

Crystalline Souls

Chapter 1: Emelie

It was sunrise. A pale blue light shone over the tall buildings, casting the streets in shadow. The old stone buildings kept the light of dawn away from most windows, holding onto the last few moments of cool darkness before the day truly began. The roofs of the buildings, made of brown and red clay tiles, gave off a warm glow. The intricate brickwork was illuminated, inch by inch. They were almost completely empty, save for a few people moving about, readying for the long day ahead. The city stretched out to the limits of what the eye could see. The roofs and walls seemed to blur together, giving very little distinction between the structures. If one were to look to the city's center, they would see the building rise up, the center built upon what once was a hill. It had been transformed into layers of balconies and platforms, each standing taller than the one before it. Buildings would be made into the walls that held the ones above. It seemed as though the city was building on top of itself, as if it would continue to be stacked upwards until it breached the clouds.

On a balcony, at the very edge of where the houses began to rise upwards, sat a young woman. Her black hair would slowly wave in the faint breeze. Her hair was so messy and wild that even that gentle wind would constantly move it into her eyes. She brushed it away time and time again, keen to focus on the view. Her soft, blue eyes scanned the sprawling city below. It looked endless to her. Like no matter how far she travelled, she would always be within this kingdom's walls.

She came to this place often. It was so calm and quiet in the mornings. She couldn't get a break from the noise during the day. Someone or something was always moving, rushing to where it needed to be. That was not the case on this balcony. The building had been abandoned years ago, before she was born. She didn't know why this place had stayed empty. There was talk of a tragic story of a man who lost his family. Some even said it could have been a murder. None of that mattered. For now, this place was hers. Her own special place where she could be alone. Something she could have all to herself. Something that made her special.

Then there was a sound. A sound she had grown to hate. The ringing of bells. There were many towers across the city, used to signal the beginning of a workday. They echoed loudly across the city. Sighing, she hopped off the edge of the balcony. As she moved towards the door, she looked back at the view once more. She froze. The ringing of the bells continued, yet still she remained. It was not until a flock of birds quickly flew in front of her view that she was snapped out of her trance.

She turned away, grabbing a bag off the floor and stepping back into the old house once more. Moving quickly through the bleak home, she slung the bag's strap over her shoulder as she went. She walked

down a pathway of light that shone through the open door to the balcony. It was the only part of the house that could be seen clearly inside, as all the windows had been sealed up long ago. All except for one, which had been forgotten inside the narrow alley next door. Stepping out of the warm rays, she moved into the house's former kitchen. She liked to imagine that there were once large gatherings here. A family of six could easily fit in here, with room to spare. There was no trace of any tables or chairs, however. All the furniture had been removed. Only her speculation furnished this house now.

She carefully leapt up to the window. She was quick and nimble, spending a great deal of time running and hopping through the streets. Only someone like her could make their way in and out of this building. That was one of her favorite parts about it. It seemed as if it were made just for her. Only she could have found a way in. Of course, then came the hard part.

The alley was a bit lower than the floor of the kitchen was. It was always a bit uncomfortable jumping down so far. To get in, she'd use the wall of the neighboring house to climb up. Getting down was more straightforward, but also riskier. She dropped down onto the stone pathway below. Crouching as she landed to absorb a bit of the impact. She winced as she landed. Her bare feet always stung a bit after jumping down. After taking a moment to recover, she dashed back into the street. It was still shaded from the sun because of the large buildings blocking out the light. It was perfect for her to move through without drawing too much attention.

Running down the roads, she stuck near the buildings. Hopping over staircases, ledges, and other obstacles, she made her way through the city. Her eyes glowed with a fiery determination as she ran. She could see that there was an open road ahead, the bright light of the sun giving it a golden glow. The street was empty. People had yet to start moving across the city. Nothing was in her way.

She couldn't help but grin as she felt the air rushing past her as she readied to turn around the corner. She preemptively began to turn, the momentum she had built up would have her shooting across the road if she wasn't quick to react. She turned into the open road, her calloused feet skidding along the cobblestone.

Suddenly, she could feel her feet sliding more than she expected. Her eyes turned down towards the road, watching to ensure she didn't lose her footing. Her arms waved in small circles, adjusting her balance slightly. She sighed as she could feel herself regain balance. She had maintained her full speed as well. Unfortunately, this speed was about to come back to bite her. She looked back up to the sunlight streets ahead of her, seeing a man in plated armor.

There was a loud smack as she slammed into him. Flying back a couple feet and onto the ground, she felt the wind get knocked out of her as her back smacked the road. She struggled to catch her breath as

she looked up at the armored man, who was now turning to look at what had collided with him. He seemed almost completely unphased, if not slightly annoyed. He looked above her head as he turned around, clearly expecting a taller assailant, before slowly moving his head downward to stare at her. Looking back into his dark eyes that seemed to pierce through her, she could feel her heart racing. His brow furrowed, more out of confusion than anger. In the eyes of the young woman, however, it seemed like a furious glare.

“What the... Oh damn it all. What are you doing? Get up.” He demanded as he reached his hand towards her.

She quickly pulled herself up, ignoring his hand. She took a few steps back and looked down towards the ground, still struggling to catch her breath.

“Damn street rat.” He muttered under his breath. “Look, watch where you’re going. You’re lucky you ran into someone who is as patient as I am. You can’t go tearing through town like you own the place. You’re gonna get yourself hurt. Now get out of here, and make sure you go nice and slow.”

