

THE  
DISAPPEARANCE  
OF  
ELIJAH BENJAMIN

## The Disappearance of Elijah Benjamin

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# Chapter One

A mouthful of dirt was never a good start to a day. Jinx spit out the earthy grime out of her mouth as she lifted her head from the ground. A metallic tang stained her tongue. Brushing her lip, red tainted her soot dusted fingers.

“Get up, soldier.” A grating voice called. Sargent Lysis hoisted her up from the neck like a sack of potatoes on a Wednesday and dropped her no better. “Keep your defenses up, Elijah.” Sargent commanded. Attempting to hold her ground with wobbling knees, she clutched her fists next to cheeks and hunched her back.

Bitter cold wind and angry rain slashed against her frame. Her uniform slicked onto her skin. She was definitely getting sick after this. Signing up for the army was a sanctum so she could defend herself, not to continue being treated as a rag doll. Not after so many years of being a street kid. Not after so many months of learning to deal a slight of hand and steal belongings to live. Not after so many days of ravaging hunger. Not after so many hours of sleepless nights wondering if she’ll live till tomorrow.

The transition of seasons in Somnium was never kind, even worse out in the Dreadlands where the army trains. Nothing but dried grass and sand for miles on end without the city to be seen.

She could almost hear the howls of the other soldiers circling her and her opponent. Ringing them in like an underground boxing match. Fight night. She’d take advantage of this opportunity to smash Logan’s head between her knuckles and shatter his brain. At least one good kick to the ribs and cough blood.

Jinx would do it. Even if she, in reality, was a sixteen-year-old, lithe girl who crawled out of the Slumps, surviving as a wanted criminal. In the eyes of the army, she's a seventeen-year-old boy known as Elijah Benjamin, son of a Lord. Elijah's eyes were not jewels of emerald with streaks of silver, but a dark brown. He wasn't as slim as her yet both tall and agile.

This was another life for Jinx. She had many previous names. A moldable mirror ready to fit into another's eyes. Her illusions let her live so. Always cloaking herself as another person. Not changing her actual body, but letting others see what she wished. Though the concept of magic was still fresh in the City of Somnium, only recently unleashed into this world. Using her abilities to her advantage was out of thought.

"Come on Elijah," Logan hissed. "You started this fight. Might as well finish it."

Jinx itched to use her abilities to mess with his mind. Make him delirious in questioning what was truly real. Change the shape of his reality. Easily make him believe he was somewhere else. Make him believe she was not Elijah Benjamin, but Akuji—Virtue of Death and Fear.

Though she couldn't expose herself like that. Showing any kind of magic use could end with a bullet in her chest. People of Somnium weren't opened minded to the possibility of magic. Not to mention she was also drying out, overusing her abilities. Needing to reserve every bit of energy she had until she could get away.

"Come on, get a good shot." Logan teased, voice lilting. His blond hair was ashen to gray, licking his forehead.

Jinx saw no way to win this fight. Logan was brawny and strong. If she'd come out victorious, her brains would have to be her muscle of choice. Her agility would have to dominate.

Logan and Jinx prowled around each other; two predators locked in on one goal. Warm liquid oozed down her lip. Jinx wiped with the back of her hand, a cold grimace pinned, glaring at him through lowered brows.

Taking that as an invitation, Logan launched first. Jinx with hands behind her back, crouched down. Nimble feet swirling her around.

Logan grumbled through his teeth at the miss. Another blow, Jinx repeated her movement. Limbs flowing freely.

Gaining the confidence of the battle, Jinx eddied like a shadow. Swerving, becoming playful in this game of masculinity.

Heavy-footed, Logan grounded every step, matching a blow meant for her. Mud splashing around the explosive of his foot. While her maneuvers went unheard.

As he twisted, Jinx would turn with him, clinging onto his back. Never giving him the full visibility of her actions, staying out of sight.

Logan hunched over and kicked out his foot in an attempt to trip Jinx. A swift hop over. Vulnerability smiled. Jinx used his own actions against him. She hooked her foot behind his ankle, knocking him off kilter.

