The Cold Light of Day

a Carnival Row fanfic

by Rodo

for coaldustcanary

"YOU SURE ABOUT this?" Tourmaline asked Vignette as they both pressed themselves to the huge chimney. It was just one house further, but it was already nearly dawn. Tourmaline wrapped the dark scarf tighter around her head to keep her bright hair from peeking out and cast another worried glance at Vignette. Her friend was breathing laboriously and she was sweating and clutched her side in pain. Just one more house, Tourmaline thought. Just one more. Vignette's eyes were already beginning to glaze over from the exertion, but what choice did they have? They were in the middle of the city, it was about to turn day and they were fae. Their only other option was to cling to the chimney until nightfall and hope nobody looked up.

"Afissa said her mistress ran off with the puck who lived there, shortly before, well," Vignette ground out gasping. "I don't think they can confiscate our property yet, even if we can't live in it. It should still be empty."

"And if it isn't?"

Vignette shot her a dark, desperate look, and Tourmaline knew there was no choice. "Then we'll hide in the attic and hope nobody comes up."

Tourmaline nodded, before turning away from Vignette to slowly creep closer to the edge of the roof. Down below, Finistere Crossing was still asleep. They'd heard some deliverymen pass shortly before, but now only the birds danced over the gleaming cobbles. It was so different from the Row it was startling.

"Now!" Tourmaline whispered urgently, then she watched as Vignette detached herself from the chimney to stumble over to the next house. She slowly unfurled her wings, hissed with pain and lifted herself up to the next roof, falling

to her knees once she'd made it. Tourmaline cast one last glance at the ground, then followed as fast as she could. When she knelt beside Vignette, she saw that she was crying.

"Come on," she said, and gently wrapped an arm around her. She tried to crouch as much as she could while they hobbled over to the small attic window, but it was hard to do so while half-carrying someone else. Vignette's breathing was becoming unsteady and Tourmaline wanted to curse.

The window, of course, was locked. At least it looked as if the room behind it hadn't been used for a while. Not that she could see much, just vague shapes of old furniture covered in sheets.

"See anything?" Tourmaline asked Vignette.

Vignette shook her head.

"Well, here goes nothing," Tourmaline said, and unwrapped her scarf. Then she wrapped it around her arm, before hitting the glass near the latch with her elbow as hard as she could. It hurt and she bit down a cry. Then they held their breath and listened for some reaction, but none came. The Crossing kept sleeping. A glance at the horizon told Tourmaline that it was half-light already. With a hurried motion she rewrapped her arm, reached through the hole for the latch and opened the window. She went through first, then caught Vignette as she lost her footing on the tiles. For a moment they both collapsed against the wall under the window as cold and musty air mixed above their heads. When Tourmaline turned to Vignette she smiled brightly, as she so rarely did these days, like she used to, back in Anoun. When they were young. And safe.

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It was hatred at first sight. Tourmaline had been so elated when she finally went to uni. Her parents had handed her her allowance, waved her off when she left for Kish, and for the first time in her life, she was on her own. She could do whatever she wanted, whomever she wanted, and nobody could tell her differently. It was freedom, and it was exhilarating. She looked forward to the parties and the new people, to the lectures and to working on her writing. Her future was full of possibilities, it didn't even bother her when they told her she'd have to share her room in student housing. Tourmaline had never shared her room before, but what was university for if not new experiences?

Well, she changed her mind when, a week after her own arrival, her roommate arrived. She had *heard* of country bumpkins, but she never thought she'd meet one fresh out of the lowlands. That, however, was clearly who walked through the door with an uncertain smile on her face while Tourmaline was preparing for a party. The clothes alone looked like they belonged in the last century: a sturdy, conservatively tailored leather coat with traditional embroidery. Tourmaline hadn't seen someone wear anything like that outside of illustrations in her textbooks. The girl looked positively ridiculous. She even wore her hair really short, when that hadn't been fashionable in High Bresail since Tourmaline's parents were her age.

"Hi," the girl said shyly, and Tourmaline saw her take in the room. Her glance passed over the three dresses Tourmaline had yet to make up her mind about, the two open and half-unpacked suitcases and the books Tourmaline had scattered across her desk (and the floor, the eyes lingered on that especially). "My name is Vignette. Are you always this messy?"