Not waiting for him to finish speaking, she quickly nodded and began moving back down the road. As she walked away, she tried to catch her breath. She could feel herself shaking as she did her best to leave as fast as she could without running. The guard’s voice ran through her mind again and again, sounding harsher and harsher each time it replayed. She glanced back, looking to see if the man was still watching her. He was scanning the other side of the street.

She darted out of sight into a nearby alleyway, making sure that she was out of sight. She moved through the narrow alleyway as best she could. There were crates filled with random junk that took up most of the available space. Leaping over the obstacles, she made her way to the open road once again. She took off as fast as she could once there was nothing in her way to slow her down.

The roads were finally beginning to fill with people ready to start their day. Windows opened to let in the light. Carts were pulled by horses out into the streets. Voices began to grow in volume now that no one would complain about the sound. The young woman darted around the people, nimbly dodging and circling past them. Some would be surprised and call out for her to slow down, but most paid her little mind. They would grumble to themselves about her recklessness and carry on with whatever jobs they had. It became easier and easier to lose her in the growing crowd.

This part of the city was always busy during the day. Being a rather large market square, it was almost always a hub of activity. Here, supplies gathered from the kingdom's borders had already been

processed in one way or another. These goods were purchased and traded. This district served as a place that connected the upper and lower parts of the city. The constant movement gave this place a feeling of impermanence for most that passed through. Few truly lived in this place. If their home was there, they spent little time in it. It was easy for those that did live there to fade away. Become a part of the scenery. That was a trick that the young woman learned to take good advantage of.

She quickly dashed across the road, narrowly avoiding a cart! The horse neighed loudly at this disturbance, and the rider cursed at her! She just tuned out the noise, something more important was occupying her thoughts.

She moved through the streets, heading closer to the outer rim of the city. The lower district. The streets were less sloped here, slowing her movement down slightly. She didn't like this part of her journey. It was always fun for her running down the large hill. Soon she found herself submerged in the ocean of buildings that stretched to the horizon. Here, the buildings were dark and unkempt. Cracks in the paint and stone were speckled across the many buildings. She paused for only a moment to look back.

From here, she could see all the way up to her sanctuary. The place where these daily journeys of hers felt like they truly began. She couldn't make out the building in any real detail. She only knew where it was because of how much time she had spent there. She knew all the roads from up above. She wondered to herself, if someone was watching from up there at that moment, would they even be able to see her?

She slowed down, pacing herself. She still had a lot to do today. She would need her energy. Now walking through the streets, she could hear the sounds of the city much more clearly. The chatter of the people all around her. The clip-clop of a horse's hooves. The rolling of a wooden wagon. But soon, a new noise disrupted the sounds. It repeated in a rhythmic pattern. She heard people gasping, and moving away. The horse whinnied as it nervously pulled its cart to the side of the road. The driver's shouts rang out as he attempted to regain control of his stead. Beneath all that, this new sound continued. A rhythmic chugging sound. She turned to look at the source of the disturbance.

An automatic vehicle, the kind she'd heard stories about. People had taken to calling them Chugs, because of the noise they made. She knew that they were more common on the southeastern side of the city, where a lot more shipments came in, but she was still surprised to see one at all. They were rare, reserved more for special occasions than anything else. They were very expensive. Only nobles, royalty, or large companies could afford them. This made seeing one a sure sign that something of great importance was going on.

It was made almost entirely of metal. Most of it was painted in reds and purples, with a few patches of shiny grey metal. It was mostly rectangular with a defined central cabin with three windows, two on either side and one at the front. The windows were dark, almost completely hiding the occupants inside. The back of the vehicle was massive, covered in pipes that pointed towards the road, hissing as steam billowed out in small clouds. The wheels turned slowly as it moved along the path, shaking and trembling as it moved along.

It seemed strange how slow it was moving. The woman wondered why whoever was driving it chose to move so carefully. She'd heard that these vehicles weren't as fast as a horse could be, but they could still move considerably faster than someone walking on foot.

This Chug in particular had an armed escort walking alongside it. City Guards. It must have been a noble of some sort. The young woman wasn't interested in the guards, however. Seeing such a machine so close was amazing. Of course, she'd seen the airships that frequently flew above, but those were far, far away. It almost felt like they weren't real at all, being so high up. This, however, was very real.

She soon realized, however, that she didn't have time to gawk. She took in the sight one last time before getting back to running.

By the time she had made it to the lower district, the sun had risen into the sky far enough that the streets were mostly lit. Dawn had given way to early morning. With the day beginning, she knew that there wasn't much time left for her to wander about. She'd need to pick up the pace if she wanted to make some money today. Thankfully, she'd be able to move through these streets quickly. She knew them well. Almost too well.

She counted the number of turns before she arrived at her destination. Five. Despite the bright light from the cloudless sky above, the streets here seemed dull. Perhaps it was the faded and washed out brickwork.

Four. She passed by an abandoned house. Unlike the middle and upper districts, that was a common sight. The houses didn't stay empty very long. A new family would move in looking for work. They wouldn't stay long either. When the house became too much to pay, they'd have to move elsewhere until they had enough money to return to the city.

Three. This part of the district was secluded and quiet. People didn't come here often. There wasn't much of interest, save for an old pub. The few regulars that knew of this little oasis would go there to drink away their pay.

Two. That's where she was going. She didn't go there to drink, however. She went there to find work. Not as a bartender or a cook. Her boss would wait there for her arrival.

One. She could see it now. The old door, once a bold red, was now a dull maroon. The sign hung haphazardly just above and beside the door. 'The Careless Crow' it read, with a drawing of a crow stumbling about with a flagon on its wing. She pushed the door open, stepping into the dimly lit room.