His back collided with the sludge, the air knocking out of him. Logan radiated fury, chest heaving hot breaths. A prized chuckle slipped through Jinx's teeth. Logan's pupils dilated at the sound.

She gave her back to him, arms raised to the crowd. Talking down to him, voice dancing with victory, "A bit hard to fight when you're lying on the floor like that."

Before Jinx could blink, her foe sneered in her face. Firm knuckles collided with her temple; an ache veined to every outlet. His blue eyes imprinted in her mind before her vision darkened into nothing.

## Chapter Two

Jinx struggled to lift her heavy eyelids. The air surrounding her body cuddled her into warmth. Incoming winter winds were far away from the blanket holding her now. Slowly lifting an arm, Jinx's limbs screeched in pulses of pain, digging nails into her head as well. Identifying the root cause would be an arduous task. Lines blurred between the undeserved knockout or the constant abuse of her powers.

Nerves possessed her frame. She'd been knocked out. Panic found way to her brain. Had her illusion fallen risking her real identity to others? Breaths turning ragged.

If someone saw her. Really saw her . . . death was a promise.

Jinx raised her trembling hands, flipping them front and back.

They were thicker and paler than her own. Fingerprints incompatible with the bones she'd been born with.

Tension eased off her shoulders as her breathing slowed to a calm.

Practicing her craft was necessary, similar to exercising a muscle. The more she practiced, the more realistic they became. Her illusions strengthened so much so that they can now be touched and not falter. Yet if she conjured some sort of blade, it would not cut. Jinx was overworking herself. She usually has time to take a break and let her muscles relax. Though time constrained itself into a small space. She's tucked herself away for more than a week.



Within the year and a half, she'd spent at base, there was time for her to wipe of the cloak. Slip away unnoticed or hide under the sheets of her bed. As weeks passed, it's been harder for her to take that necessary moment.

She needs to seal herself away, even for just five minutes. Magic always came at a price.

A soft hand wrapped around her forearm.

Heart surging from her chest, Jinx detonated from her bed, finding wide eyed nurse Myla. A bubble of laughter popped from her. "I see too many soldiers wake up like that these days."

She shuffled back to her tray, laying down some metallic contraption. Her withered fingers slightly shaking, wisdom wrinkled onto her expression. Grey hair tucked back into a bun, pinned at the nape of her neck. "Don't give me that look," Myla commanded, some tease laced within the words. "Lay back down, you need to rest."

Jinx blinked, taking in the line of beds posted against the wall. A curtain of cloth was ready to separate from whoever needed privacy. Cabinets and trays posing in gleaming perfection. The infirmary.

Jinx had visited Myla often in the year and a half she's been in the army. This wasn't her first fight with Logan. Logan had sent her here at least once a month, but Jinx had handed his ass over to him just as much. He always pushed her around. Treating her like the weakest of the bunch. Jinx wouldn't take it, though. She never did. Never will.

The nurse's aged sound echoed down the hall. "Just a good strike to the head was all it was. You have a slight concussion; I recommend you stay here under watch for a day or two."

*Watch. A day or two?* No, Jinx needed privacy now.

The stomach of magic tied to her organs were dried and empty, ice flooded her system. Nipping frost, teasing the tips of her fingers, slowly advancing to her palm. Her mask could easily falter any moment now. Her insides jumped to the peak of her throat. “That won’t be necessary, Miss Myla.”

“Don’t be silly Elijah.” She lazily waved him off like he’d spoken another language, and she didn’t bother to understand. “When are you going to stop getting into fights with that boy? One more visit from either of you and I’m sure the Virtues will have to take your hand.”

As loving as Miss Myla was, Jinx rushed to get up. “Will it be in marriage?”

“At least Logan can’t knock you out of your spirits.” the nurse said, focusing on her tools. “He feels threatened that you climbed the ranks twice as fast as he did.”

Jinx scoffed, “Well, that sounds like his problem, not my own.” Stretching to her full size, Jinx’s vision blurred. Drunken objects slurred across her sight. Twisting and turning into confusion. Lightheaded, she furiously blinked.