Messy? Tourmaline wasn't messy. She was just busy, and it wasn't like there was any rotting food or unwashed dishes anywhere. She'd learned not to do *that* from her older sister's great example. She'd visited Agate once when she'd moved out to uni herself, and that had been a lesson Tourmaline would never forget. She knew better than to be *messy*.

"You're my new roommate, I take it?" she said, not being able to keep the antagonistic feelings out of her voice entirely. Vignette no longer smiled.

"I guess so."

"Where are you from then? Even the Nyseen know better than to wear something like *that*."

Tourmaline watched as Vignette looked down at herself, from her coat to her boots. It was satisfying to watch her be insecure after she'd insulted Tourmaline.

"I'm from Anoun," Vignette said eventually with her head held high and a pout on her face. "Same as you, judging from the accent. Only my parents taught me how to be polite, unlike yours. I guess rich Bresailians don't bother with manners these days."

Oh, how much Tourmaline wanted to teach that stupid girl a lesson. This wasn't a place for someone like her, who knew nothing about fitting in or how the world beyond her little village worked. Vignette should have stayed on whatever little farm she had come from and learned how to keep goats and grow

potatoes, she thought, but before Tourmaline could come up with a witty reply, the clock struck eight, and she cursed. She was supposed to be at the party in half an hour, and she still didn't know which dress to wear!

"I'm late," she bit out, then snatched a dress at random before heading for the bathroom to get changed.

"Aren't you going to sort out this mess?" the new girl called.

"Later!" Tourmaline called back, but she didn't mean it, and she didn't fully empty her suitcases until a month later. By then, Vignette and Tourmaline had settled on their boundaries. One half of the room belonged to Vignette. It was clean, the clothes were on their hangers, the books on their shelves or on her desk, and there was never much more than a used cup and some pencils scattered about. The other half belonged to Tourmaline, who liked to leave her dirty laundry on the floor instead of in a basket, who never made her bed and who used the foot of her bed as a make-shift bookshelf. Her friends thought the differences were amusing when they visited, but Tourmaline didn't. It irked her to share her room with someone who was simultaneously so out of place in Kish and also so pointedly orderly, as if everything about her was meant to taunt Tourmaline.

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Closer inspection of the little attic room revealed a disused bed, an old armoire and some rickety chairs. There was also a trunk full of what turned out to be tablecloths. Everything was covered in dusty white sheets, and removing them made Tourmaline cough. She wished they could leave the window open, but it was too cold in here as it was – Tourmaline could see her breath mist even through all the dust – and somebody outside might get suspicious if they saw an open window. The shattered windowpane was bad enough.

"Seems you were right," she told Vignette, who was still sitting with her back against the wall beneath the window. She had trouble keeping her eyes open, but when Tourmaline spoke she made an effort and stared at her. "This doesn't seem like a house anybody lives in."

Vignette smiled weakly, then coughed, which only caused her to double over in pain, clutching her side. "Told you," she finally whispered between laboured breaths. "I'm going to open the door. Hopefully that helps with the dust," Tourmaline said, before she did just that. The corridor beyond looked just as deserted as the room, and that served to calm her a little more. A part of her had feared only this one room was empty.

"Let's get you into bed," Tourmaline suggested when she was back in the room, and Vignette nodded. The sweat on her forehead worried Tourmaline. That couldn't be good, with the cold, but at least lying down would probably help with the injury.

It had been her fault, Tourmaline thought when she helped Vignette stumble onto the little bed and assisted her in lying down. It had all been her fault. Vignette wasn't even supposed to come. It was just supposed to be Tourmaline, but she just had to open her stupid mouth and mention it when Vignette had come by the Tetterby for a visit. And of course Vignette wanted to help Fleury get out too – they'd both seen her get shot down, and Tourmaline would bet that Vignette's wings ached in sympathy whenever she saw the wound too. So of course Vignette had tagged along to help Fleury reach the trafficker who helped desperate fae reach friendlier shores. When the Burguish had discovered them at the meeting place, Vignette had volunteered to draw them away alongside Tourmaline. And when they'd shot at them, Vignette had shoved her out of the way and lost her balance, crashing into the eaves of a building. That was just who Vignette was – always thinking of others before she thought of herself.

