

# All of our Lives

*Elli Eberle*

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For Anna

This story wouldn't exist without you

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## PROLOGUE

### Fruit cake

The little girl hid behind her mother's skirts, one hand firmly grasping the fabric as she looked around with wide eyes. This place was creepy. So many people, and so many stairs, and so many rooms filled with so many pictures and busts that looked down at her as she passed by. The carpet on the floor was softer than the grass in summer, and glowing crystals mounted on the walls shone almost as brightly as the sun, but somehow, it was colder inside than it had been outside.

"This is his room."

The woman leading them stopped in front of a door. The little girl didn't like her. Her voice was sharp and cold, and she didn't look kind.

"Let's see if they get along. We had other applicants for the position, but—"

Boring. Why did adults always talk so much? From the door, the little girl looked back over her shoulder, counting with the fingers of her free hand. The one, two—third door! She wondered what was inside the other rooms. She wondered what was in *this* room.

The woman had her hand on the handle of the door, which stood open a crack, but not far enough to see anything inside.



The little girl bounced back and forth on her toes, trying to catch a glimpse anyway.

Her mother lowered herself to one knee and put her hands on the little girl's shoulders.

"Now listen. The boy in there is... slower than you are. So I want you to be nice, and play with him, and if he needs anything, then I want you to help him. Okay?"

The little girl nodded solemnly. She could do that.

"That's my girl." Her mother kissed her forehead. "I'll be back tonight."

The door opened, and her mother pushed her into a room that was almost as big as their house at the edge of the village. Everything inside was bigger, too. The bed was bigger, and the shelves were taller, and the windows wider. The only thing not particularly big was the square table at which the boy sat in front of an open book and a stack of loose papers.

Behind her, the door closed. The little girl wished her mother didn't have to leave her alone, but she knew that her mother had to work to earn money, and that they needed money to eat, and that she was a big girl and could stay alone for a while. And there were no creepy paintings or statues inside this room, which made it the best place in his house so far.

She skipped closer to the table, giving the boy a curious look. He was reading the book—she never had met a child who could read!—while clutching a pencil in his right hand and didn't pay her any attention at all. His left hand was pressed against his chest, the fingers all twisted.

"What's wrong with your hand?"

The boy didn't look up. "That's rude," he said.

At least she thought that was what he said, because he spoke weirdly, a bit like old Olson when he was drunk at night and yelled across the village square. She didn't know why it was rude, but she knew enough not to talk back to people who were in charge, and that included the child of the

family her mother worked for.

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Mama says I'm supposed to play with you."

"I don't want to play with you."

"Why?"

Now he looked up. His left eye was weird as well, pointing so far inwards, she wondered if he saw anything with it but his own nose, but she didn't say anything, because surely that would be rude as well.

"Because you are annoying. Go away. Play alone."

The little girl huffed and turned away from him. He was rude, too! Play – with what? How could his family be so rich and yet he had no toys? No dolls, no figurines, no building blocks; not even pretty stones or sticks with faces scratched in and a few scraps of fabric as clothes. All he had were books, and those boring sheets in front of him, and the pencil he held in an iron grip.

Perhaps she should have taken her own doll with her, but she had left it in their house, afraid someone might take it from her. She would share, though, if he really had nothing else. Did boys play with dolls? The ones in the village didn't, they only wanted to play knights and hit each other with swords, but they were also much older than her.

He didn't look much older. Perhaps he would play with dolls, but she didn't have her doll, and he didn't want to play with her anyway, so she shuffled into a corner of his room and flopped down on the rug.

Boring.

She rolled onto her stomach and pressed her cheek against the floor to look under the shelf, finding dust and nothing else. At least the rug was soft and tickled her skin. If she

stroked all the fibers into one direction, she could draw patterns into them with her finger. All circles, and all squares, and then a house, but she messed it up and the roof was all wrong. She started over, adding a sun this time before trying for a tree that looked more like a sad dandelion flower. With her palm, she wiped it all away.

Boring.

Her stomach rumbled as she scooted along the shelf, past boxes she didn't dare to open and things she didn't dare to touch. The row above was filled with books, but those weren't very exciting if one couldn't read, which she couldn't. Her stomach rumbled again. They hadn't had time for breakfast, and if her mother would only come back in the evening, that meant no lunch, either. That was all right. It wasn't the first time. Usually, she could distract herself from the hunger by playing or taking a nap, but here, she could do neither.