“Did I not tell you to lie down, child?” A reprimand lashed from Myla. However, Jinx had her sights set on the bathroom down the hall.

She forced a leg in front of the other. Needed a break of the magic expelling from her. “Bathroom.” It was all Jinx could say. Energy depleting and buckling knees, Myla caught her in time and offered support. Near dragged to the bathroom, Jinx shoved off the nurse and closed the door behind her. Lock clicked in place.

Aggressively wriggling the knob, assuring entrance was strictly prohibited, Jinx sucked in a sharp breath, letting go.

She collapsed to the ground. The cool squared tiles icing her sweat beaded skin. Resting her arms atop her knees, Jinx let her head sag between her legs. Faking the sound of a retching stomach so Miss Myla could tend to other duties other than fixing her attention to Jinx. The one person who didn't want eyes on her now.

Close. That was too close of a call. She can't risk that kind of idiocy again.

If she were to get caught, the Virtues really would take her by the neck and death would be her confidant. Her soul ready to vanish from life itself, she was nowhere near as pure to walk the Immortal Fields and the Virtue Akuji would see it so.

If someone were to find her, using magic in the army—magic at all—her head would be severed. And if her cover were to be blown, the persona of Jinx revealed—the most wanted criminal found—execution would be immediate. She'd tampered with many lives and taken many things. It'd be a lie to humanity if Jinx admitted she didn't like it. In fact, she learned to love her title—Thief.

A simple game. Outsmart the other, learn to play with psychology and dangle in front of a person's eyes what was not there. Never to find someone who doubted their reality. Question what was. Maybe that is what this is all for, to search for someone who ponders the question of their surroundings. Someone who really puts her to the test.

Her stomach caved in on itself, sending a shock. Jinx clutched her middle tighter. Biting down on her own tongue.

It was time to move on. A sign from the Virtues. Any more time in this place and she'd be putting herself at risk. Jinx had learned what she wanted and needs nothing more. Combat, strategy, mannerisms, thought processes of other people, and—her favorite—a military suit made for stealth.

“Elijah?” a voice called behind the door with three adding pounds. “Are you in there? I brought you some chicken from the Dining Hall. I thought it might help with your mood.”

That deep, throaty voice belonged to no one other than Franco Lancaster. A high-ranking specialist in weapons and combat. First joining the army, Jinx stayed back and watched, scouting for the best route. She overheard whispers of Franco recently losing a brother, Jinx knew she’d struck gold then. She was able to befriend him soon after joining, as well as convincing him give her extra training on the side.

Jinx dropped her voice an octave, “Thank you, sir.” A cough, “That wasn’t necessary. I’m feeling perfect.”

“Shall I wait for you in the Dining Hall then? Or Your chambers?” Franco asked.

“Dining Hall, sir. I’ll convince Myla to let me out early.”

Franco snorted, “Yes, because you certainly have a way with words.”

Silence pressed between them. Jinx waited until she heard his footfalls leave for her to finally breathe. Hardened muscles giving up. Just ten minutes in here and she could go back out, hit the showers. Unlikely for any of the men to shower at midday.

Jinx’s head fell back, resting against the wall. Her lids threatening to close, but she didn’t fight it. Relaxing wasn’t an option, but just for these minutes, she’d let herself.

Memories conjured themselves as dreams. Remembering a time where Jinx lived in peace and lived a different life. Her own. She held another name and a smile on her face. A time where she had a home, a family, love.

When she could hold her mother's hand and feel her velvety touch. Lay in her uncle's arms, feeling the slow rhythm of his heart on her ear. Barrel into her uncle's chest, playing outside in the dirt. The air picked up her mother's sweet tune, reading her a story goodnight. Yeasty aroma of mother's breakfast breads coated in melted sugar. The wooden house of the slumps drenched in gold rays of the peeking sunlight.

Jinx's hand stretched out to hold her mother, to touch her, to tell her she wanted to go home. Fingers brushed the coarse threaded wool of her skirt. Almost there. All it took was one more step.

A breath away.

Jinx jolted awake. Lids popped open. Reality kicking in.