"It's not your fault," Vignette said, drawing Tourmaline back into the present. When Tourmaline looked at her sceptically, she added, "It really isn't."

"You weren't supposed to be there," Tourmaline told her.

"But I wanted to be."

Tourmaline sighed and put her hands on her hips. It was no use. Vignette would be Vignette, and truth be told, Tourmaline didn't want that to change in the least. She loved her just the way she was, even if she could be the most frustrating, stubborn fae she'd ever met. They just had to get through the day, and then out of this mess, that was what mattered. And Tourmaline was determined to make sure that they both would.

"I'll go look for some blankets. I'm freezing my arse off, and I doubt you're feeling any better. You're sure it's okay I leave you alone?"

Vignette nodded, but still curled in on herself. "It's broken ribs at worst. I can breathe; it's not getting any worse. It just hurts like hell whenever I move."

Tourmaline looked her over one last time. She didn't want to leave her, but what choice did she have? She left the room and checked out the rest of what she thought were the servants' quarters. Small rooms, not much in the way of luxuries. It was still not something she was used to, even after all the years, the Burguish habit of having the servants live in the upper storeys. It was the other way around in Tirnanoc. It was all about the view when you had wings.

Her foray into the rest of the house yielded nothing useful, unfortunately, aside from an absolute surety that nobody else was in it, aside from some mice. There was no food, the water wasn't running, and downstairs it looked like thieves had already taken everything of value. When she was back upstairs, Tourmaline's eyes fell on the trunk with the tablecloths. They'd have to do, she thought. At least they weren't dusty.

Vignette yelped in surprise when she spread the first on top of her, and Tourmaline felt a pang of regret. She'd been so still and her breathing so regular, Tourmaline had thought she'd fallen asleep from all the exhaustion and pain.

"It's cold," she explained. "You're going to freeze before nightfall if I don't do this."

"And what are you going to do?" Vignette rasped, and Tourmaline had to smile. Vignette really wasn't good about putting herself first, even if it was the most sensible thing to do.

"Simple," Tourmaline said. "I'm going to join you. You think I want to freeze any more than you?"

"Wouldn't be the first time we share a bed," Vignette pointed out.

No, it really wouldn't.



This was what having your whole world crash down on you felt like, Tourmaline thought. It was as if she was in a dark cavern and the ceiling had collapsed at her. She felt trapped, hopeless and alone. She was barely twenty-two, she had centuries to live yet. She'd had plans and dreams and it felt as if all of that was over. Who had she thought she was, dreaming of becoming a successful poetess? She was just a stupid, big-headed girl from High Bresail who'd crawl back home with her wings tucked in.

"Tourmaline? Is everything alright?" a familiar voice asked. Tourmaline didn't

need to look up from where she'd buried her head in her pillow to cry and scream to know who it was. She didn't want to see the world, and she didn't want to talk to her roommate, of all people. They'd avoided saying a word to each other for a couple of months now, each pretending the other was air. And now she had to intrude on Tourmaline in one of her worst moments.

"'M fine," she groaned. After all the crying, actual words felt foreign in her throat.

"You clearly aren't."

Tourmaline heaved a sigh and tried to bury her head deeper in her pillow to drown out the annoying voice.

"Did something happen to your family?" Vignette asked, and Tourmaline wanted to scream. She clearly wasn't going away, so Tourmaline did her best to pull herself together before heaving herself into a sitting position. She knew she looked dreadful, and she hated being seen like this.

"No," she said. "It's nothing. Leave me alone."

Vignette Stonemoss was standing in the middle of the room with her feet wide apart and her arms crossed in front of her, as if she was getting ready for a fight. Part of Tourmaline wanted to give her one, but the rest was just exhausted. And going by her furrowed brow, Vignette really was worried.

"I got my coursework back, okay? My professor hated my ballads. Said I had no talent for narration and that I should quit while I'm ahead."

Vignette blinked at that. The tension went out of her shoulders and she uncrossed her arms. Here it comes, Tourmaline thought. A mocking on top of the humiliation.

"She did what?" Vignette said instead. "Your professor really told you to quit? She's the one who should think twice about quitting if she tells that to a student, no matter how bad her work is. Can I see it?"

