

Chicken
House

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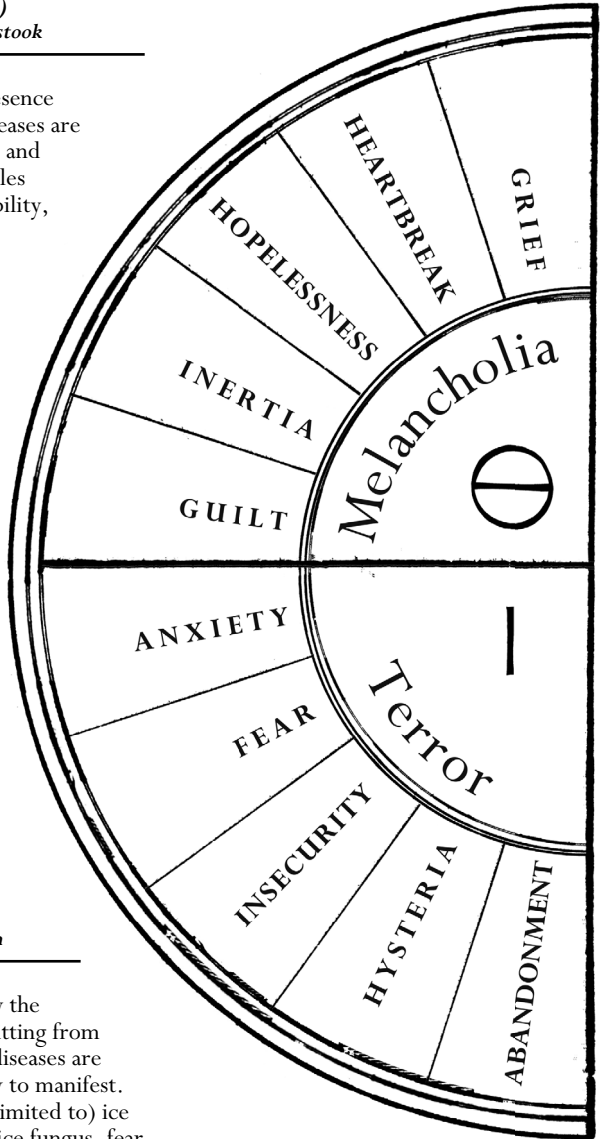
For Charlie – welcome

MELANCHOLIA



Aqueous illnesses
 (root. melancholia)
 Old Language: tristook

Illnesses defined by the presence of water and air. These diseases are typically draining in nature and difficult to reverse. Examples include water fever, invisibility, people blindness, weeping sickness.



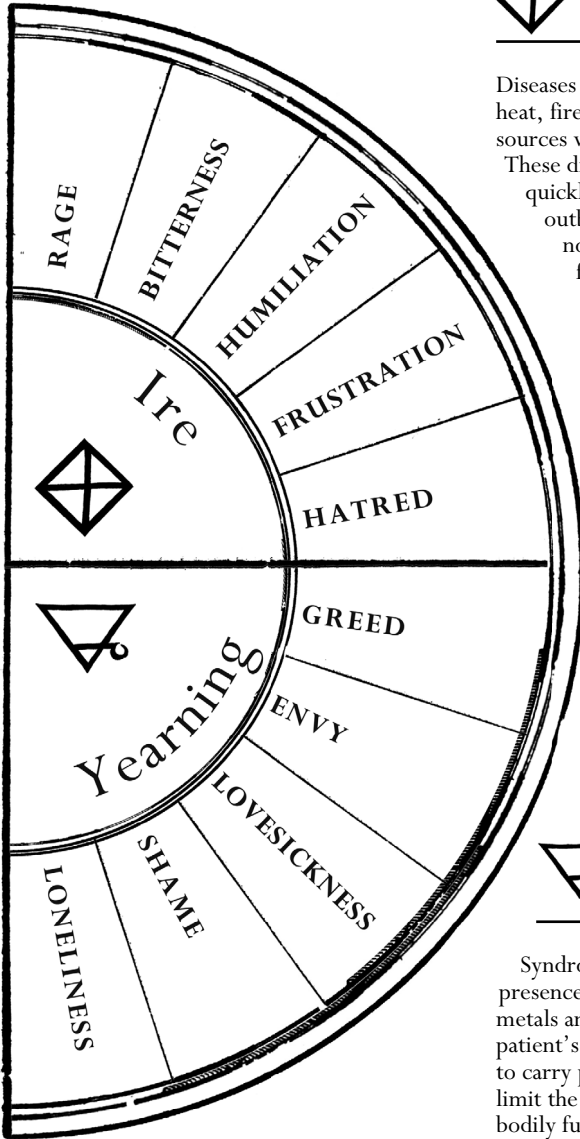
TERROR



Frozen afflictions
 (root. terror)
 Old Language: ovn

Afflictions characterized by the presence of ice or cold emitting from the patient's body. These diseases are often disorienting and slow to manifest. They include (but are not limited to) ice fever, terrorization, black ice fungus, fear frenzy, shivers, night terrors.

W H E E L



IRE



Incendiary diseases
(root. ire)
Old Language: bar

Diseases defined by the presence of heat, fire, steam and other flammable sources within the patient's body.

These diseases typically come on quickly and are prone to sudden outbursts. They include (but are not limited to) spark breath, fire breath, burn scale, soot sickness, heat.

YEARNING



Mineral syndromes
(root. yearning)
Old Language: awyth

Syndromes characterized by the presence or absence of minerals, metals and organic substances in the patient's body. These diseases appear to carry particular social stigma and limit the patient's movements and bodily functions. They include (but are not limited to) Midas-fingers, rooting, crystallization, moss skin, leaden heart, iron will.

PROLOGUE

On his last morning at King Jude's Hospital, Kitt tried on his college uniform for the first time. He did his best to stand straight and tall in the stiff black trousers, shiny black shoes and starched white shirt while his friend Ani helped him with his tie.

'It's too tight,' he protested. A curtain had been drawn around his bed, and he dreaded the moment it would be pulled back and everybody on the ward would see how foolish he looked.

'I can't do it if you're interfering.' Ani batted his hand away as he tried to loosen the neck of the high-collared shirt. She twisted the tie around itself again and took it in another loop around his neck, then paused. 'This doesn't look like the diagram.'

She squinted at the packing list and instructions for how to do up the College's distinctive black-and-white tie. She did another loop, then the whole thing slid

off his collar.