Capsuled in a tiled bathroom, moss picking the sides of each square. A lonely toilet in the corner, a matching glossed sink by its side. A squared mirror hanging right above.

Her lips smacked together, tasting her dry mouth. Digging the palm of her hands into her eyes. Some pain eased on its own in her middle. The well of energy regenerated only a fraction of what she needed, but a scorching hot shower would do her some good.

Stiff spine and muscles ached as she hauled herself up. Jinx's limbs longed for rest, painful enough to walk. Leaning her weight against the cool sink.

Jinx caught sight of her own reflection; an uneasy ball formed at her throat. She missed the sight of her actual face. The one she'd been born with. The silk brown skin swathing her entirety, striking out her piercing jewel eyes shining green. Slivers of silver peeking from behind. Satin obsidian hair, cascading in a waterfall down her shoulders, meeting her hip. Slender cheeks heightening her cheekbones, refining her surrounding attributes.

She was obviously her mother's daughter, just twisted with her father's eyes.

Jinx held her breath, squeezing shut her eyes. Damn the Virtues. Damn the stupid bargain.

Guilt crawled up her throat. Her jaw clenched, teeth shut together. Tension built behind her silver-lined eyes.

No. Jinx couldn't afford to get caught up in her feelings. She had to swallow them. Emotions always led to poor decisions. It's what led her here.

Choking back the storm of chaos thundering in her chest. Jinx summoned the prickles of energy inside the trench. Bringing it forward, sketching her art to life. Drafts of calming cold slipped around her, followed by her signature color of green whispering around. The painting of Elijah Benjamin cloaked her. Cropped black hair, olive skin, deep brown eyes, and full lips.

A click unlatched as Jinx opened the door. Peering behind the slim crack, it appeared as if Myla had left the premise.

Jinx dodged any sort of human contact, heading to the communal showers in the barracks. Once reached, Jinx slammed the door, pressing her back to it.

A nice long shower. She drooled at the thought. Mud still caked her skin and grime piled under her nails.

Shrugging off the heavy sand uniform, bundling at her feet. Jinx was left bare to the public as she peeled off the illusion. Vulnerability held open its hand. She twisted the knob and water spewed from the head. Jinx opened her mouth to drink, chugging down before its temperature slowly warmed into the scalding boiling pot; she wanted to drown in. Steam soon joined the party.

An inescapable groan slipped. Jinx rubbed the water in every crevice until a sheen curled around her. A coat of pristine skin. Her hair rid of the clumped sludge, threading her fingers through the velvet sheet of hair.

Granting herself just a couple more minutes under the water than she'd escape the army. Trekking two days through the Dreadlands, lying low until she reached the City of Somnium. The incoming winter would be bearable as long as rain wouldn't catch her. Her classic thieving ways would return. She'd have time alone again.

The door creaked behind her. Jinx's heart dropped out of her chest.

"Virtues spare me." Franco breathed.

Jinx kept her back towards Franco. Neither of them dared to take a step. Until an idea sprung to mind. She did what she did best. Lie.

Hand over her bare chest, Jinx turned around, anger etched into her face. "What do you think you're doing interrupting a lady in the bath?" She shouted, pointing an accusing finger.

Blinking back to the present, Franco squeezed shut his caramel eyes, securing his blind vision with a hand above them. The making of a sentence stuttering on his tongue. "Apologies my lady, I was not expecting anyone in here, let alone a woman."

"And yet you continue in here cornering me?" She reached over at the towel rack standing beside the showers, encasing herself in a towel. Franco continued posted at the door frame, opening a view of her to the rest of the soldiers. "At least close the door behind you." She hissed.

Franco's fairly swept hair bobbed as he did, jumping between in or out the room. "In or out but choose one!" She called again.

Franco decided in but pointed his stare at the door. Spine facing Jinx. "If I may ask, why are you not bathing in the woman's quarters down at the south wing?"

"If you must know, it is my first day here." The lie spilled easily. Jinx went to gather her clothes, yet she only had her uniform. She slowly kicked it to the side, hiding it in a corner. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Franco side stepped, "Where are you heading my lady, so I may walk you?"