Behind her, something slammed onto the table, and the boy yelped. The little girl scrambled to her feet and ran to him.

"What are you doing? Are you hurt?"

"Wha. What does it. Look like."

He glared at the tin box in front of him, and at her, and at the box again, sucking his thumb. With his elbow, he nudged the box, muttering "it's stuck" past his thumb.

His hand didn't only look weird, he also didn't use it. No wonder he had trouble getting the box open. Her mother had told her to help him, so help him she would. Before he had a chance to protest, she snatched the box and pried the lid off.

A smell sweeter than anything she had ever smelled rose from the box, making her stomach twist and grumble. The box was filled with layers of brown-gold cake, each slice laden with colorful specks of red and green.

"Hey." The boy grasped at the box but fell short. "That's mine. And I di. Didn't. Ask you."

He was rude, but he was right. It was his cake, and if it was

as mean as him, it probably tasted terrible, and anyway, she didn't want any of it. She put the box down and stomped back into her corner where she huddled against the end of the shelf, arms wrapped around her knees.

This wasn't fair. Her mother had said to play with him, and he didn't want to play with her, and she had said to help him, and he didn't want her help, and she was hungry, and she didn't want to stay here all day only to get yelled at. A tear rolled down her cheek. She wanted her mother to come back, to take her away from the creepy house with the creepy eyes and the mean people.

"Hey, you. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Are you crying?"

"No."

She sniffled. He sighed. Wood scraped over wood, and the little girl looked up in time to see the boy stretch his feet towards the floor. His right foot, at least; the left one was a bit weird, too, all sideways, which she didn't think would be very nice to walk on.

He clutched the desk as he slid off the chair, standing only on his good foot for a moment to put the open box on the seat before he grabbed the top of the backrest. Step by step, he dragged the chair closer to her, pulling it while standing on his right foot and leaning on it when putting weight onto the other. When he plopped to the ground in front of her, he looked very tired, and the little girl wished she had helped him instead of watching him struggle.

The boy pulled the box off the chair and put it between them, but he didn't take any of the wonderful smelling cake. She stared at it, wondering if it would taste as sweet as it smelled, and what those colorful bits were.

"What is it?" he asked. "Have you never seen fruit cake before?"

"I'm hungry," the little girl said, even though he was right, and she had never seen fruit cake before.

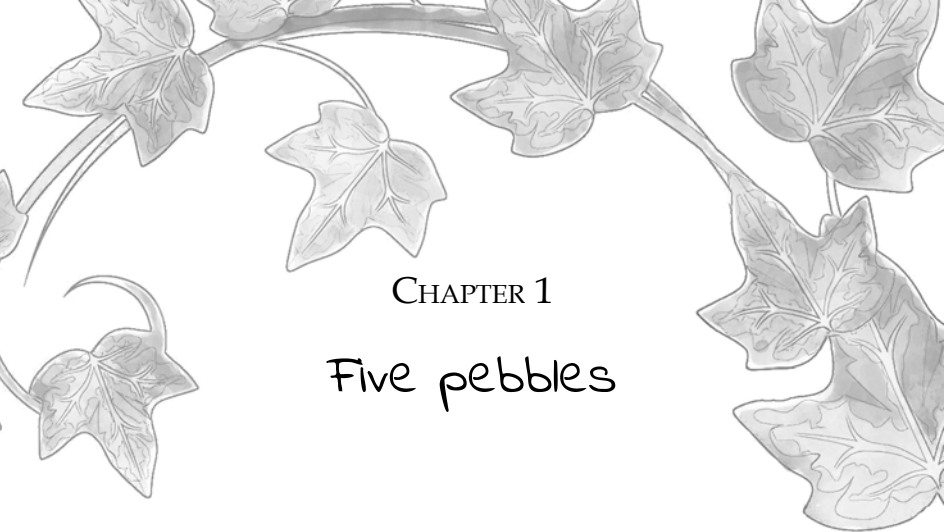
The boy pushed the box closer to her. "Then take some."