‘The fabric’s too slippery,’ she complained.

‘It’s silk.’

‘It’s too fancy to be tied.’

‘Let me see the instructions again.’

‘Maybe one of the other patients knows.’

‘At this hospital? I doubt it. Some of them don’t even have coats for the winter, never mind ties.’

Ani gave up, sat on Kitt’s bed and swung her legs. Late summer light poured through the ward’s three large windows. Kitt noticed the dirt under her fingernails and felt a twinge of guilt – she’d rather be outside, he guessed, than cooped up in a hospital helping him with this. He wondered when he would see her again.

His hands were strapped into thick padded mittens. He picked up the tie with difficulty and held it draped between his palms.

‘I’ll have to learn how to do it myself sooner or later,’ he said.

‘One of your new friends will help you.’

He wasn’t sure he shared Ani’s optimism. He was about to go into uncharted territory. He’d been in the hospital ever since she rescued him from the Observatory. He’d imagined that, once he was well enough, he’d go back to his old life, sleeping under market stalls in Leadenhall and running errands for the merchants

in exchange for a hot meal. But he'd been invited to study at the College, where the all-powerful Guild of Finance trained its financiers. All the other children had been there for years. They came from rich, well-known families. Whoever heard of an ill, homeless boy being summoned to join them?

'I wish I could take my old friends,' he told her.

Ani stared resolutely at her shoes and twisted a strand of her hair into a braid.

'I don't understand why you have to go.'

'Because they invited me.'

'You can say no to an invitation.'

'Not from the Guild of Finance. Besides, I want to go.' As he said it, he realized it was true. The only thing scarier than what lay ahead was the thought of staying exactly where he was. He was fed up with the hospital, the endless rounds of medicine, stuffy wards and ailing patients. He felt ready for adventure – one of his own choosing.

'The methics don't think you should go,' said Ani. 'I've heard them talking.'

'I don't care what the methics think. They've never helped me. Now, tell me honestly: how does this look?'

His question caught her attention and made her laugh – an explosive, joyful sound – at the sight of his tie draped over his head.

'Come here, you'll get gold on it.' Ani took it off and

gave it a shake. A few flakes of gold leaf fell to the ground. She ran the silk through her fingers. ‘What would happen if you touched this with your bare hands?’

‘It would turn into solid gold, and I’d be the only person there dressed all wrong.’ Kitt kept his voice down; he didn’t like to reveal the full scope of his illness to the ward. Ever since he’d fallen ill with Midas-fingers years before, he’d been chased and hunted. It made him cautious.

‘Then you wouldn’t have to go?’ Ani’s dark eyes suddenly looked straight through him, pleading.

‘You’ll be fine without me. Come on. Try again.’

When it was time, he and Ani walked down to the ambulans yard, Kitt self-conscious in the black-and-white uniform. He’d left his old clothes on his bed on the ward. He wouldn’t be needing them any more.

An ornate carriage stood in the centre of the yard. The stags that drew the ambulances grunted and knocked their antlers against the wooden stable doors. Two figures stood by the carriage, one in blue methic robes, the other in financier gold. Ani and Kitt hesitated at the sight of them.

Methic Gilchrist, the old man in blue, held out an arm, gesturing them to come closer. His Guild Master’s medallion shone dully around his neck.

‘Kristofer. This is Darian Montagu.’

Kitt knew who he was: Master of the Guild of Finance. He and Gilchrist were the most powerful people in Lundain, though everyone knew it was the financiers who really controlled the city. Kitt had hoped that, if he passed the Trials at the College and joined the guild, he would meet the Guild Master one day. He hadn't expected to do so today. He hoped more than anything he'd done his tie correctly. Darian's blue gaze swept over him, icy and analytical. His face was pale, pinched; the only colour in his skin were the purple crescents under his eyes. Kitt guessed that running the city didn't leave much time for sleep. The Guild Master's eyes settled on his mitts. Kitt clutched them to his chest.

'H-hello, Guild Master,' Kitt stammered.

'Are the gloves necessary?' Darian asked Gilchrist.

'Yes.' The methic's response was firm. 'At all times.' He then added more gently: 'You know that, don't you, Kristofer?'

'I must wear the gloves day and night to protect myself and others.' Kitt recited this instruction faithfully. 'I mustn't take them off under any circumstances.'

Darian looked from Kitt to Gilchrist, then back again. 'You have him well trained.'

'He is well protected. He is different from your other students.'

'Exactly.'

‘Keep taking your medicine, Kristofer,’ Gilchrist said. ‘And if your condition worsens, tell your teachers right away. They will let us know, and we can help you.’

‘It’s time to leave,’ Darian said, addressing Kitt directly for the first time.

‘Oh. Y-yes, sir.’ Kitt hadn’t felt at home at King Jude’s surrounded by methics, but all of a sudden he felt rooted to the place. Something in him told him that if he ever came back, it would be as a completely different person.

‘You may say goodbye,’ said Gilchrist gently, nodding in Ani’s direction.

She was waiting under the arched entrance to the yard, her dark eyes fixed on Darian, full of mistrust. Kitt hurried back to her. He wished he didn’t have to say goodbye with the Guild Masters watching.

‘See you,’ Ani said awkwardly.

‘Write to me.’

‘Write back.’

‘I will.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise. When I come back, I’ll be a financier, and the city will be all ours.’

‘Yours, you mean. Financiers don’t share.’

‘This one will.’

Kitt wanted to tell her he would see her again soon, but he wasn’t sure that was true. Nobody had told him

how long he'd be at the College for, whether he'd be able to have visitors, who he would be when he came back. He tried to imagine it . . . Wearing gold robes, going wherever he liked in the city, people looking at him with respect, awe. He wondered what it would be like to stand in a crowd of people, also in gold robes, all of them the same, content together, like a family. Only a week ago it was more than he could have even dreamt. The mere possibility of becoming a financier felt like an ache when he thought of it now.

Ani stepped forward and hugged him. He folded his arms over her back, each mitt touching the opposite elbow, careful not to let his cheek touch hers. He felt the same ache whenever he was that close to somebody – close, yet impossibly far, thanks to his Midas-fingers. He couldn't remember the last time he'd touched another person's skin.

Ani stepped back first. A flake of gold had fallen from his hair on to her shoulder.