"I don't need a bodyguard if it's safety in which you are worried about." Jinx bit out.

"I'm more worried for the other men, especially if the woman is walking around in only a towel to her destination." Franco stupidly smirked.

Suddenly feeling bare again, Jinx clutched the cloth tighter to her figure. "And how would you know what I am wearing if your eyes are closed?"

"Well, if I may expand, there was only a uniform piled a couple of feet from your station. And unless you hid another form of attire somewhere in here, I'd say your towel is the best solution."

How did the Virtues bless him with a brain like that? It couldn't have been over ten seconds in which he entered and closed his eyes. She should have asked him to teach her that as well. "Then a towel it will be. Let the boys look. It's certainly not my problem."

"You must be chaos for women in society." Franco smiled; half of his face still covered.



*You have no idea*, she wanted to mutter, instead she said, “It has been a real pleasure speaking to you, Sir, though I must get back to the infirmary. Myla must be waiting for me. Good day.”

Reaching for the knob, Franco strode to the uniform on the ground. “I should get this back to the soldier who left this in here. He’ll be hearing about this.”

Panic surged in her veins. Pulse racing. Wielding her tone to a calm, “It’s alright I should take that. It may very well be dirty.” She closed the distance between her and Franco. Outstretching an arm to reach for the uniform.

Franco whipped it away from her. “Nonsense.” Jinx’s eyes widened. Challenge gleamed in Franco’s expression, arching a brow.

Jinx fisted her towel, securing its place. She shot her arm again. Franco dangled it out of reach. Stress bubbled in her chest. “I really insist, sir.”

Franco hoisted it up high like a sail on a ship, waving it with cheering victory. Jinx was not about to jump in a towel. She flicked her hair back from her face. “Will you give it to me if I accept your offer to walk me to the infirmary?”

A satisfied grin pinned onto his lips. She gave a curt nod, though Franco interrupted again, “Wait.” He unbuttoned the top of his sand uniform. Jinx blinked rapidly as her heart thudded against her chest. Shifting weight from foot to foot.

“Sir, what are you doing?” her brows pinched.

He shook off his top, exposing the muscles of his torso. Jinx’s gaze found the ground appealing. “This is for you, my lady. Just until we cross the base.” He gently placed his top around her shoulders. Warmth spread through her skin. “You don’t really expect me to let you walk around wearing only a cloth. It would be ungentlemanly of me.”

“It is also uncivil to walk in on a woman taking a bath, but that is a conversation for later.” Jinx turned on her heel and strut out. Chin high and shoulders back, ignoring the glances of every passing man. It was truly disgusting, but she brushed it off.

Maybe for her next life she’ll be a baroness. Learn the authentic ways of a lady. It would be fun to scare someone off with just the bat of an eye.

Hurried footfalls clacked behind her as Franco tried to keep up with her pace. Though Jinx was really trying to get away from him. She had no destination at the moment, but if she’d mention Myla then to the infirmary, she must go.

Franco just kept by her side. Not a sound leaked from his full lips. Message understood, I won’t speak unless you speak to me.

Jinx rushed down the hallway until she reached the women’s quarters. She barged into the last room of the hallway, remembering Myla mention last month that a nurse recently left. Jinx just hoped this was the correct room.

Luckily, opening under her hand, Jinx stepped in. Franco planted himself outside her room with hands behind his back. She waited for the sound of his retreating footfalls. Nothing came from the other side. “Are you not leaving?”

From behind the door, “Not until I deliver you to Myla.”

Jinx cursed under her breath. Franco was persistent. She’d give him that. She had no other option but to play along until he left her alone. Sweat licked her brows. At least without the use of her powers, her muscle could relax. Save the energy for a later time.

Opening the closet doors, a single nurse's uniform folded perfectly rested atop a shelf. Bless the Virtues. She fiddled with the long white dress and tightened her corset. Pinning her hair into a low bun like Myla's. Holding her gloves in one hand.

"I told you I don't need a bodyguard." Jinx complained, shoving Franco's top into his chest. "The infirmary is right here."