Tourmaline really didn't want to show it to her, in case she changed her mind. But Vignette just looked at her so earnestly and sat down next to her, Tourmaline leaned down and picked up the bag she had dropped next to the bed to fish out the paper covered in her own loopy handwriting, annotated by her professor's neater one. Vignette took it, and her eyes flew over the pages, reading the paper front to back. Tourmaline bit her lip, steeling herself for the worst. If someone else told her she had no talent, she'd quit tomorrow, she thought.

Vignette sighed when she put down the paper, and Tourmaline tensed.

"Your professor is crazy," Vignette concluded.

"What? You're telling me my poems are actually masterpieces now? What are you studying anyway? It's not writing, I'd have seen you in class."

Vignette raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. "No, your poems really need work. Your narration especially. Your professor isn't wrong there. But you're really good with metaphors and you manage to convey really complex feelings in just a couple of words. Narration is something you can learn – and your professor should teach you, not expect you to know it already – but I think you've got the most difficult part of being a poet down. It's what I always struggled with in school. It's history, by the way. And for your information, that includes a lot of literary analysis, since plenty of the older chronicles are written as poems with lots of figurative language."

Tourmaline stared at the other girl in amazement. She'd never heard her talk so much, not even at first. And Vignette didn't think her dreams were doomed, she was on her side. In this very moment, Vignette was the most beautiful being Tourmaline had ever seen. She was kind and smart and compassionate and a bevy of metaphors flew through her mind. Tourmaline felt a smile spread on her face and she saw the answering one on Vignette's face. Without a thought, Tourmaline leaned over and pressed her lips to Vignette's in a quick kiss. When she sat back, Vignette looked confused. Shit, Tourmaline thought.

"Look, I'm sorry if I overstepped," she told her cautiously.

"No!" Vignette said quickly, and her eyes widened slightly. "I was just surprised - in a good way!"

"Really?" Tourmaline asked, and before she got an answer, she leaned in again and let her breath play over Vignette's lips, before capturing them in another kiss, this one more heated. Then Vignette kissed back, opening her mouth to deepen it with a moan.

The next morning, they woke up together in Tourmaline's bed, limbs entangled with each other as the sun shone through the window. Half awake, Tourmaline buried her head in Vignette's shoulder and smelled her hair. She was giddy, the last day all but forgotten, except for the good parts. She'd figure out how to write a proper ballad; without the professor's help, if necessary. For now, she'd enjoy having made a new friend, and maybe more.

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Tourmaline shivered, despite the stack of tablecloths that weighed heavily on them both. Vignette did too, and Tourmaline wished she could hug her more closely. She already spooned her from behind, keeping an arm on Vignette's waist while she buried her face in her friend's neck. She hated this cold. Sometimes, she felt as if she hadn't been warm in months. The memories of Anoun, of her carefree youth, seemed so distant, they might as well be someone else's.

"Try to sleep," she told Vignette. "Better you get some rest before next night."

"You too," Vignette answered, and she awkwardly gripped Tourmaline's hand. "I'm sorry."

"Whatever for?" Tourmaline whispered while she watched the dust motes dance in the pale morning light.

"If it weren't for me, you'd be back on the Row by now."

"If it weren't for you, I might not have made it as far as this, or did you forget that? Besides, there's worse places to be."

Vignette remained silent for a bit. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Pact-occupied Tirnanoc? A Burguish prison? The bottom of the river? Professor Sestern's class?"

Vignette laughed, then whimpered and coughed. "Don't make me laugh, please."

Tourmaline pressed a kiss to Vignette's hair. "I'm sorry. I just want to distract you."

"I know," Vignette said. "But the laughing isn't helping. Besides, Professor Sestern's class can't have been that bad. I bet the classroom was heated, at least."

"Yeah, but the company was worse."

Vignette sighed and adjusted the position of her head. "I love you, you know?" she said.

"I know," Tourmaline answered. She thought about all the times she wanted to hear that, and all the times she had. Vignette had been the most important person in her life for ages, ever since her parents had died and later, when she'd lost track of her sister in the aftermath of the war.

"Not like that, but ..." Vignette trailed off.

"I know"

"Do you? We never really talked about, well, anything, really. There was never time."