Gilchrist beckoned him towards the carriage, where Darian was climbing up behind the driver. When Kitt put a foot on the step, Gilchrist grabbed his arm and pulled him towards him. Kitt grabbed the carriage door to steady himself while the methic whispered urgently in his ear:

'Be careful, Kristofer. Midas-fingers is caused by excessive greed – the financiers won't encourage you to

fight it, but you must. Or it will consume you.'

Kitt didn't have a chance to reply – Gilchrist nudged him into the carriage and turned away. Darian looked back at them, but he didn't seem to have heard Gilchrist's warning.

The carriage moved off. The gates to the ambulans yard opened, and Kitt turned around to wave at Ani. She wasn't waving back. Her arms were folded tightly across her chest, and Gilchrist's hand was on her shoulder. Kitt pressed his mitt to the window and hoped she saw it.

'Whatever Gilchrist just told you,' Darian said into the silence, 'ignore it.'

'Y-yes, sir.' Kitt was uncomfortably aware that they were alone on the long journey west.

'You don't belong to them.'

'No.'

'From now, you belong to the College.'

The carriage took him out of King Jude's Hospital, out of the city, and into a new life.

The College lay in the desert beyond Lundain, at a point where a stream, long since dried up, had carved its shape between two low hills. It was where every ambitious and resourceful family sent their children, in the hope that they would one day pass their Trials and join the Guild of Finance. The people in the city

assumed the College was like the guild, full of every precious metal, jewel and rare substance in existence. Kitt had grown up hearing stories of breakfast served on gold plates, games of tick-tack-toe played with rubies, and stained-glass windows in every room. When he arrived, he realized that these stories were told by people who had never set foot there.

Darian walked with him in silence to the entrance, where he exchanged some words with a dour-faced teacher. Then, with a final glance at Kitt's gloves, he said, 'Good luck, Kristofer,' climbed back into the carriage and left.

Despite finding Darian a cold and intimidating travelling companion, Kitt felt forlorn and even more alone as he watched him drive back to the city without him.

The College was a stark, colourless place. Adornment and comforts were for when the students reached the guild, not before. The only colours were black, white and grey. Soaring concrete walls, cold tiled floors, desks carved from ebony so dark that their inkwells were only discernible by light reflecting on the liquid. The beds were steel frames with stiff white sheets. Most of the children brought pictures and blankets from home to brighten up the dormitory, to show that a real person lived there. Nobody had told Kitt about this. His corner stayed blank.

His first few weeks passed in the press of boys and girls moving through the black-and-white-tiled corridors, shivering in freezing classrooms, and failing in every subject: mathematics, gemology, economics, metallurgy and mining. He attended lectures on debt, currency and valuable artefacts. The others had read books he had never heard of; their families knew each other through the guild; their parents owned houses whose front porches he'd slept in. They spoke differently, as if there was a secret language that sounded like his own, which he should have understood but didn't. And even if he had come from their world, his Midas-fingers meant that he could never fit in with these rich, healthy children.

After his parents died – his father in an accident repairing a waterwheel when he was just a baby, his mother of a fever a few years later – Kitt had lived in Leadenhall Market, working for the merchants, stealing from them from time to time, and playing with the other children who had nowhere else to go. This was when he'd first felt the beginnings of his Midas-fingers. He was in the market, waiting for the glass merchant to turn his back for a moment. Glassware was difficult to steal but sold for a lot, and Kitt was particularly good at pinching the more delicate items without breaking them. He was in the shadows, waiting, watching, when a financier and his son approached

the stall. The boy picked up a glass trinket and began to play with it. It caught the light, piercing Kitt's vision. He wasn't sure why, but he felt angry, as though the boy were playing with something that was Kitt's. While the child was distracted, the financier went behind the stall to speak with the merchant. Kitt saw the moment the child put the trinket down and realized he couldn't see his father. He saw him call out, saw his face flush, the quick movements of his head as he looked left and right. Then, in a flash of gold, the financier reappeared. The boy pressed his face into his father's robes, smiling with relief.

Kitt didn't know why, but it gave him a stomach ache that didn't go away. It was like a hunger that no amount of food could satisfy. The craving consumed his whole body. Then he began to taste it: metallic, like blood. His tongue felt thick and grainy. One morning, he noticed it lodged in his nail beds: gold.

Once it arrived, it never relented. Flakes crusted in the corners of his eyes and in his hair. Liquid globules formed in his mouth. He spat them out on the street when nobody was looking. It came from his fingers: soft and gel-like, until it touched something else, then it solidified and caked everything. In time, it didn't just coat things. His touch transformed them into solid blocks of gold. He began to wear gloves, shaking out the golden flakes at the end of each day, his fingers

aching and clumsy against the stiffening fabric.

When he'd finally been taken to King Jude's, the methics gave him medicine, and his symptoms reduced a little, but never went away completely. That's where he'd met Ani. When Methic Blake, the Guild Master before Gilchrist, took him to the Observatory to take part in a dangerous experiment on unwell children, Ani had rescued him. She'd rescued them all. Back at King Jude's, he'd been given more medicine. And more. And more. But the greed was always there, even on the days when he had no idea what he wanted.

That winter, six months after he arrived at the College, Kitt woke to a sodden weight being dumped at the end of the bed near his feet. He jerked upright, his senses finely tuned after years spent sleeping on street corners. The dormitory was so cold he could almost see his breath. Leaning forward, he patted his blankets until he found his clothes for the next day, soaking wet and tangled into a ball. Even through his mitts, he could feel the clammy chill of the fabric. From the corner of the dormitory of twenty other boys, there was a muffled scuffling sound.

His roommates were getting bolder.

He gathered the clothes up in his arms and went into the bathroom. The trail of drips behind him reflected the ghostly, fluorescent lights. He bent over

the sink and wrung out the clothes. Soon his mitts were damp, heavy and cold, and his wrists ached. He looked at the sorry tangle and remembered standing in the ward at King Jude's with Ani, putting on the scratchy black jacket for the first time. When he arrived at the College, he'd been relieved to find he looked just like every other boy there. If it weren't for his mitts and the flakes of gold in his hair, he was indistinguishable. He belonged, or so he'd hoped. But it wasn't long before the name-calling and pranks started.

They had smelt it on him – he didn't belong there at all.

Kitt pushed the bathroom window open. He craved the fresh air, and it wasn't like the room could get any colder. In the night sky, a hard white moon was bright enough to cast shadows. The same moon would be shining over the city of Lundain. His skin prickled with goosebumps in the icy air.