The cake smelled too good for the little girl to resist. She picked a piece and shoved it into her mouth, trying in vain not to let it crumble all over the place. And how good it was! It was perhaps the best thing she had ever eaten. For a moment, she was very jealous that this mean boy who wasn't so mean after all had a box full of this wonderful cake, but then she looked up, and she saw how sad he looked, and she wasn't jealous of him anymore.

"I don't know how to play," he said, and he sounded sad, too. "I can't run and. My parents think toys are a wa. Waste. Of time."

The little girl reached for the boy's hand. He didn't pull away, and he didn't complain. Perhaps he wasn't mean but only very, very sad, so she smiled for both of them.

"I'll show you."



## CHAPTER 1

### Five pebbles

The young woman lay on the floor with her head on a pile of dirty, threadbare blankets and stared at the low stone ceiling. In the dim light falling through a lone slit in the massive walls, she couldn't make out any details, but by now, she could tell from the sound of dripping water alone whether the bucket was full enough to offer her a sip.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It wasn't quite time yet.

Sometimes, when it rained, there was enough water for her to wash her hands and face. It hadn't rained in two weeks though, and her skin was as dirty as her clothes and blankets; as everything around her. Still, she was lucky. Today, the drops came steadily, and she wasn't thirsty yet. She was hungry, though, and there was nothing she could do about that. The last of her stale bread, she had eaten the previous day, and the five polished pebbles lined neatly against the wall told her that the sun would have to rise two more times before Mel returned.

Mel. Her jailor. The woman who had spoken of justice, and then brought her here — wherever here was.

For what?

"For what," she mumbled, only to flinch at the sound of her own voice. It was hoarse; as thin and weak as the rest of her body. Other than the falling water, it was the only thing breaking the silence, though, and sometimes the words just slipped out, her mind desperate to have anything to cling to.

"For what," she whispered. "For what. For what." She repeated the words until they lost all meaning, feeling foreign on her tongue. "For what." She would have screamed them, but it wasn't worth the trouble, wasn't worth the scratching in her throat and the ringing in her ears.

The cold, unforgiving stone walls wouldn't answer her question anyway.

Metal clanked as she sat up, the shackles painful and way too tight around her ankles. She was sure the skin beneath them was raw and infected, but there was nothing she could do about that, either.

Intending to cling to the precious few hours of daylight during which she could make out more than vague silhouettes, she reached to the side to lift a stained piece of cloth, revealing a pile of small dolls. Made from scraps of fabric, little bits of hay, and strands of her own hair, none of the dolls were taller than half of her hand.

She picked one up that was nothing more than a scrap of rough-spun linen, of which a round, straw-filled piece was tied off with a single string. Pulling the linen this way and that, she tried to figure out how exactly she was going to shape the body.

When she was finally happy with the result, she raised her hand to her head. Her hair had become thin and brittle, but it wasn't falling out on its own—yet. She grabbed a thin strand, not even flinching when she ripped it out. It wasn't easy to work with; wouldn't have been even if her hands hadn't trembled and if she had more light than the small window offered. But it was all she had, and all that kept her from losing

her mind, at least for a few hours each day.

The light was already fading when her trembling fingers finally fixed what — with much goodwill — looked like the beginning of a right arm. At this speed, finishing the doll would probably take her a few weeks, which was just as well. There was nothing else for her to do down here other than losing her mind and starving.

She stroked the bald head of the little doll and put it next to the others, carefully pulling the piece of cloth back over them. Huddling under her own blanket, she looked up at the small, barred slit beneath the ceiling. Winter was over, or at least she assumed it was. It wasn't freezing anymore, though the nights still got cold down here in this barely two by three steps cell that was her whole world.

*For what?* she wondered again, but this time, her lips didn't form the words.

Why was Mel keeping her here? Was that her idea of revenge? Bringing her enough food so she didn't die, and so little that she wished she would? Watching her lose her mind week after week while she waited for her body to finally give up?

Perhaps in summer, the dripping water would dry up, just like it had frozen over in winter. Perhaps Mel would forget her one day, and she would finally, truly starve to death. Perhaps the wounds on her ankles would turn worse, letting her feet rot away under those damn shackles. Or perhaps she would just continue to fade away until there was nothing left of her. She didn't know anymore what she was more afraid of; to die, or not to die.