"I know," Tourmaline assured her. Because she did, and she felt the same, even if she wouldn't have thought that a while back. She'd always love Vignette, and

Vignette would always love her. But it wasn't the same as it was back in Anoun. And to her own surprise, Tourmaline discovered that she was fine with that. That she was over it and no longer mourned the might-have-beens.

"Do you ever wonder how we ended up here?"

Tourmaline thought about that question for a bit. "I think I gave up wondering about things like that a long time ago," she finally answered. "But I'm glad we're both here, no matter how fucked this city is. We're together, we have friends, and you have Philo. I don't think I've been this happy for years, even with all the bad shit."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Tourmaline insisted. "Are you going to tell me you're not?"

Vignette stayed silent for a moment while Tourmaline turned her attention back to the dust motes. All that, the cold, the dust, the stillness and the uncertainty of it all coalesced and took form in her mind. It was an unexpected one; Tourmaline hadn't written a poem in years. She just hoped she didn't forget before they got back to the Tetterby.

"No, you're right," Vignette murmured. And after a short pause she added "Philo is going to be worried."

Tourmaline snorted. "Of course he is. If he's anything like you, he'll be pacing your room right now or ask anyone and everyone what they know, and they'll have to keep him from going out to look for you."

Vignette groaned. "I really hope he doesn't try to find us. This is all my fault."

"It really isn't. How often do I have to tell you? Besides, Philo is smart, and he knows this city a good deal better than us. You need to worry about yourself. How is the side?"

"Hurting."

"But you can still breathe alright?"

Tourmaline felt Vignette nod.

"Try to sleep then."

Vignette must have been really exhausted, because she did. She didn't fall asleep immediately, but after a while, Tourmaline heard her breaths even out in a familiar way. She still knew Vignette's body like the back of her hand, despite all that she had forgotten since the day their relationship – undefined thought it had been – had changed into what it was now. The day war had entered their lives.

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It had been like a dream – the assembly, the dean telling them all the news before they'd find out from the papers or rumour. The world was falling to pieces around them, and Tourmaline was sure she wasn't the only one who looked like a ghost when she flew home. Some of the others had started crying, some had screamed. Angry whispers had followed her all day. Tourmaline, on the other hand, just felt numb. Her thoughts drifted to her father, still mourning her mother, and her sister who stayed with him. They were safe, she was sure. They were far from where the Pact had invaded.

Vignette was already in their room, sitting on her bed with her legs crossed and her eyes closed, like the statue of a meditating saint. When Tourmaline entered, she opened her eyes. They looked determined and clear, and for a while, they just stared at each other, as if what had happened was unspeakable and this was the only way they could share what they felt.

"I'm leaving," Vignette finally said.

Tourmaline blinked. "What?"

"I said I'm leaving. I already handed in the paperwork at the office."

"What!" Tourmaline cried. "Why?"

Vignette tilted her head and looked at her as if it was obvious. And it was, but Tourmaline really didn't think this was a good idea.

"So what, you're going to throw away your future and join the Winged Brigade? Vignette, you're just one girl! What difference can you possibly make?" she asked. She'd gone too far, Tourmaline realised when she saw how Vignette's face fell.

"What difference can I make? If everyone thought like that, we could just hand our lands over to the Pact, do you want that? To be ruled by fucking faantroigh like we're cattle? You know where I'm from! You know my family is still there, and you want me to just sit still and study history like any of it is going to make a fucking difference?"

"Of course staying here isn't going to make a difference! But throwing your life away won't either. Don't you think your family is happy that you're safe at least?"

Vignette stared at her, lips pursed, the anger clear as day on her face. "You just don't want me to leave you," she said, and the words hit Tourmaline like a blow. It was true, she thought, but not the entire truth.

"I don't want you to die!"

"I'm not going to die!"

"It's a fucking war, Vignette! You study history, what do you think will happen? Sure, they say the Republic of The Burgue is going to help, as if that's going to be any better and as if they won't be happy to send our kind into the fray first. You're not a soldier. You don't even know how to throw a proper punch!"

With a wordless scream, Vignette proved that she did, hitting Tourmaline square in the jaw and sending her flying to her side of the room. They were both breathing heavily, staring at each other, and with a pang, Tourmaline realized she might have lost her.

"I'm going," Vignette said, in a tone that made it clear that this was it. She grabbed her packed bags from the closet, put on her shoes and didn't look back.