'Psst.'

Kitt whipped around to find Rayan Mandwell in the doorway, smirking and warm in a dressing gown. It was deep red – the colour looked almost violent against the white porcelain.

'Looks like you're going up in the world.'

'Yeah?' Kitt was wearing the black pyjamas that had arrived in a package with the rest of his uniform,

provided by the College. The only things of his own were his mitts.

‘Yeah. Thought your sort did their laundry in the River Tamesas.’

An explosion of snorts and laughter came from the corridor behind Rayan. Kitt grinned thinly and nodded.

Rayan sauntered into the bathroom and peered into the sink. He was taller than Kitt, bigger too, with a wide smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

‘Too bad,’ he said about the clothes. ‘Can’t think how that happened. You want to be more careful. What do you have tomorrow morning?’

When Kitt didn’t reply, Rayan jabbed him in the ribs.

‘Huh?’

‘Intermediate Debt with Professor Walpins,’ Kitt yielded.

‘Walpins? Yikes. You’ll have to go with nothing on. She won’t like that. Well, not nothing. You’ll have *these*.’ He flicked one of Kitt’s mitts. Kitt stepped back and clasped it to his chest.

‘Don’t.’

Sensing a fight, a few of the other boys drifted in, blocking the only exit. Kitt had the window to his back, lavatories on one side, sinks on the other. He wished Rayan would stop gloating so he could go back to sleep and get warm again.

‘What did you say?’ Rayan asked.

‘I said, don’t.’

‘Don’t what? Oh, this.’ Rayan went to smack the mitt again, but Kitt dodged out of the way and backed towards the wall until the sink’s cool edge pressed into his lower back. The press of the other boys – six of them, eyes wide, arms crossed against the chill, gathering behind Rayan.

‘You don’t get to tell me what to do. You have no idea, do you? My mother is one of the Guild Master’s most trusted advisors. I’ve grown up in the guild. You’ll probably never even meet the Guild Master. You’re lucky I even bother to speak to you. You should be thanking me. Go on.’

‘What?’

‘Thank me.’ Rayan’s eyes bored into him. ‘Thank me for talking to you.’

Kitt scraped his tongue against his teeth, feeling the grains of gold forming there. He wished the other students had seen him arrive in Darian’s carriage. None of them would believe him if he told them.

‘Thank you.’ He spoke barely moving his lips. The other boys smiled, satisfied, but Rayan wasn’t done.

‘We’ve heard the rumours. Gold . . .’ Rayan’s eyes moved over the gold flakes in Kitt’s hair, in the cracks of his lips. ‘But you lived on the streets, right? Why would you live like that if you could make gold?’ He

stepped towards him; Kitt couldn't move any further back.

'Maybe you just wear these to stop you spreading your filth.' The laughing faces pressed closer; Kitt's heart beat harder.

'Where did you come from?' Rayan hissed. 'The rest of us have been here for years, learning, training, then you come out of the blue.'

'He doesn't come from a financier family,' one of the boys reminded them.

'He doesn't come from any family . . .' added another. 'No one visits him.'

'And we're supposed to pretend that you're like us?' asked Rayan. 'Stand next to you in the guild when we pass our Trials?'

Sweat pricked Kitt's forehead. He suppressed a cold-induced shudder. He knew everybody at the College thought these things . . . whispers followed him between classrooms, insults were muttered before bed, and he never knew what to say. It was like they wanted him to apologize, but for what? For existing? He wanted to shout and swear at them. He wanted to fight, even though he knew that was the last thing he should do.

'The Guild Master brought me here,' he said quietly.

'You what?' said Rayan.

‘The Guild Master—’

‘You *dare* make up lies about the Guild Master? As if he would ever stoop to speak to someone like you? As if it’s his idea you came here? You should know I hate liars.’

Once again, he glanced at Kitt’s mitts.

‘Fine. Don’t believe me. I don’t care. I’m going to bed,’ Kitt announced, hoping his voice sounded confident enough to make them see that they wouldn’t get a fight out of him, and they’d grow bored enough to leave him alone.

He tried to move sideways, but one of the other boys blocked the way. Fragments of their faces – tense, expectant – reflected endlessly in the mirrors above the sinks.

‘I don’t think you understand,’ Rayan said sharply. ‘I *hate* liars.’

‘I’m not lying.’

Rayan’s hand shot out and gripped Kitt’s shoulder, pinning him against the wall.

‘You are. Take it back. Admit you’re lying. If you don’t . . .’ He looked at the boys behind him. ‘We’ll just have to flush the truth out of you.’

They moved so fast that Kitt realized with dismay that there had never been any escape. They had planned it all.

Rayan’s leg hooked behind his ankles and pulled

him off balance; there were hands ready to grab him as he fell. His head hit the side of the sink, making his vision swim with blue and pink splotches. Someone turned the taps on; he heard water rushing near his head. He was hauled under the rush. The water was icy at first, then hot, then scalding. The pipes groaned within the tiled wall. Kitt fought back, writhing, eyes squeezed shut. He shouted out but quickly stopped when his mouth filled with water. It felt like his skin was screaming in protest as the molten torrent poured over him. They lifted his legs off the floor and squeezed them tight so he couldn't kick out.

He reached over his head, scrabbling for the tap, but his sodden mitts couldn't grip the metal. Panic rose in his chest and throat. He coughed out the hot water. He tried to shout for them to stop, but it came out as splutters that couldn't be heard over the laughter.

'Boil him!'

'Wash the street filth off him!'

His hair was plastered to his head. They pulled him out from under the tap for a moment to breathe. He blinked the water from his eyes, unable to tell the difference between water and tears; they felt as hot and humiliating as each other.

'That's done it,' one of them said.

'Wait – listen.'

Kitt heard nothing except the pounding of water on porcelain.

The grip on his legs slackened, but Rayan's forearm was under Kitt's chin, pressing into his neck. They locked eyes for a moment. Kitt saw Rayan hesitate – had he had his fun? Would he quit while he still had all the power? The cold air suddenly felt like bliss on the bright pink patches where the water had scalded Kitt's skin.

'Someone's coming.'

'Ray, let's go.'

Kitt's feet touched the floor.

'Nah.' Rayan's teeth glittered under the fluorescent lights.

'Ray ...' one of the boys warned.

'Not even the teachers want you here,' he told Kitt. 'Anyone can see it. As if the Guild Master would ever take an interest in you.'

