I should start from the beginning. I am Laneice, I was born to the second family of a powerful clan. My mother married into the clan by way of my father. I wasn’t born to the home of the main family, but a house down in the city below.

 I was told that after I was born my mother took me to see the head of the family up here overlooking the city. When she had shown me to my great aunt, she also asked that we be allowed to move into the main family home. Her request was granted, and I grew up in a small house near the back of the overlook.

 Shortly after my birth though another girl was born to the daughter of the first family. She was almost a mirror image of the matriarch that had founded this city after traveling lost with a small group of survivors from a war long past.

 The child was named Dalphina, to pay tribute to our founding mother.

 From the moment of her birth, my mother hated her. She would bad mouth the child and her mother when we were at home, but when we were out in the gardens, she would always be polite and friendly.

 As we grew up it was clear I wasn’t going to look like any of our kin, this made my mother upset, but I just couldn’t understand why at that age. She would look at me when she thought I couldn’t see her, and what I saw was contempt. As if I had wronged her.

 I spent a lot of time trying hard to win my mother’s approval because of this, but she wouldn’t have it. Rather than praise me, she chose to point out why Dalphina was a mongrel of a child, and how I should have been better than what I was.

 Over time I had become friendly with Dalphina, and we would spend our days playing in the gardens and learning in a classroom that belonged only to us.

 I was content to have things go on like that, but as always, my mother complained about how her chance to shine had been stolen by that child, that wretch of a creature, and that I shouldn’t be friends with someone who thought they were better than I was.

 I started to ignore my mother when she started her rantings. My father had done that for far longer than I had been.

 After a somewhat lengthy party held in the main family’s home, my mother was in a foul mood. She cursed and fumed about Dalphina again, and again I blocked it out. I should have been listening, but I was too young to grasp the weight of what my mother was saying.

 The morning after the party my mother took me into town with her, holding my hand and almost dragging me along. I could barely make out the cavern where the waters bubble and the gardens around it were, due to her frantic speed.

 We were at the bank for some time before we moved to a somewhat run-down looking part of the city. From here you could see the family home up on top of the overlook. Mother pointed in that direction multiple times as she talked to someone down the road from where she had me wait.

 I don’t know just what she had told that person, but she had a twisted smile on her face when she came back to get me. Our last stop was a dress shop near the center of town. I forgot everything about the strange encounter as soon as I was trying on new dresses inside.

 I didn’t know about the chain of events that had been set in motion by my mother. I also never predicted just how much they would affect me in the future.

 The month came and went with relative peace from my mother, and soon the festival where they would name the next leader of our family would be held. That was why I had gotten a new dress. My mother was hoping I would in her words “Just maybe not look like a mess of plan white fur.”

 When the time came for the festival I wasn’t in the best of moods, she had made it clear I wasn’t there to have fun. When I saw Dalphina playing in the garden wearing a lovely white dress, I wanted to go say hi to her, but my mother grabbed me by the arm and tugged me away. All we could do was wave to each other.

 After dinner and some games in the main house, I was taken to sit with Dalphina and the other girls from what mother called the minor branches of the family. I didn’t know why she hated them so much. They were cute, not as cute as Dalphina, but she just seemed to glow whenever I saw her. She always had a smile, the only time that smile left her face was when we were little when a butterfly landed on her nose, and she tried to look at it, but couldn’t figure out how to focus her eyes.

 As things quieted down, and we had a bit of dessert, the matriarch of our family started to speak. She talked about how we would need a strong leader in the future and what it means to hold the mantle as she did.

 She stood near the four of us and had us stand in front of her.

 She spoke stating that one of us was destined to lead our family into a new chapter and she had thought it over for years now.

 The next thing she said made my mother’s face turn bitter.

 Dalphina would lead our family into this new chapter. After that everyone went back to eating and playing. Everyone, but my mother who looked like someone had stolen her future from her.

 Later that evening I was playing out in the garden with Dalphina. We ran around in our dresses and tried to catch the bugs that would light up and vanish just as fast, everyone else had started to head to their respective homes, but she was always a night person at heart.

 As we played my mother called to me, she asked if I could help her with something in the main house for a moment.

 I didn’t know it at the time, but that would be the last night I saw my mother.

 When I got inside my mother told me to stay there, I asked her why, but she just said to wait there for a moment. I wasn’t going to stand there doing nothing, she didn’t want me for anything, she just wanted to get me away from my friend again. When I moved to open the door, she grabbed my hand. She told me that I had better stay inside or I would be killed too.

 At that point it hit me hard, Dalphina was in danger. I ran off to find her parents, my mother was chasing after me, but she couldn’t keep up. When I saw them, I shouted that my mother had done something to put Dalphina in danger, my mother caught up and tried to laugh it off, but I yelled again. I pointed to my mother and said she is trying to kill her! She made me leave the garden.

