

## Catching Stars – Skylar Gruys

My feet felt the impact of the chain as my foot moved cautiously on the bed. Nightfall was approaching, and I understood what that meant. My teeth chattered to the cold touching my face. My rough hands felt sore, and I sneezed quietly hoping the man downstairs didn't hear. My eyes feel distant against the incoming twilight. I was scared of the nightfall; the man would come back when the nightfall began. I lie against the hard mattress; I couldn't see how anyone found this comfortable.

My brown hair tossed to my side. I wanted to escape, but the feeling of if the man caught me was worse, if I didn't manage to get away. I brought my hand up, I could see my raw hands and rough scratched fingers nails from handling the power I was given. My mother had been scared when I showed her what I could do, if only she were alive now, maybe I could show her I'm not a monster.

At our little cabin— we'd go every summer on my birthday. My mom would push me on the swing, and we'd explore the wet never ending beaches of the coast. One night I was with my mother and we were looking up at the stars. My mom was pointing out the different constellations to me. "That's the little dipper" She would say, showing me the outline in the sky.

"Hey, mommy?" I asked, as I let my feet slide along the grass. "Can we take the stars out of the sky?" My mom giggled, as she fixed the hair out of my face.

"Don't be silly, Aradia." My mom laughed looking into my hazel eyes. "But why don't we try just for fun." I nodded. "Okay, let's reach our hands up." I lifted my hand, showing off pale skin that was soft and warm unlike the hands I wore now. "And take!" my mom shouts, as I squeeze my hand shut. My mom didn't expect anything to happen. My hand glowed when my small fingers closed around the star I had just taken. The feeling was exquisite. My eyes felt as if they were looking into the sun.

My whole body felt on fire, yet with a smooth sensation as if I were flying to heaven. I opened my hand. A glittering sparkle shone— I felt tired, but the momentum of the star kept me awake. "Ar-a-dia..." My mom made out. The star stopped glowing and turned into a crystal. I smiled. My mom was looking at me like a monster. "Aradia, you were holding that crystal before, right?" I shook my head. My mom looked to the sky where the eight stars of the big dipper once were— there was now only seven.

I blinked my eyes. Remembering my mother really put me in a bad mood. I hear the click of the horse as I look outside. The twilight was fast approaching, but the boy still had time to come back to the store. I drag my body over to the window. My feet found it hard to move, stuck to the chain. I smile seeing the boy come over on the path; he was charming and had desperation that I found attractive.

"I'm here about the crystals." He said to the man downstairs, as he stops his horse in front of the cottage, the man waited outside. All fat and greasy with his weird round glasses and long beard. Seeing him made me want to gag.

"I told you boy, we ain't got any for your kind." The man spat.

"Just because I work for the king, doesn't mean you have to act like that." The man rolled his eyes, as if to ignore the boy once again.

"1 million gold and you'll get your healing crystal."

"I can't get 1 million gold." The boy declared, as his sword shook at his side. The boy was handsome with dark golden blonde hair and a nice face outline that could only belong to a man of high status. He came everyday trying to beg the man for a healing crystal. Another name for it would be a star.

"Get out!" The man downstairs yelled before slamming the door. The boy looked defeated, as if coming back every day wasn't going to convince the man anything. I leaned my hands on the window still. My legs felt tired

from pulling the chain further along. The hard metal dug into my skin, and I could feel the blisters popping as I tried to catch the view of the early May forest outside.

The boy climbed back on his horse, but not before he caught a glimpse of me hiding by the window still. He didn't go away, but looked up to where I was gazing. I ducked down; scared of what the man might do to me if he knew I could see out the window. "Hello?" He asked curious about me. "How come you're hiding up there?" I peeked over the top of the wooden window still. I blink, my precious hazel eyes looking at this beautiful man. "My names Alden? What might be yours?" He hoped for an answer, but I was too scared to give it. I peeked over the top again, and he caught a full glimpse of my face.

"I'm Aradia." I mutter quiet enough so he could hear me, but not loud enough for the man to hear. But it was too late. I looked behind me to see the man downstairs had come.

