

"I can hear you, you know."

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She could hear them, but they couldn't hear her. They didn't understand. She didn't understand. They needed to *understand.*

Those claws fell again.

She dropped the barrier.

Fire ignited in her shoulder, hot and fast, spearing, rending deep.

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A crystal erupted from the blighted ground, then another, then another. She danced back, but they seemed to *follow.* One after another, larger and larger, more kept coming, trailing her path, a deliberate, intelligent design. They were chasing her.

The sole of her shoe brushed the ground. A crystal punched right through it, through the meat and metal of her foot, impaling. Her momentum tried to carry her along all the same, and synthflesh and leather ripped and pulled and stretched as she fell backwards like a ragdoll.

The second her body made contact with the soil, crystal answered, a quake heralding just before they burst forth. She tried to roll, to twist, pushing herself back upright, but her pinned foot snagged instead of tearing free altogether, and her spine didn't bend that way, and--

A crystal lance speared her forearm and *yanked* her upwards, borne on its girth. She screamed as her shoe finally did split, two toes spread like smiling lips on either flapping side, the fifth altogether gone. Before she could even gain a sense of equilibrium, more spires erupted, and it was a barrage, gunfire and grave. Agony was everywhere and then nowhere when one jut severed her spine.

The Force roared in her. The light burned even hotter than the fire consuming her, making ashes of her skin, smoke of her hair. She ripped open and remade herself, pulling one arm down, snapping the other free, bowing at the waist, until--

Atyiru curled around her stomach. Her ruined, reborn hands cupped her belly protectively. She whispered to it.

"Everything will be alright, Litlun--"

And then the crystals came again, stabbing, enclosing, caging, and a million voices cried out in her mind.

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"I just...I really liked it here." Her voice cracked. "And this is where I first-- saw *him.*"

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"I thought they were good. Or...at least fair. The Truthwardens, you know? And the Shadowseers *and* the Lifhtbringers...it was supposed to be balance. That's what they kept saying, that it should be balanced And I thought-- I-I t-thought that meant it would be good, it would be--"

"But it wasn't."

"No. I was so*stupid*, I--"

"Saira, *no,*" she rebuffed firmly, cupping the other woman's face in her false hands. "You weren't. You weren't. This isn't your fault. *This isn't your fault.* It's what they have done to you. What they took from you. It's not fair. It's not balanced. And it's nothing to do with stupidity. This was deliberate. This was planning, and intent, and patience, and they wanted it this way."

"But why me?" she choked, sobbing. "If-- I--"

Atyiru hushed, humming, and pulled her into a hug, stroking her hair.

"I think, Saira," and now her own voice cracked, from misery, from anger, "that if it had not been you, it would have been anyone else. Any other girl. Any other victim. Because it's about us. It's not about balance. It's about control."

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"I can. I can feel them. It. I'm. I'm not."

"Me too. I think that's why our spirits fled here. I think I needed to find you, and you needed to be found." Somewhere, back on Selen, she was bleeding out iron red and iridescent oil. Her voice softened, and she smiled for her companion. "Oh, Saira. It isn't fair, but I am so glad that I got to meet you!"

Saira gave a cry. "Don't say that, don't say that! G-go! You can-- you can still survive! I can sense it, I-I think. It's too late for me, but."

"It is not too late, Saira! Yes, they've violated you. Yes, you've been taken from. I can't undo any of that. But Saira, listen to me. I'm going to come for you. I'm going to come for you, okay? So I can't die. I've got to come and see you. Just hold on a little longer for me, alright?"

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She cupped his cheek, smooth, unblemished, warm beneath her damp palm.

"I can hear you, you know. I can see you. You tell your Harbinger," she whispered, "that I am coming for him. You tell your Father I will hunt him down. I will make this right."

Hold on for me, Saira.