"Well, have fun dying then!" Tourmaline called after her. Then she sat back down on the bed and cried until it was dark outside, until there were no more tears left. She cried for her friend, for the love that they'd shared, for the future that might have been, and for her country. It took months for the first letter to arrive, but even though they patched things up somewhat through written words, they didn't speak again until after Kish had fallen, when it was too late.



The way back to the Row was long and arduous. Roof by roof they crept through the city, with Tourmaline taking point and watching out for coppers down in the streets. She saw five, and one time, she was almost caught. The copper pointed his light upwards just as she slipped back over to the other side of the roof, and it lingered there for a good minute. She and Vignette pressed themselves to the tiles and tried not to make a sound until it went away, then they stayed still until the man's footsteps faded up the street. Tourmaline breathed out deeply with relief, and on they went.

She didn't truly start to relax until she spotted the dark window that served as a doorway to the Row. One last time, she checked a street before crossing it with a decisive flutter of her wings, followed closely by Vignette, who was visibly exhausted. Tourmaline knocked on the window, two taps in fast succession, followed by a pause, then another.

The window opened, and the fae on guard let them pass after a short inspection. "Weren't you supposed to be back last night?" she asked.

"We were, but something came up," Tourmaline told her when she went through first, then she helped Vignette, who gave up putting on a brave face now that they were safe. She was gritting her teeth when her feet hit the floor, and all the way though the hole in the wall and down the stairs. By the time they were back at the Tetterby, she was sweating again, even if it wasn't as bad as it had been the night before. All Tourmaline wanted was to get her into a nice, warm bed with a cup of tea and something to eat, but Moira stopped them at the foot of the stairs.

"What happened?" she asked, looking over Vignette for wounds. "Did something happen to Fleury?"

They both shook their heads.

"She got away clean, I think," Tourmaline added. "We were the only ones who got into trouble. Do you need me to work today?"

Moira shook her head and nodded at Vignette. "Should I send for the doctor?"

"No," Vignette said in the same moment Tourmaline said "Yes." Vignette glared at her for a second and she clearly wanted to put up a fight.

"Send someone to fetch her man too. I'm going to put her into bed. We'll be in my room."

Moira nodded and Tourmaline looked back at Vignette, who looked betrayed but also too tired to fight after all. Side by side, they stumbled up the stairs and into Tourmaline's room, which felt mercifully warm after the past day. Tourmaline pulled back the sheets before watching as Vignette tried to struggle out of her jacket, wincing and hissing but too proud to ask for help.

"Come on, let me do it," she told her, grabbing the coat by the collar and carefully sliding it off the right arm first, then the more delicate left side and finally the wings.

"Thank you," Vignette said weakly.

"Don't mention it. Now get into bed. I'll get us something to eat."

Vignette nodded and Tourmaline watched as she did just that, then she went down to the old hotel kitchen and put a kettle on the stove while she looked through the pantry. They didn't have much anymore, thanks to the bloody Burguish, but she found some bread, cheese and a sausage and two plates. After the tea was done, she put everything on a tray to carry upstairs. When she arrived

there, it didn't surprise her to see Philo walk up the stairs as fast as he could manage without breaking into a run.

"How is she?" he asked when he spotted her.

"Alive," Tourmaline answered as she kept walking. "Tired. Cold. She's a little better than last night, so I don't think it's anything dangerous, but she got hurt quite a bit."

Philo sighed.

Tourmaline watched his face when they entered her room, and it was fascinating to see how the weight just fell off him when he laid eyes on Vignette. And Vignette looked like she was no longer in pain. For a moment, Tourmaline froze at the threshold and just watched them. It was really sickeningly sweet, and if she was honest with herself, she was a little jealous.

"Tea?" she asked and Vignette nodded. "You too," she offered Philo, whose eyes went to the third mug on the tray. Yes, Tourmaline had figured they wouldn't have to wait for him long. She placed the tray on the night-stand, took her cup and some of the food and then retired to her favourite armchair. While she listened to Philo and Vignette bicker, her mind drifted off, now that she could finally relax, just as her gaze drifted upwards, and she remembered the dancing dust that day, and the poem.

"In the cold light of day ..." she murmured, fingers itching for pen and paper.

Fin