"What the....? How did you?" His face looked red. He was angry. My face went pale white as I felt the grip of the man's hands push me far away from the window. I hit the bed post, the chain pulling me back like a yoyo. My hand bent a weird direction as I cough at the wind being knocked out of me. "Don't ever come back!" The man yelled telling the boy Alden to run far away. I hoped he'd run, the man from downstairs would kill Alden. He'd kill him next time he came back. "You!" The man yelled turning to me. "I'll have to put you on a tighter leash!" He yells as I wait for his hand to smack me. Luckily it didn't come and I just felt him take hold of the back of my dress. Gripping me from behind, he pulls me to the window. "Take one!" He yells loud enough my ears could have stared bleeding.

I feel sweat drip from my brow, looking outside I could notice the incoming stars. The boy Alden was gone, and somehow that made me feel far away and alone. The man's nails dug into my back, as I reached my hand to the sky. My energy felt drained, catching stars was always like this. I reached far out the window, hoping maybe the man's grip would loosen and I'd fall. My eyes looked to the glowing crystal far in the atmosphere.

"Hurry it up" He yelled again, as my hands closed around a giant glowing star millions of miles away. I felt my body feel powerful as I gripped onto the glowing jewel. Even though it was torture spending everyday here, I still felt the happiness of holding onto that star. My whole body lit up and I felt full of energy as if I were far away from this place. But then it disappears. The star is taken out of my grasp. "I'll be taking that." The man happily said, pulling away the jewel from me. The first few times he'd done it I'd fall into tears over the loss of my star, now I just felt drained. "Rest girl, I want two stars tonight." The man smirked, closing and locking the door.

I fell to my knees. The chain bounced as I touched the dusty hardwood floor. If only I could be saved. But no one had ever come to save me. My mother thought I was a monster the moment she found out what I could do. She heard legends about my kind; the star catchers were evil doers who used their power for evil. Not one of them had a good soul. My mother died of stress, because she couldn't contain the fact she given birth to a monster. My father had died long before that, or maybe just left my mother. My mother never told me about him. But she did tell me he'd see me as a monster as well. A little demon— that didn't deserve to be alive. I brought my fingers across a large scar on my left wrist. I received that when my mother thought cutting off my hand might make me normal again. If only she had been right.

I climb atop of the lumpy mattress, the stars glowing for comfort outside. Why did I have to be born like this? What was so great about being special? No, I wasn't special, I was a monster. No one would ever look at me and tell me I was special. I collapse on the pillow, making sure I don't let the tears leak. I had given up on crying long ago. Maybe it would be better if I were to just die. That way the man wouldn't get what he wanted. That way no one would ever have to look at me. That way I'd never have to be a part of the cruel world no one would accept me in. Too bad I knew no way to die here, with this chain holding me down.

I rest my eyes, tired from the impact of taking the star out of the sky, my ears hurt, but not enough to not hear the sound of the rustling branches outside. Then I hear a strange sound, the sound a heavy boots on hard wood floors. I open my eyes again, as I see the knight in shining armor approach from the window still at the side of the room. "Aradia, was it." He smiles, pulling off his hat to show off his blonde hair. I'd never seen an angel before, but that wasn't true anymore as I looked at him.

I nod to Alden's comment as he comes through the window. He looks at my body, not in disgust but in pity, you could call it. He sees my feet; dry, blood coating the edges from where I try to rip off the chain holding me back.

He walks over, sword to his side he unsheathes it. He was here to kill me; to grant my wish of never having to take another star again. He takes the sword and lifts it in the air, as I close my eyes awaiting the death he would bring me. But that wasn't what happened. Instead he cuts, the chain holding me down in that house. He breaks it free, as if the chain were nothing more than an annoyance to him.

He bends down and pulls the chain off my leg; I open my mouth to speak to him. No words come out, but the knight Alden offers a smile to me, in my time of need. I wasn't sure what to do, how were you supposed to act to people who were nice to you? What were you supposed to say? Why was this man being nice to a monster like myself? I wanted to ask him these things but my mouth stayed closed. He looked at me with sweet blue colored eyes.

"You're free my beautiful angel." His words play a melody over my heart, and I wasn't sure the words I was supposed to use. Tears escaped my eyes, and I had to cover my mouth so the man I had feared wouldn't hear me.

"Thank you." Are the words I give, before he takes me by the hand and leads me far, far away.