal, especially with Freckles in tow. Many would think it was debatable which of the two were the lesser of evils. The Night's Guards or the Forsaken Woods? The name itself spoke volumes. It wasn't call forsaken because it was filled with faeries and dancing sugarplums. Still, I would take the forest every time. I knew what to expect.

My body stiffened as a guard came into the intersection, his gaze zeroing on me. Crap. Instinct kicked in, propelling me forward. I grabbed the guard and planted my fist into his face before he had a chance to go for his weapon or alert the other guards. The force of it knocked him out, thanks to my altered DNA, I never missed my target.

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure she wasn't going to freak out and alert the remaining guards. Her cool expression surprised me. Shaking my head, I continued on straight down the corridor.

We came to the metal door, and we only had seconds before we were noticed. I shoved my shoulder into the door, pushing just far enough for us to squeeze through. Twilight bathed my face as I turned and yanked her over the threshold. A guard yelled, but I didn't stick around to hear his threats. Slamming the door shut, I shouted one word. "Run!"

I grabbed her hand and took off, hoping she was strong enough to make it through the Forsaken Woods. About a quarter of mile, the questions started. Of course, she would have a million. Everyone did.

Where am I?

What happened?

Why can't I remember anything?

I'd heard them all countless times, and tonight, I lacked the patience she needed. I'd

been on the run for months and on the road for days, without a place to sleep. My body was demanding rest. She was going to just have to deal with it. A year ago, sleep was the last thing I'd wanted. Now my body commanded it. But first I needed to keep my wits long enough to get us to safety. If it had just been me, I might have climbed the trunk of a mossy cypress and fallen asleep in the crook of its branches.

But *she* changed everything.

"Tell me where we are going?"

There was something in her voice that tugged at my heart, but I wasn't in a position to care. "See for yourself, Freckles. We're here."

The look of horror on her face was priceless. Chuckling, I walked into the mouth of the dark cave, leaving it up to her whether or not she decided to follow.

It only took a few moments before I heard her mutterings. She made a snide comment about a flashlight as I was starting a fire. The soft glow lit the dark and damp cave as it caught the wood and grass. I'd been here early in the day and scoped it out, dropping off my supplies.

"Happy now?" I asked.

"Not really," she replied, rubbing her hands up and down her arms.

She reeked of money and proper upbringing, a pampered brat. And totally out of my league. Now and before the whole world-going-to-shit thing. Yet, I was inexplicably drawn to her. The way the color of her eyes flickered over firelight, reminding me of a sun catcher. She was a diamond in the rough, and I needed to tread carefully around her. The last thing I wanted was a distraction, even one as breathtaking as her. Any other guy in my position would have fallen at her feet, but I was made of stronger stuff. I had more willpower apparently, and I had a task I refused stray from.

Not even for a princess.

Once she realized I was serious about spending the night in the cave, she settled next to the fire, warming her hands and studying me with the most mesmerizing eyes I'd ever seen. "Why were those guys after you?"

How did I answer that question? Where the hell did I start? I sighed, placing my hands behind my head. "I bet you're just brimming with questions. I'll give you the gist, as I am too tired to answer them all right now. What do you remember from before? What's your last memory?"

With the white dress spread out around her, she pulled her knees to her chest, resting her chin on the tops. "I was shopping with some friends at the mall."

I scoffed. Of course she was.

Her gaze narrowed into little slits, but she carried on, ignoring my outburst. "I got a call from my father. And..."

The slumber often made people forget their pasts. I didn't have one memory to cling to, just a snapshot of faces. It was never enough. Not even a real name. I wasn't sure I wanted to be the one to tell this beauty she might never remember—might never know who she really was. "You can't recall, can you?"

Pain fractured in her eyes, and I swore my chest squeezed. What was it about this girl that made me want to console her, protect her. I didn't even know her. It made no logical sense. "No."

"Don't panic. It's normal to have memory loss after coming out of the slumber. It's the aftereffects of the drug and the mist, assuming you were exposed."

“Mist? Drugs? What are you talking about?”

I was crazy if I thought I would be able to get even an hour of sleep with her in the vicinity. She huffed in annoyance and I couldn't help but smirk secretly. Ruffling her feathers was just too darn easy. And fun.