It all happened at once.

A creak on the staircase down the corridor made most of them let go. Except Rayan, who shoved Kitt under the water again. Kitt pushed hard against Rayan's chest, but the other boy's full weight was pressing down on him. He had no way out. He didn't even register the idea as it came to him. His instincts made him fight back, and he did it with the only weapon he had. Kitt shook one hand free from its mitt, then

grabbed Rayan's face with his bare hand.

The boy's eyes widened with shock.

Then the screaming started.

The other boys had scattered by the time Professor Walpins made it to the bathroom. One of the sinks was overflowing and the windows were fogged with condensation. Kristofer – the strange new boy who had joined the College too late, too poor – was drenched and crouched on the floor, cowering from the other boy. It took a moment for her to realize it was Rayan Mandwell. He was also on the floor, doubled over in shallow water, his trembling hands covering his face. He was the one screaming.

'What on earth is going on here?' she demanded, even though she could take a good guess. Dormitory high jinks gone wrong. Most likely Kristofer had been the victim, then the tables had turned and Mandwell didn't know how to take it. She had seen it before, when an underdog finally fights back, taking the bigger, older, more confident child by surprise. But Rayan Mandwell was from an influential family. His mother was the guild's Keeper. It wouldn't do for the boy from the streets to be attacking his peers, even if he was provoked.

'Mandwell, stop that racket at once. Stand up, boy.'

She splashed over to him, grabbed one of his wrists

and hoisted him to his feet.

When he lifted his face, she dropped his hand as though it burnt her. Now she understood his screams.

The entire right side of his face was stiff, contorted, frozen. A grim mask had been fused to his skin.

A mask made of gold.

Kitt was taken to a place outside the walls of the College: a stone building with a bare stone floor, and only one window. The children were sometimes threatened with being sent there when they broke the rules, but he didn't know anybody who had been in isolation before. Kitt didn't bother counting the days he spent there.

He didn't mind it. It was more peaceful than the classrooms and dormitories. At least he didn't have to pretend any more. He told himself he was finally where he belonged: alone. Most nights he dreamt he was at the Observatory, that strange prison the methics had sent him to, to cure his condition. In his dream, the medicine always worked, then he woke, disappointed to still smell metal, the taste of it heavy on his tongue, flakes of it sharp in the corners of his eyes. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed to be getting worse.

He didn't wear his mitts in isolation. There was no one and nothing that needed protecting. Over time he smeared the room in gold. The plates they brought his

food on were far more valuable when they were returned.

Just when he thought he might be happy to be in isolation for ever, to not speak to another person or wear gloves ever again, Darian visited him.

The Guild Master stood silhouetted in the door by the weak sunshine; the gold of his robes matched the gold handprints on the walls. He bent his head as he stepped inside, his pale hair brushing the top of the door frame. His presence seemed to change the very air in the room. For a moment, Kitt understood what people must have felt in the presence of kings and queens in the old days before the guilds.

Darian did a double take at the gold around the room. Kitt was painfully aware of his own appearance: unwashed and still in the pyjamas he'd been wearing when Rayan had dumped his wet uniform on his bed. Darian closed the door behind him, looked around, and when he realized there was nowhere suitable to sit, he settled for leaning against the wall opposite Kitt.

Kitt didn't know what to do. Should he stand? Bow? Apologize?

Darian's pale blue eyes seemed to look through the fabric of the world. His robes seemed to glimmer in a way none of the other financier robes did. He wore less jewellery than the others too, which surprised Kitt. His only adornment was the heavy Guild Master's

medallion around his neck. Kitt felt an overwhelming urge to touch it. He squeezed his hand into a fist to suppress the gold.

‘Rayan Mandwell was admitted to Queen Cleo’s Hospital in Lundain.’ The Guild Master’s voice had the quality of satin: quiet and smooth. Every consonant was carefully articulated.

‘Is he . . .?’

‘His face will heal. The methics were able to remove most of the metal, but they say it will scar.’ Darian stared at him. Kitt felt he was expecting him to show guilt or grief over this news, but all he felt was a grim sort of satisfaction.

‘His mother, as you can imagine, is not happy,’ Darian continued. ‘We have spoken several times. She has the capacity to make my life . . . difficult. She wants somebody to be held accountable.’

Kitt imagined travelling away from the College, returning to Leadenhall Market, finding his old friends, perhaps one friend in particular: Ani. He remembered her in front of the gates of King Jude’s, a crease of concern between her brows as she watched the carriage carry him away.

‘Will I be sent back to Lundain?’

Darian turned his icy eyes on him. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘Yes. No. I don’t know . . .’ His fingertips tingled.

This answer made Darian's lips curl into an expression that wasn't quite a sneer, but it wasn't a smile either.

'This is not what I envisioned when I brought you here,' he said.

'I'm sorry.' Kitt glanced once again at the medallion. He felt a peculiar twinge of greed; molten gold surged from his fingertips. He picked at it with his fingernails. 'It's not that I don't appreciate the – uh – the opportunity, but—'

'Opportunity.' Darian spat out the word like it was something disgusting. 'To the other children, this place is an opportunity, one they barely deserve. For you, Kristofer, it is a *lifeline*. Perhaps if you'd been left to grow up on the streets, you would have been fine. But the methics found you. I know what they almost did to you. Methic Blake and her . . . experiments.'

Kitt couldn't hold his gaze.

'The teachers say you have nightmares. That you speak in your sleep. When you were freed from Methic Blake's grasp, you went to Methic Gilchrist. Do you think he's any better?'

Kitt tried to answer honestly. 'Methic Gilchrist was always very nice to me . . .'

Darian snorted. 'All these methics have their methods for getting you to take their medicines and become something you are not. I could not leave you to rot in a

hospital, a pet prisoner of the Guild of Medicine. And since my guild doesn't keep prisoners, my only option was to invite you to join us.' He began to pace the small room. 'You would not believe what I had to pay for you.'

'Pay? For me?'

'The donation I had to offer the hospital to get them to release you. To let you be what you are. Bringing you here was a risk, I knew that. You weren't raised for it; we didn't have time to prepare you. Our Trials are rigorous. Most fail. But I had special hopes for you. And now I find myself disappointed.'

'I didn't know all that.' Kitt couldn't fathom why Darian thought he would make a good student. Why he would pay so much money to get him to join the guild.