 That got them moving, if for nothing else than concern. We made our way to the garden, as we got near, we must have scared some creature off as we heard the growling and saw something run into the night.

 Dalphina was face down on the ground. Blood was pooling around her. She was rushed inside. The other family members grabbed my mother, and as they took her away, she shouted at me, calling me a foul, wretched child.

 As they took her away, I was pulled in another direction. I was panicking at this point. They put me in the room where all the family healers had gathered, and they told me to help with whatever I could do.

 They spent the rest of the night into the next afternoon taking turns healing, resting, then treating again. I spent my time bringing them food and water, along with cloth for bandages.

 The next morning, I learned that my mother had been charged with an attempted murder of Dalphina, and she was executed that night. I couldn’t do anything I was numb; my mother had tried to kill my closest friend, and now she was gone because of it.

 Late into the next night, the healers had done all they could, and I was told to stay nearby in case I was needed. They set up a small bed for me in the same room.

 When I woke the next morning, she wasn’t in her bed. I was worried, but when I opened the door to the hall, she was standing on the other side holding two trays of food and smiling that timeless smile. As I looked at her, I could see the scars on her face. Two lines going down her face, one across her nose, the other went over her lips. There was another set of claw marks that went from the left side of her ribs across her chest and up.

 Despite everything she had been through, she smiled as we looked at the scars. She wasn’t the least bit bothered by them, no she was more worried about me when she noticed I was crying.

 As I sat there, she held me, and I told her everything that had happened. I told her about what happened to my mother and how I had been there with her when I discovered.

 I never had the chance to say goodbye to my mother. She was wrong in the head, but she was my mother. My father vanished after that. I guess he was worried he would suffer the same fate.

 When I finished telling Dalphina about everything she had missed, she said to me that she would look out for me from now on. She said that she would be here for me, and we would be close together from then on.

 It sounded ideal, but sadly it was too perfect to be true, at least at first.

 Within a week all my things had been moved into her room by her request. Her family didn’t seem thrilled not like she was. The looks they had reminded me of the one my mother had shown to me rather often when speaking of Dalphina.

 When I was with her everyone treated me like usual, but the moment Dalphina was out of site, though brief as she could make those minutes, I was reminded that I owed what I had to her by our family. They made sure I felt guilty about what my mother had done.

 During one warm day, Dalphina had gone to change into a more relaxed dress, and I was left with our family, it went as well as I had expected. I was told that I was a leech and that the only reason I still had a home here was that I had fooled Dalphina into liking me. Other times when I was out of her sight, they would make me do extra chores, and push me, or pull at my hair. They were always careful not to leave any noticeable marks because Dalphina would see them when we took our bath together.

 I managed to keep a cheerful if a bit sad expression on my face for her sake. She didn’t need my hardships with having the weight of leadership already sitting on her shoulders.

 Sometime later during the night, we were getting ready to travel to a party outside the garden cave where it is said the spirit of the first matriarch is still watching over us. Dalphina went to find her shoes as she rarely wore them when she could get away with it. It was at that point the rest of our family started in on me again, first the insults, then the pushing, and finally messing with my dress. They were yelling at me and telling me to stay home or run away. They didn’t care long as I was gone.

 What they didn’t know was that just around the corner Dalphina had heard everything they were saying. She didn’t let them catch on, she didn’t even tell me she knew. She just came up to me and took my arm. She said she wanted to get ready for the festival together.

 I don’t think anyone in the family was ready for that night’s festival, at least not the part where Dalphina was going to say a few words to the family as she excepted her position as head of the family.

 She made sure to stick close to me that night. If I had to go, so did she, if I needed a break, she would take it with me. She was like a protective blanket. Throughout everything she kept her smile beaming.

 When it was time for her to address the family, she pulled me along, that alone got some odd looks from them. When she started her speech, it wasn’t what they had expected.

 *I have seen the way many of you treat Laneice, that must end. It is thanks to her that I am even here today. She saved my life by defying her mother and helping to find me. Even after she learned that her mother was executed, she stayed with me to help take care of me. If that doesn’t tell you where her loyalty is in this family, then you are all a lost cause. Those of you who can’t get over your misplaced hatred of her is no longer going to be welcome in the primary household of the clan. Laneice is going to be by my side for as long as she wishes to be. She belongs with me.*

 She put her feelings into her words that night, and she managed to sway many of the people who had gathered, but not all of them could get past pointless grudges. The main house was a bit less crowded after that night.

 That brings us to now. We still share a bedroom, the master bedroom of the main house in fact. Her affection toward me had only grown with time, and she even told me she loved me. She said she would take care of me. It is funny I used to think I was protecting her when we were little. So, life goes on as usual in this place overlooking the city. Dalphina and I run through the garden that we first saw each other in, the garden she almost died in, and the garden that she told me she would love me forever in. I only hope that I can stay together in this garden forever with Dalphina.