

*four frozen monarchs*

The buzzing is low and insistent, pulsing and ringing with all the authority of the beings that sleep within its gentle grasp. The only sound within the drifting vessel, it fills the air so thoroughly that she finds herself clicking her heels all the louder against the chromatic floors just to drown it out.

Blackness presses in against the curved windows, so thick she has half a mind to think it will shatter the reinforced glass. It is constricting—suffocating, even—to exist within the vessel. To walk its empty, labyrinthine halls, breathe its clean, recycled air. For she knows that the darkness gathering beyond it will only keep at bay for so long. She can already picture the inky black flowing through the metal, shattering the glass. Swallowing the vessel completely, (*finally*), into its merciful abyss.

She has been alone too long.

And yet, she is not alone.

There is a room, tucked safely in the centre of the vessel. Perfectly spherical in shape, chromatic metal reflecting the subtle glow of each anchored orb within it. Four orbs in total, and each harbouring an individual. They will be the life givers of a new civilization, a new world.

She is their ferrier into the new life. She was told that it will be a beautiful one.

Her clicking steps draw nearer to the spherical room, and she forces her feet to hit the ground more violently. The buzzing grows louder. She struggles to block it out.

There is a desolate beauty to the blackness surrounding the vessel, surrounding her. It is definite, complete, unchanging. The velvet of nothingness has grown to become a comfort to her, but she knows deep within her being that it is not as harmless as it seems. If the fabric ever touched her skin, it would never let her go.

Her fingers, long and thin, flex at her sides.

She walks away.

The buzzing quiets.

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She does not sleep, and so she does not wake. There was a time when the sun would have scolded her, shining reproachfully into her tired eyes. But there is no sun, no moon, no stars. Nothing but the darkness beyond the vessel.

A slight glow emanates from the ring of chemiluminescence surrounding the base of the vessel, illuminating the silvered strands of her hair. Her eyes stare as she waits, latched onto nothing, for nothing is all she knows.

She searches the vast blackness for light. For life. Scouring every inch of the thick velvet shroud with the numb desperation she still feels. The ashes of hope still dwindling in her chest.

But the darkness holds still in the impassive way all shadows are partial to.

And she shatters, again.

Her heels grind into the reflective floors, striking with enough force that pain spirals up her legs. But it cannot compete with the emptiness growing in her chest. It is only a matter of time.

The dull glow bounces around the space, catching the underside of her features. She watches her reflection in the chromatic metal, distorted by the curve, twisted by the light. Darkness is much more skilled at hiding these sorts of things.

Her legs ache, pulsing with waves of pain as she quickens her pace. It reminds her of a heartbeat, the asynchronous rhythm of it, and it comforts her. But the buzzing soon drowns it out.

She sees herself in the darkness beyond the window, as if her overlaid silhouette was just as pure a shade of obsidian. She knew, (*she knew*), it wouldn't stay out. She turns her back to it.

The buzzing blankets her skull, filling her ears with its dull, penetrating monotony. She braces herself as she approaches the spherical room in the centre of the vessel, flexes her fingers before resting them on the circular doorknob.

It turns.

She stands on the threshold.

Four orbs seem to float within the chamber, glowing more brightly than the ring surrounding the outer vessel. The thick, reinforced glass curves around the body of each individual, holding them steady in their frozen sleep. Each orb is an inorganic womb, cradling the fetally curled bodies in gentle fluid until each one is awoken anew.

Four orbs, harbouring four frozen monarchs.

The rulers of a new world. The rulers of the old. The bringers of life, brought to the mercy of her and her empty vessel. The powerful are powerless before her.

How long has it been? Since her world was a place of light?

There was a time, once. Before the brightness of a sun fractured into chaos. Evacuation. And then darkness, suffocating the dregs of an entire civilization. An entire world.

It's the reason she's here.

She walks further into the chamber, deadening the buzz of the orbs with the roiling mess of her thoughts. Her fingers rest against the glass of the lowest of the four, the bottom of the diamond-like formation. And she watches as her fingers glow, inhales as the deep cold sets in within them.

The person within is peaceful, their features relaxed and completely still.

And the person without is anything but.

She recalls a story from the age before. A girl, a box. The release of countless curses, but the continued imprisonment of a single blessing. But she believes that the final blessing is not a blessing at all. Hope is futile, and will bring only immeasurable pain. (*It already has*).

The monarch within the glass embodies this unattainable dream. The very fact that they're preserved in the gelatinous liquid is indicative of the final blessing, the final curse. They entered this dreamless state with a singular hope in mind: that they and their three counterparts would wake in a second Earth.

But that Earth cannot exist. It has been too long. The darkness beyond the chamber is impassive, impenetrable.

The buzzing grows louder.

She draws her fingers away from the glass, flexing away the residual cold. The pain she feels now will be nothing compared to the despair of the four glass-bound slumberers when they realise how endless the darkness can be.

Her fingers stray back to the glass, tracing the smooth silhouette down to the base of the sphere. The cord weaves between them, and she strokes the plastic coating. Follows it to the small outlet on the floor.

And she pulls it free. First one, then two, then three, then four.

The glow dies, the buzzing comes to an abrupt end.

She sighs in the silence, as thick as the darkness waiting so patiently beyond.

There is no blood on her hands.