Her stomach growled, and she tried to find something else to focus on. The air. It smelled wet. Not the musty kind of damp that never left her prison walls, but the earthy smell of spring rain. It was a good smell. She leaned her head against the wall and looked up at the small window-slit. When she



listened very closely, she could hear the rain. As she willed herself to fall asleep, she imagined it: the drops dripping off the leaves; the earth soaking up the water until it formed little puddles; the last of the day's fading light caught in the water; perhaps a little snail, those long eyes going this way and that. She had always liked snails.

Her eyelids grew heavy. She was always so tired now. Huddled deep into her blankets, she listened. The tap tap of the water, already quicker than it had been before. Wind rustling in the leaves. The call of an owl. Thunder rolling nearby.

No. Not thunder. Her head jerked up, and her gaze flicked to the barred door of her cell. A flicker of light danced over the metal. She scrambled out from under her blankets and crawled to the spot where her pebbles lay, leaning in close because it was too dark to see them otherwise. With her heart beating up to her throat, she counted them. Counted them again, and again, and again. Five. There were only five.

She couldn't have slept through a whole day, let alone two. She barely slept more than a few hours as it was. Had she forgotten? No no no. She couldn't forget. She didn't forget. The light went, and when it returned, she placed another pebble. Every day, she hadn't forgotten it once yet, and there were only *five*.

Mel couldn't be back yet.

She pressed herself against the wall, pulling the blanket up to her chin. Footsteps sounded on the stairs leading down. Too heavy. Too many.

"Move!"

A thump. A groan. She winced.

"I said move."

Something heavy thudded down the stairs, a surprised yelp cut short by the impact. Someone—no, more than one person laughed, while whoever had fallen whimpered.

Wasting no more than a fleeting thought on the prospect

of rescue, she decided that she'd rather take her chances with starving to death than facing whoever the gruff voice belonged to. People laughing at someone getting hurt were definitely not the kind of people she could ask for help and expect to receive it.

It was dark in the corners of her cell—perhaps not to her eyes, but to the eyes of someone entering the dungeon from above. She curled up and pulled the blankets over herself, hoping that at a glance she might be mistaken for a pile of filth.

People walked around. Too many people.

"Look! Keys." The man's laugh sent a shiver down her spine. "This is the perfect place." An impact. A pained groan. "Got your jail cell ready, rich boy. Fluffed the pillow myself."

She barely dared to breathe. When the footsteps came closer, she squeezed her eyes shut and bit her arm so she would make no sound. Metal jingled, then clanked, a small object being dragged along the bars keeping her prisoner.

The silence that followed was almost worse. She didn't know if he was even still there. The more she tried to suppress her trembling, the worse it got, until she was afraid it would be visible through the blankets, just like she feared he'd be able to hear her shallow, terrified gasps.

"This one." His voice no longer came from the door to her cell, but she couldn't stop shaking. "You. And you. Get him in there, and then get your asses up. We have things to do."

\* \* \*

Ross stumbled as rough hands shoved him. His left leg dragged behind, giving him no chance to keep his balance, and his bound hands were insufficient to catch his fall. The impact drove the air out of his lungs, nothing but a breathless groan leaving his lips.

He flinched when metal slammed against metal. The laughter that followed made him curl up and hide his face in his arms, but no one shoved him, or kicked him, or did whatever else they had found enjoyment in during those past hours. Instead, footsteps faded, as did the sounds of laughter and language so foul, it would have made his mother faint.

His heart was racing, but he tried to focus on what he could feel. Who knew how much time he had to get his bearings. Hard stone under him, covered in grime and littered with stones that poked through his clothes. The sound of wind and rain so muffled, it was barely audible. Stale air, smelling damp and musty.

He was probably under the earth, which wasn't good. But then, nothing of this was good; not his soaked clothes clinging to his skin, nor the blindfold over his eyes and the ties around his wrists, and least of all the bruises blooming all over his body. At least those foul-smelling ruffians seemed to have retreated for now. He waited a few moments more, but everything remained silent, so he finally dared to grab the blindfold and pull it off. Not that it did him much good; no matter how much he blinked, everything stayed dark.

With a grimace, he raised his bound hands to his head. His left temple was swollen and tender, but he couldn't feel any blood. When falling down the stairs, he had only bruised his hip and ribs, so he probably wasn't blind. He also didn't seem to have broken anything, so he tried to sit up.