Franco buttoned up his top. "So you've said."

Pushing open the double doors, Franco and Jinx's conversation was quickly cut off by Myla's screaming. The high-pitched shriek ringing in Jinx's ears. Her skin hummed with anxiety and her stomach was uneasy. Myla screeched, "Elijah." The nurse's vision homed in on the two of them and straight-lined for them. "Where is Elijah Benjamin?"

Franco held her shoulders. "What do you mean? He was here an hour ago. Elijah said he would speak to you."

"I haven't had contact with him since he went into the bathroom. I returned and the bathroom door was wide open. Elijah would have waited, stubborn as he is." As Myla continued to speak, Franco side eyed Jinx. Some wires in his head sparking to life. A certain gloss coated his eye.

He lifted a finger, halting the nurse in her tracks, "A moment, miss, I have to speak with the newest recruit." Franco's fingers leached onto Jinx's wrist as she paraded a sheepish smile. Pressure squeezed under his clutches.

Franco dragged Jinx out of the infirmary and back into the room, locking the door behind her. The zing of an unsheathed dagger rang, cool blade pressed to her throat., "What did you do with Elijah?"

Jinx didn't dare breathe. Sliding on an unexpressive mask. Franco bared his teeth, his face scrunched. "I won't ask again. What did you do with Elijah Benjamin?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me!" The blade dug in.

"I did nothing." She allowed her lip to wobble, tears pricking her eyes. Pleading in innocence, her limbs shook.

"I can see through your lies. Why was his uniform in the bathroom? Where did he go? Did you kill him?" Jinx for the first time didn't know what to do. She can't reveal that she used magic. Though being accused of murder wouldn't be any better. Adding another lie might help, but Franco wouldn't believe her.

"I told you I don't know where I was going. It's my first day!" Jinx yelled back.

Her throat strained under his grip. Franco was going for the kill. Her pounding pulse alerted her. Ears hearing the rapid thumps. Heat radiated off her neck.

"Don't move." Jinx coolly menaced, dropping the act. Poking Franco's gut with his other dagger. The one he'd left unattended at his side. Franco's features calmed, his eyes darkening. "Step back."

Franco obeyed.

"Where is Elijah?" He asked again.

"I don't know." She said. White knuckle grip at the hilt of the dagger. Hostility oozed off the walls. The room closing in on both of them. Jinx forced down a dry gulp.

Franco panted. Scanning her, deciding how much of a threat she really was. A beat later, Franco jumped for her, dagger shooting at her neck. Jinx blocked his arm. Grabbing him by the shoulder and neck, rolling him onto his side using his down weight.

She kept her clasp on his arm, twisting it, the blade in his hand clinked to the ground. Jinx swiped it away from his reach. Franco open his mouth but quickly sealed it once Jinx forced the dagger at his throat. “Stay very quiet or Akuji will be the next Virtue you will pray to.” He stilled. “Do you understand me?”

A nod.

Jinx released a stressed breath, muttering a curse. She stood, gathering his daggers. “Hand it over.” She sent a pointed look at the holster.

Franco followed her glare. “No.”

“No?” Brows furrowed; she clutched the front to his shirt.

Franco thinned his lips. “Who are you?”

“Someone you don’t question. Now get up.” Jinx pulled him up by the collar. Franco adjusted himself, his expression clear. Still trying to figure out who she was. “You are going to get me out.”

“Why would I help the one person who disarmed me?”

“Because I know where Elijah Benjamin is and if you would like to know, you will help me get out . . . Franco Lancaster.” Jinx emphasized his name.

“How do you know I won’t rat you out the moment we step out of this room?” Franco questioned, folding his arms.

Jinx copied his position, “Who is going to believe a nurse, a lady of society, unarmed you, a corporal?” She really hoped that was enough to sway him, because she had no more tricks up her sleeve.

Intrigue peaked, he stayed quiet. Watching her with wary caramel eyes, trying to make the puzzle of what chaos she stirred. “Now that we have that settled, you are going to do three things.” She unlatched the holster from Franco’s hip and tied it around her own.