'The methics told me it wasn't a good idea,' Darian continued, as if reminding himself of something. 'They warned me. But I want them to be wrong. I want you to prove them wrong.'

'Wrong about what?'

'That a person like you shouldn't be free. They want to keep you in hospital, medicate you, suppress your . . . *gift*.'

Kitt looked at his fingers caked in solidified gold, globules glinting at his feet.

'Gift?'

'Yes. Midas-fingers is a very rare gift.'

‘It’s an illness.’

‘That’s a matter of opinion, Kristofer.’ Darian’s voice took on a sharp edge. It made Kitt snap to attention; he felt fixed by the Guild Master’s gaze, an insect in amber, unable to look away. ‘I am no methic, but I understand the feeling that causes your condition. Greed. So tell me: what do you want more than anything?’

Kitt felt a surge of gold, and wiped his hands on the floor. He muttered his answer; Darian didn’t catch it.

‘Speak up when you answer your Guild Master.’

‘Lots of things.’

‘Specifically. Right now, in this moment.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Yes, you do. Pick something. What do you want? If you could have anything.’

‘Your medallion.’

Kitt blushed red. It was the first answer that came into his head. He couldn’t explain it, and if he thought about it, there were lots of things he wanted more. But he had succeeded in bringing Darian up short.

‘Yes. I was right about you. You aren’t interested in riches like the others. You want power.’

Kitt wasn’t sure that was true, but he didn’t dare correct the Guild Master. What he really wanted was to make all the bullying stop. To see the expressions on all their faces. To make every door open and every

person afraid, and every penny his, and every day his to use as he wished.

Darian's pale fingers ran over the chain. He lifted it over his head. For a bizarre moment, Kitt thought he might hand it over, but he simply held it, and watched the medallion swing on its chain, lost in thought.

'I remember the day I became Guild Master. How it felt to have this placed around my neck. Nothing is heavier. Nothing is more precious.'

'Sometimes I think what I really want is to not make gold any more,' Kitt said. 'To be normal.' He said it more out of habit than anything else. He felt no surge of gold as he spoke the words, but it got Darian's attention again.

'That is the methics speaking. There are much better things to be in this life than "normal".'

'Easy for you to say,' Kitt muttered.

'It isn't. You do not realize the grip their beliefs have on you. They have convinced you that greed is a bad thing. Is it bad to want this?' He shook the medallion. 'Power. Belonging. Control. What's wrong with those things? What if you're not ill at all, Kristofer? What if you are more powerful than any of us?'

Kitt didn't know what to say. He thought of every hospital bed he'd slept in, every medicine he'd been given . . . He looked at his hands. So what if he made gold? Lots of people wanted gold. Maybe Darian was

right. As long as he learnt not to hurt people, like he had Rayan . . . Or, perhaps, to hurt only the people he wanted to hurt . . .

Darian replaced the medallion around his neck.

‘I can send you back to Lundain if you wish. The methics will find you again. They will do whatever they can to hold you back. Or you can stay here, where you can be yourself. And when you pass your Trials, you can join me at the guild. You will be safe there.’ He leant in, his voice as soft as a pillow. ‘We have treasures so rare and valuable, that they make gold seem as dull as rock.’

After their conversation, Kitt emerged from isolation in a clean, dry uniform. Darian walked with him back through the college gates, under the concrete arches. A frost had settled overnight, making their footsteps loud and crisp. It made the rooftops pale and glittering. Kitt couldn’t believe he had never noticed how beautiful it all was. Ahead of him, some of his classmates were walking through the cloisters – they slowed to a dawdle when they saw the Guild Master.

Darian stopped and turned Kitt to face him.

‘I must return to the guild,’ he said. ‘Stay out of trouble. I don’t want to be called back here on account of your behaviour.’

‘No, sir.’ Kitt sensed it wasn’t a coincidence they were having this exchange in front of the other

students. Darian wanted them to see Kitt had his approval and protection. The children leant against the pillars, watching closely.

‘Make the most of it. Study hard.’

‘Yes, Guild Master.’

‘Darian.’

‘Darian.’

‘We will speak again soon. My young friend.’

With a rare smile, Darian shook him by the mitt, then walked away, his robes like a yellow sun in the icy air.

When Kitt turned back, his classmates were still watching him. He kept his head down, avoided looking at them and walked on. He needed to fetch his books and get back to his lessons. He vowed to work harder than he ever had. He would prove Darian right.

Someone called out to him, but he ignored it. Soon they were all at it. Asking him how he knew the Guild Master, and if he had been expelled. They said good riddance. The old taunts slipped back in. But they didn't sting. He had the College, the guild, the friendship of the Guild Master himself. One day, he would see the treasures of the Guild of Finance. The thought made his hands throb with gold. For the first time, he felt powerful.

When he was closer, a student threw something at him: a stone, soaring towards his head, until it fell short

and skittered at his feet. Kitt picked it up and looked at it thoughtfully. Then he slipped his hand out of his mitt and rolled the stone between his fingers.

He tossed the gold nugget back at them and kept walking.

FIVE YEARS LATER



CHAPTER ONE

Junior methics formed a nervous sea of blue robes around a long scroll of paper that had just been pinned to the common room wall in Queen Cleo's Hospital, headed: JUNIOR RANKINGS IN PREPARATION FOR THE FOURTH TRIAL.

Methic Edwin Oswald found himself squeezed at the back of the crowd, so he had to stand on tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the scroll and find out where he stood in the rankings of the junior methics in the city attempting the Trials. He was taller than most and was able to read the first third of the list, but that was no good to him – his name never appeared there.

He buried his hands in his pockets and waited for the pushing to subside, wondering how he was going to explain his inevitable low ranking to his parents. He could already imagine the air of confused disappointment infecting every room of their house, meals spent

listening to lectures about the family legacy, his mother shaking her head and muttering about the quality of his education.

‘Second place, Darke. Nice work. How does it feel down there?’

‘Pfft. We still have mineral syndromes to go, Arter. Don’t get too comfortable.’

The crowd allowed Edwin Oswald to shuffle closer as Payton Darke and Arter Montgomery wrangled over their usual spots at the top of the list. For a moment he allowed himself to imagine a universe where his name was at the top of the rankings, and Payton Darke knew his name and smiled at him, and he teased her with the same easy confidence as Arter. In that universe, she would come home with him to meet his family and tell them all how brilliant he was, and they would all agree they had been wrong and . . .

‘Bad luck, Os.’