His left leg was stiff and entirely unwilling to follow his wishes, and his arms, with his hands bound together as they were, couldn't hold his weight. After a moment of struggle, he dropped back onto the floor, pain rippling through his left leg in a violent spasm that made him grit his teeth.

He curled up and raised his hands again, this time to test the bindings with his teeth. The rope was coarse and frayed already, but it still took him forever to get it off. When it

finally fell apart and he could spit the remaining disgusting fibers out, he flexed the fingers of his right hand, pulling his left close to his chest.

Getting up into at least a sitting position was possible now, but futile. When he started to crawl, his fingers quickly found a wall made of roughly hewn stones and a row of solid iron bars. Some kind of cell—a prison, perhaps. An abandoned prison, judging by the amount of debris on the ground, and by the fact that a gang of bandits could drag their victim in here without any guards raising an alarm.

He didn't bother to follow the bars further, knowing he would find a door that had been locked and deciding that it was wiser to save his energy. Instead, he moved away from the cold metal and leaned against the only marginally less cold stones, pulling his right leg close so he could rest his forehead on his knee. His left leg twitched again, and this time, he couldn't hold back a quiet whimper. Would have been nice of them to kidnap him with his crutch, but no such luck.

Would have been nicer not to kidnap him at all.

He didn't have to think too hard about what it was they wanted. Money. Everyone always wanted money. They probably thought he was worth a bunch of coins and then some to his family. He, on the other hand, wasn't so sure about that.

If he wanted to have any chance at all, he should probably try to get some sleep, so his mind would be clear when the bandits returned. Wedged in the corner between wall and bars, he closed his eyes, all cooperating limbs pulled close to preserve as much warmth as possible. His exhaustion was stronger than the pain, stronger than the fear, stronger than the unsettling feeling left by the question of what they were going to do to him. Slowly, the fuzzy weightlessness of almost falling asleep took over.

Water splashed somewhere in the dark. He flinched so

hard, he slammed his head against the wall. Rubbing his head with a quiet groan, he stared into the darkness while everything was silent again.

"Is someone there?" he asked.

His face felt as tired as the rest of his body, and he was sure he hadn't gotten the words quite right, but that didn't matter, because there was no one. If this place was half as decrepit as he assumed, he wouldn't be surprised if it was infested with rats and other vermin and the rainwater leaked down here.

His mouth was dry as he swallowed. He considered checking whether the water reached his cell, but it hadn't sounded close enough, and he was too exhausted to move again. It was a better idea to get some rest. Shivering in his damp clothes, he closed his eyes, but sleep was slow to return. He tried to find something to cling to, something to distract himself with—something to keep his mind away from the question of what would happen to him if his family didn't pay.

\* \* \*

The woman sat stock-still, holding trembling hands close to her body. Her thoughts were a jittery mess, scattering almost as quickly as they formed. Strangers. In her dungeon. Dangerous, crude strangers, and a man they held captive. It wasn't good. Five pebbles. Two more days. Mel would come back. She might stumble upon them and get killed, or she might see them in time and retreat, but either way, it meant no one was going to bring food. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

And the voice. The voice! She pressed her hands against her ears. After all those months alone in the dark, she had finally lost her mind. It hadn't been his voice. He couldn't be here. This was no place for him. When she thought of him, he was warm. Bright. Kind. His eyes. His smile. She missed him so much. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and it was stupid to

waste that much water, just like it was stupid to risk making a noise. Gasping soundlessly for air, she willed herself to stop crying with little success.

When her tears finally dried up, her mouth was dry and tasted like salt. Listening closely, she wondered if the stranger was still awake. But she couldn't risk it during the day, so she had to drink now. Slowly, she lowered her hand into the bucket, careful to make no sound as she licked the water off her fingers.

She even allowed herself to waste a bit of water to clean her face, which was caked with tears and dirt. She had to figure out who those people were and what they wanted. If they were going to leave again. Deep inside, she knew it didn't matter. Who was she kidding? Without food, she had a few days at best, and they were just settling in.

Her only chance might be to make herself known, to bargain for a few scraps of food. If only she had something to offer but herself. She'd rather die, she thought, but the conviction tasted stale already before it had fully formed.