He simply watched. “One: You will walk in there and tell Myla that you have a lead on Elijah, and she must calm down. Two: You will open the weapon’s chamber. Three: You will prepare me a horse and *safely* deposit me at the edge of the base with me unharmed.”

“And if I don’t do any of those things?”

“Let’s not get there, shall we?” Jinx shot him a wink.

## Chapter Three

Franco did as he was told. He calmed down Myla and opened the weapon's chamber for Jinx. All the while casting curious glances over at her.

Eerie silence filtered through the space as she stacked up on throwing knives, tucking them into the crevices of her leather suit. A specialty the army had been working on. A fine suit made for special combatable to withstand sharp blades and bullets.

“So you take the suit but not guns?” Franco asked.

Jinx glanced over her shoulder to find him leaning in the center pillar. He stood out against the dark walls of the room. Thousands of weapons encased on shelves: pistols, muskets, swords, daggers, throwing knives—just to name a couple.

“Not the sharpshooter type.” She said. Jinx walked over to the rack of daggers. Grabbing each one, testing its weight and grip on her hand. Choosing a black stiletto dagger, sheathing two of them, one on each side.

Franco interrupted again, “Good choice.”

Jinx fastened all her straps. “Is there something else you would like to say to me, Franco Lancaster?”

“Oh, I'm just wondering . . .” He kicked off the column, making his way to her side. “Why are you taking your time if you were in such a hurry to leave?”

Jinx smiled. “Patience is a virtue, Franco Lancaster.” She hooked her fingers to the back of her head, braiding her hair.

“Why do you keep repeating my full name?” He studied her closely.

“It’s not. Your full name is Francesco Berilo Lancaster, the fifth.” Franco grunted at the fact. “What are you trying to understand?”

“Everything.”

Her smile grew wider. Over the course of the year and a half she’d spent here, Jinx had come to like Franco. He was a loyal friend to Elijah. She was lucky that it had been him to stumble in the showers and not any other. A good man with a kind heart. A person who let interested take the lead. Franco’s curiosity would always take over his logic. It was a fact he proved to her time and time again.

“So where is Elijah?” Franco pressed again. An alarm blared throughout the building repeatedly every other second. Right when Jinx expected it. “What did you do?” His face paled.

“Questions will be answered later. Now let’s go.” Jinx ushered them out. Falling into the hallway, every man belonging to the Somnium Army fled to the south wing. She yanked Franco in the opposite direction, running north to the stables.

Jinx used him as a shield, covering her frame with his. Nothing more than a trailing shadow. Each passing soldier too focused on the emergency, summoning them to the infirmary. Franco weaving between them, rounding the corners of each hall.

She felt Franco’s spine stiffen with ideas. He was probably looking at the other soldiers’ weapons latched to their hip or signaling them for help.

Picking a nano blade from the pockets of her suit, and tipped it to his side, inching just enough for him to feel it. “Don’t think about it.” She violently whispered.



Franco swallowed a tight gulp, his only reaction. The farther away they stepped from the chaos, silence became their friend. Longing brushed fingers against Jinx's mind. She couldn't wait to be alone, sometime to breathe and think. Just have herself.

She was so close to it, freedom danced on her tongue. Teasing the delight of living by her own rules. Her hands grew clammy under the leather gloves. She wasn't off yet.

Franco pushed the iron doors to the stables. The smell of hay and horsehair sticking up Jinx's nose. Between the narrow box stalls, a white mare flicked her snow like tail, bellowing at their presence. Her accessories gleaming with the Somnium Army insignia. Jinx swiftly snatched everything off.

Franco made to open his mouth. Jinx shot him a look, causing him to snap it shut again.

She led the mare out of the stables, Franco falling a moment behind. The sun already began its descent. Patches of grass and sand of the Dreadlands warming to an orange hue. Jinx hadn't realized she spent all her day. However, the night will be her blanket, securing her safe passage to the city.

"You have your horse, you're on the edge of base, now where is Elijah?" He crossed his arms, looking down at her. His patience crumbling. Jinx could see it, the nervous tick on his left brow.