Someone slapped him on the back, bringing him back to reality. Two people in front of him moved and he finally caught sight of his name: third from bottom. Better than he’d expected. Worse than his family would tolerate. But it was only fair – his Incendiary Diseases Trial had been a disaster. It had taken weeks for his burns to heal, and he’d needed new tinted glasses after his old ones had melted halfway through. Without his

glasses for half the exam, it was a miracle he'd even finished.

The door to the common room opened, and the chatter died away. Methic Gilchrist entered. He had a way of looking at them all with affection and encouragement, as if this thing called medicine that they were trying to learn wasn't so hard and didn't deserve their sleepless nights and bitten fingernails.

'Methics! You have seen the latest rankings. Congratulations to those of you who have reached dizzying heights. As you know, we are beginning to consider which new methics will exhibit their work at the Curio Ball in front of the financiers.' Os could have sworn he saw Gilchrist nod at Payton Darke at this point. There was a murmur of excitement. 'A strong relationship between our two guilds is of the utmost importance if we are to continue our work. I need you to dazzle them. Now, for those of you who feel you did not fulfil your potential, take heart. The Trials are a long and detailed examination process. There is still time for you to pass.' Os's issue was that he had perfectly fulfilled his potential; it was his lack of potential as a methic that was the issue.

Gilchrist adjusted his Guild Master's medallion and went on: 'Now that you know your ranking, you will attempt your next Trial. The subject is mineral syndromes. You will do the exam in teams.'

He reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a black velvet pouch. He shook it – it sounded like pebbles tapping together.

‘You will approach in the order of your rankings. The mineral you choose, sight unseen, will determine your team.’

Os sat on the arm of one of the sofas that had softened under the weight of methics and their textbooks over the years. He had a while to wait. He watched his peers each put their hand into the bag and pick out a stone – there was bright turquoise, sparkling amethyst, icy quartz, tiger’s-eye and jade. Five teams in total. He saw Payton Darke pinch an amethyst between her thumb and forefinger. As the teams took shape, they all watched keenly to see who would join them, and Os felt a plunge of shame as his turn drew closer. No doubt they were all waiting to see who would have to make do with the weakest students on their team.

Three were left, and by his count three stones: one amethyst, one tiger’s-eye, one quartz. Arter Montgomery was on the quartz team, and he didn’t look happy about his next potential teammate. The turquoise and jade teams looked smug – they had avoided the three weakest students.

Os felt the eyes of his classmates on him as he approached Methic Gilchrist. The Guild Master gave him a small smile – he had been methic to the Oswald

family all of Os's life, and, no matter how disastrously the young methic failed, Gilchrist was always encouraging and kind. The bag was now shapeless and nearly empty. Os reached inside and felt the three stones. He scooped one into his palm and pulled it out.

Amethyst.

He couldn't decide if he was delighted to be on Payton Darke's team or wished he could have been saved the embarrassment. *Maybe this is my chance*, he told himself. *Maybe Gilchrist is right, and one exam can change everything.*

Each team had five members. The amethyst team had Payton, twins Dilan and Tristan, and Hailee, who was only a few spots above Os in the rankings. They barely had time to say hello to their final team member; the final two stones were drawn and Gilchrist announced, 'Those of you holding an amethyst, come with me.'

The five young methics followed their Guild Master from the comfort of the junior common room through the gleaming corridors that bustled with nurses and methics, visitors, the patients who were on their way to recovery and looking for company or entertainment. As they walked, Os tried to remember everything he could about the feelings in the quadrant of Venner's Wheel that resulted in mineral syndromes: greed, envy, shame, loneliness, pining . . . It was the

subject he was least nervous about, but that wasn't saying much. He kept pace with Payton, whose lips moved silently as she recited her exam revision to herself. Os's palms started to sweat.

The Trials took many forms – the junior methics never knew exactly what the exam would entail. Some were written papers in the echoing Methics Hall, others were practical tests creating medicines from the botanicals grown in the hospital labs. As they advanced, the Trials grew more complex and riskier. This next Trial had been the subject of endless speculation and rumours. They watched keenly to see where Gilchrist would lead them: to the wards? The labs? An exam hall?

They were being taken to the operating theatre.

Os had never set foot in there – he'd only been allowed to observe other methics at work through the one-way glass. He was side by side with Payton. He glanced at her, and their eyes met. She gave him a reassuring smile. It was good she was on their team. Arter Montgomery might hold the number-one spot by the skin of his teeth, but Payton had the sharpest mind of everyone in their year. With her help, maybe all their ranks would improve, Os hoped. Maybe he wouldn't have to tell his parents about his current grade.

When they got to the double doors, Gilchrist stopped and handed Payton a white envelope with the

Queen Cleo's crest printed on it. The Trial instructions. The five young methics hesitated at the doors.

'I would say, "When you're ready",' Methic Gilchrist said to them. 'But that's not how medicine works.'

He pulled one door open and ushered them through before they even had a chance to glance back. It slammed shut behind them. They were on their own – except for the unconscious woman on the operating table in the middle of the theatre. A voice came over the sound system:

'Your Trial has begun.'

The operating theatre was state of the art: all black glass, sleek metal benches and a vast mirror made of one-way glass which the methics used to observe the session. No doubt it hid their examiners. Os tried to steady his breath and wiped his palms on the front of his robes. He looked back, hoping Gilchrist might have followed them, but of course he hadn't. Their patient was the only person to focus on.

The scent of roses hit them from a few feet away. The woman was unconscious, dressed in simple, worn clothes that were unusual for patients at Queen Cleo's. Her long brown hair lay on the operating table around her head like a halo. Her complexion was flushed, pink blooming over her cheeks and lips, making her beautiful in her illness. Even Os didn't need a textbook to

know what they were dealing with: these were all the classic symptoms of lovesickness.

‘What are the instructions?’ Hailee nodded at the envelope in Payton’s hands.

Payton tore it open and read aloud: ‘Diagnose and treat the patient.’

‘How?’ said Tristan.

‘That’s it. It doesn’t say anything else.’

Hailee took the piece of paper from her, not trusting the instructions unless she could see them with her own eyes.

‘There aren’t any exam questions or anything?’ Os asked, even though he could see over Hailee’s shoulder that Payton had read the whole message.

‘Well, it’s clearly lovesickness,’ Dilan announced. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ said Payton, taking the role of leader without having to be asked. ‘She needs medicine – rosehips, lavender and calon seed. Let’s get started.’