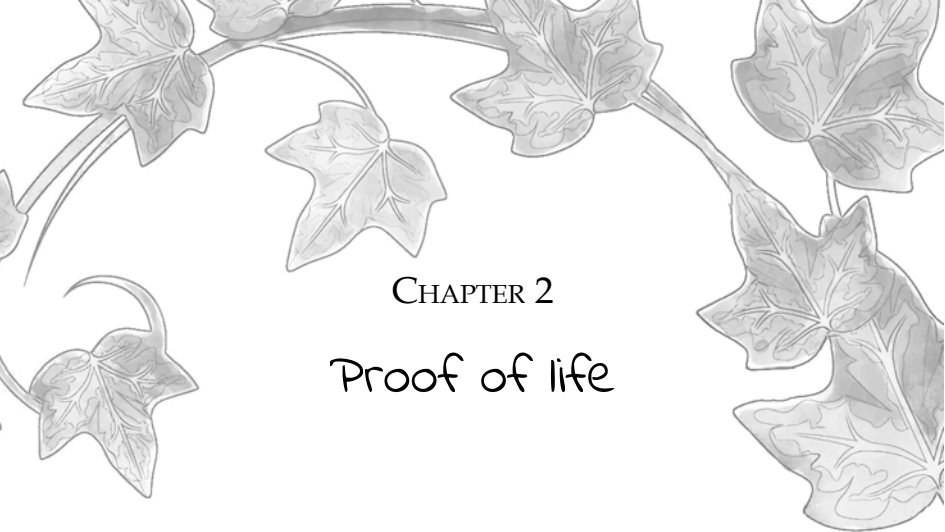
Would she?

Death had always been a quiet companion; lurking over her shoulder whenever her food ran out and Mel was yet to return; holding her hand when her water turned bad and she could keep nothing down while fevers wracked her body; whispering in her ear when winter fell and a cough settled in her chest until she thought she would hack her lungs out. Through it all, she had clung to life, not even knowing what she was holding out for, just knowing that she wanted to *live*.

Her whole body shook so hard, it took willful effort to stop her teeth from chattering, and the feeling of dread in her stomach momentarily displaced the hunger. Would it be worth it? Facing their gleeful cruelty. Feeling their hands on her. They could use her and mock her and still leave her here to die.

She wanted to slam her arm against the wall until the pain made all other feelings stop, but that would make too much noise. No noise, no no. She shuffled back into her corner and slipped under her blanket. Quiet. If she was absolutely quiet, perhaps they wouldn't notice her. And if they didn't, she could listen, and learn, and figure out what to do.

She wrapped her arms around herself, staring into the darkness as she tried to push away the thought that in the end, she was going to die anyway.



## CHAPTER 2

# Proof of life

It was a restless night. Between his damp clothes, the spasms running through his muscles, and the bruises littering his body, Ross kept waking up, shaking from the cold and the uncertainty of his fate alike. Long before dawn, he gave up on trying to sleep, and when the first streaks of pale daylight spilled into the dungeon, he could finally take stock of his surroundings, which were exactly as bleak as he had imagined.

He was trapped in some kind of basement, the walls decrepit enough to leave no doubt that this place had been abandoned for a long time, but not enough to allow the hope they might just crumble and let him walk free. The cell he found himself in was barely four by four steps, sectioned off with iron bars on the two sides that did not consist of stone walls. Three similar cells formed a square with his cell with a two steps wide corridor in the middle.

The longer he stared into the almost-darkness behind the cells, the clearer the shapes became. The walls were littered with iron rings and metal hooks, some laden with chains. Piles of broken, moldy wood on the floor might once have been furniture; one shelf still clung stubbornly to a wall, lopsided and broken in half. Every piece of metal had been taken



over by rust, every organic object fallen victim to rot. This prison must have been decommissioned for decades already, and the gods only knew what purpose it once had served.

Remembering the sound of water during the night, he looked around in search of any trace of wetness on the walls, but if rainwater seeped into the dungeon, it didn't do so anywhere he could reach. Well aware that an attempt to break the solid bars or pick the lock would be futile, he remained sitting. As he licked his cracked lips, he became painfully aware that the bandits didn't even have to kill him. They could just leave him down here, and he would die a slow and agonizing death.

Ross began to tremble, and he took slow, controlled breaths in an attempt to fight it. They wanted something. They wouldn't kill him or let him die. *Yet*. He hated that his mind willfully supplied that addition.