Jinx cleared her throat and swung her leg up. Sitting comfortably on the back of the mare. She threaded the reins between her fingers. "Franco Lancaster, Elijah was never real."

Fire laced his tone. "What?"

A laugh crawled up her throat. They never understand, do they? The dry wind pushed Jinx's head over to where the city lay. It's not worth it, they whispered. But she couldn't leave Franco here, not like this. They were friends once after all. She said softly, truly asking, "Do you often question your reality?"

"What are you getting at?"

The plague had infected Somnium just before Jinx had been born. She never saw Somnium before magic had hit the land, but she had lived in the world after it. It was hard to determine if society was always as closed minded however it doesn't change the fact that those called the Cursed—Magic Wielders—have run into hiding. Afraid of the consequences the society might deem upon them if they were considered strange or out of the ordinary.

"Open your eyes, your mind. Our eyes are deceiving, letting us see what we only want to see. Elijah was your perfect mold. You wanted a friend who you could mentor, you wanted your brother back. The brother you lost years ago. Elijah was the perfect replacement. Only that Elijah was never real. He was an illusion."

He staggered back a step, breathing, "How did you...."

It crossed her mind to show him. It would explain everything. Jinx couldn't do that, though. The consequences were too grand. She said, "You were a loyal friend, Franco, and have taught me plenty, though I must depart." Jinx handed over the two daggers she'd stolen from him sheathed inside their holster. "Here. I never planned on keeping them." Holding up her hand, not allowing Franco to speak, the thought lingering behind his eyes. "I trust you will not use them on me."

Not needing more of an explanation, he adjusted the brown leather across his pelvis. “What did you do to cause the alarm?”

“Gave Logan one last goodbye from Elijah.” Satisfaction rippled. It was as much as she would tell him.

He rubbed a hand to his forehead, releasing a tense blow. If it calmed him or just filled him with more questions, Jinx couldn’t tell. Franco shook his head. “How long have you had this planned?”

Jinx shrugged, already giving too much. Franco understood, “So are you one of the Cursed, then?”

“Something like that.” She answered honestly. “Though if I was, would that change the way you see anything?” Franco stiffened. Not sure where to look. “The rumors of magic are true and the Cursed aren’t the ones you should be afraid of. Be afraid of yourselves.”

Franco ignored her. Brushing it off like every person unwilling to see that life has changed. “What will you do now?” Disappointment coiled around her heart. She thought out of everyone, Franco would be on the understanding side.

The mare under her snorted, shaking her mane from side to side. Buzzing energy of the horse itching to run pulsed over to Jinx. Horse shifting weight. Jinx was ready, ready to start a new life. “You’re not going to stop me?”

As she stared at him, she took it to memory to remember every inch of Franco Lancaster. From the delicate curves of his heart-shaped face to the fierce blades of his sweet caramel eyes. Rounded cheekbones, heart lips with a slightly bigger bow, two crevices that form in the squint of his eye. Swept back hair matching the color of his eyes and a charming smile, always symmetrical.

Somewhere deep in her heart, she'd thought she finally found a friend. Her skin warmed.

"No." He spoke with such certainty, it sounded like he might just be on her side. "You are going to get yourself killed in there."

Jinx fought a grin. She's an illusionist. No one kills what they want to see. "I've died thousands of times and I will die many more. You can't kill someone who isn't alive at all."

"But then, when do you ever live?" Those kinds of questions are what made them brilliant partners.

Jinx cast her eyes far past the rolling hills and dunes, reaching as far as her eye could see. Imagining the City of Somnium and the amount of people who live there. All the contrasting lives. All the different names. All the possibilities. "When you've walked my path, Franco, you come to learn one thing. You don't live one day more, but a day less."

"Wise for a girl your age." Jinx jerked her chin and led the horse around. "Wait, what of the suit?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Lips curled into a grimace, brows pinching. "I never took it." Jinx kicked her horse to a gallop, leaving behind a life she learned much from.

Yet, much like her, Elijah will never cease. Whispers will carry his name and soul throughout the city. This will be known as the Disappearance of Elijah Benjamin.