‘I’ll grind the rosehips,’ Os announced.

‘No! Maybe . . . how about you look after the patient?’ Tristan suggested. Payton shot Os an apologetic look but didn’t disagree.

The four of them started sorting through the herbs and compounds together while Os went to the woman on the operating table. Her face was pink, as if she were speaking with somebody who made her blush. She

slept serenely under the power of a sleeping draught given to her by the methics. Os could imagine it: Gilchrist explaining the Trials to her, asking if his students could cure her, how he'd be watching over them the whole time. The students felt alone, but there were experienced methics ready to swoop in at a moment's notice. He looked at the one-way mirror, but saw only his forlorn expression staring back at him. Across the room, Dilan was murmuring in agreement with something Payton was saying. The patient didn't need looking after, but, with nothing else to do, Os placed his hand in hers and hoped she knew she wasn't on her own.

Speaking with patients was the only part of his training where Os got good marks. Without them, he was certain he would have been kicked out of the guild long ago. Formulae for medicines never stuck in his mind; when it came to reading books, the letters flickered and jumped about until the words didn't make sense any more, so revising for exams felt futile. In his clumsiness he had smashed more test tubes and beakers than the rest of his cohort put together. In many ways, his parents' belief that he should be a methic was completely misguided.

He tucked his chin in to peer over the top of his glasses. Without the tinted lenses, he could see a pink light whirling restlessly over the patient. He had been

able to see lights for as long as he could remember. He liked to think of them as 'auras'. He didn't know what caused them. Methic Gilchrist insisted that just because he could see auras, that didn't mean they were real. But he found them mesmerizing nonetheless. It was as if his brain skipped into a different frequency and his vision stopped working. Lights and colours would writhe and spangle until he couldn't see, then whatever treatment or experiment he was working on would go awry.

As he held the lovesick woman's hand, he realized with a twinge of anxiety that the warm pink light shot from her heart, down her arm and into her hand, then vanished. Os pushed his glasses up. The others were still at the medicines table, debating how many rose-hips to add to the compound. He noticed he was sweating, and he rubbed his forehead against the back of his arm, holding the woman's hand the entire time.

'Right. This should do it.' Payton, Dilan, Tristan and Hailee were coming back over. Payton placed a hand on Os's shoulder and steered him out of the way. He dropped the patient's hand.

The medicine was also bright pink, a more vivid, putrid version of the light that only Os could see. They just needed to give her the medicine, then look after her until she woke up. Thanks to Payton, they should all walk out of the Trial with top marks.

The patient murmured. She was starting to come round.

‘Miss,’ Os spoke quietly to her, ‘my name is Methic Oswald and I’m here to help you.’

Payton was next to him now. She held the medicine in one hand and a calon seed in another – a lumpy burgundy seed that was key in treating any illness that caused heartache.

‘Ready?’ she asked everyone. They nodded. The seed landed in the vial of medicine with a small *splosh*.

‘This will taste bitter,’ Os warned the woman, unsure if she could hear him.

‘Prop her up,’ Payton instructed him.

He placed a hand under the woman’s head so that Payton could bring the vial to her lips. It was only then that he saw something that worried him. A tiny bead of blood on the patient’s bottom lip. How had it got there? Had it been there all along? Payton saw it at the same time as he did. They hesitated. The calon seed was time-sensitive – they would have to remake the medicine if it went bad. Os could imagine the shaking heads behind the mirror. But lovesickness didn’t cause bleeding lips.

The woman groaned more clearly this time.

Then Os saw something that truly concerned him: a tiny thorn arching out of the woman’s lip.

‘What is that?’ Dilan reached out to touch it, but

Payton smacked his hand away.

The group started fiercely debating their next course of action, but Os was distracted. Something was coming out of the pink lights that pulsed over the woman's heart. Strings of grey, like threads of liquid concrete, snaked from the pink light and across her skin. He reached out to touch her arm – his fingers should have touched the grey threads, but they went straight through, as if they weren't there. But they *were* there. He could see them, even through his tinted glasses. As his fingers touched her arm, a grey thread wrapped around his little finger and began to entwine it, growing like a weed. He moved away but it stuck to him. He shook his hand hard to free it, but before he could do so, he felt something . . .

'It's not lovesickness.' Payton's voice was filled with dread at the realization. 'There's another feeling here, something else . . .'

Her words of warning were lost to the chaos that erupted next.

Savage thorns arched out of the woman's skin, along her arms, her legs, around her neck. Each one created a raw open wound. Stems smeared with blood, the freshest shades of red and green. They grew fast and thick, crisscrossing her body, encasing her in a thorny cage.

A hideous, suppressed scream. The patient's eyes – bright blue, the whites bloodshot – were now open

and locked on Os.

‘Get the shears!’ someone shouted.

‘Rose-entrapment!’ Payton said with horror. It was a rare disease they had read about but never encountered in real life.

The grey threads were multiplying in the areas where the rose briars were growing from the woman’s skin. Os didn’t know what he was doing; he just knew he couldn’t stand by watching her agony and do nothing. He acted on instinct, and every instinct he had was telling him that the grey threads were the problem. He started trying to grab them, but it was useless: they didn’t seem to be made of anything at all. Nobody else seemed to notice them.

As he tried to seize a fistful of them swarming over the woman’s heart, a briar ripped out through her ribs and wrapped around his hand.

‘Wait!’ Payton shouted. Her hand was on his shoulder, moving him aside. She reached into the briar to free him.

Then came a lurching feeling, as if the tiles were moving under his feet. Os realized with dismay that he was probably fainting. He knew this meant he wouldn’t pass this Trial. And, even more excruciating for his pride, Payton Darke would see.

He wasn’t expecting the dreams. Flashes of images: the rose-entrapped patient looking healthy and happy

on the shores of the River Tamesas. Payton was there too, turning in the breeze, meeting Os's eye with a quizzical look on her face. He was dimly aware that her hand was on his shoulder, her little finger touching the skin of his neck. In the dream, feelings washed over him. Something told him they didn't belong to him at all.

When he came to in the operating theatre, Dilan, Tristan and Hailee were leaning over him, full of concern, while methics murmured as they worked on the patient. Os turned his head; one of the lenses in his glasses had splintered, splicing the room into mismatched segments. Payton was on the floor next to him. She had fainted too. Her left hand was on his shoulder, her right smeared with the patient's blood.