Finally hearing the creaking of rusty hinges was relief and terror at once. Footsteps rumbled down the stairs and approached. He squeezed his eyes shut at the blinding light of the oil lamp, a miserable thing he would have barely considered adequate under other circumstances.

"Slept well?"

The bandits laughed. Ross watched warily as they formed a row in front of his cell. There was no reason for all five of them to come visit him when only one of them had half a loaf of bread and a waterskin in hand. Trying not to stare with obvious despair, he lowered his gaze, watching the lined up boots instead, some of which had collided with his body more than once.

He looked up when metal clinked. One of the bandits pulled out a keyring and unlocked the door to his cell. Ross' gaze flicked to waterskin and bread. Both things would have fit through the bars.

Two of the bandits stepped inside. They said nothing,

didn't tell him to move or behave. They merely grabbed him and threw him forward, making him topple over stiff legs and land hard on his stomach. Ross groaned, but before he could get up, one of them pulled his left arm out from under him while the other knelt on his back and pinned down his right hand.

"We're about to send our ransom note."

Ross' cheek scraped over the ground as he turned his head to see the speaker. It was the supposed leader of this stinking group, a man who kept barking orders, yet hadn't dirtied his own hands so far.

"And we should start off the negotiations on the right foot, don't you think?" The leader smiled, sending a chill down Ross' spine. "Make the stakes clear, you know?"

As he crouched down in front of Ross and pulled a knife, the bandit holding Ross pressed his left hand flat against the ground, fingers splayed. Ross whimpered at the pain in his stretched tendons, earning him a few gleeful laughs.

Cold metal settled on his knuckles. The blade drew a line across his fingers before it rested on the smallest one, the tip digging into his skin.

"No!" Ross tried in vain to pull his hand back. His feet scratched over the ground and slammed against the wall, but he could not break free. "Don't! Don't, ple—"

He gasped as the pressure increased. With sickening ease, the knife cut through skin and muscle until it found resistance. Merely pressing down didn't seem to be enough, so the blade began to saw at the bone, half cutting it, half splintering it. Ross sobbed, then screamed when the man pulled on the finger that was still partially attached.

He tried to beg, but his mouth didn't want to form the words. He wasn't sure the noises he made were particularly human at all. Unimpressed, the bandit leader kept hacking at his finger until the last piece of skin gave in and the

movement stopped all of a sudden.

Beneath his throbbing hand, the ground turned wet and sticky. The smell of blood made him heave dryly, with nothing in his stomach to bring up but bitter bile. His finger was gone; he knew it, even if he couldn't feel it yet. There was only the pain, sharp and burning and so all-encompassing, it felt like they had cut his whole hand apart.

When the bandits finally let go of him, Ross curled up on his side, too afraid to move his arm. His body took this decision away from him, and a painful spasm almost flung his mutilated hand into his face, leaving droplets of blood all over his skin. He heaved again, while the bandits laughed at his misery.

"Let's hope they believe us or we'll send an ear next time."

Some of the bandits howled as if it had been a grand joke, but the sick feeling in Ross' stomach told him that it hadn't been a joke at all. He cradled his bleeding hand against his chest, too nauseous to attempt to sit up.

"Here." The bandit holding food and water threw both on the ground in front of Ross. "Don't die before we get our money."

Ross blinked, then tried to focus his gaze on the pitiful offering. Blood and dirt clung to the bread, turning what had already been an unappetizing gray into a reddish-brown mess. He closed his eyes against the overwhelming nausea, only to wince as the door was slammed shut.

Breathing in. Breathing out. Had it been this cold before? His teeth were chattering, every muscle stiff, even those that usually weren't. He pressed his forehead against the floor, the fingers of his right hand searching for purchase so he could push himself up.

His first attempt failed as his vision turned black and he started to heave again, so he merely rolled onto his back. Where his hand lay pressed against his chest, the fabric of his

shirt was already soaked with blood, and it didn't look like the bleeding had any intention of stopping soon. He whimpered as he pressed his hand harder against his body, with little success. He had to do something.

A second attempt to get up proved more successful. Hunched over and breathing heavily, Ross finally managed to get into a sitting position. He looked around. The blindfold lay where he had dropped it. Even before it had ended up on the ground, the scrap of fabric had been far from clean, but it was his best bet. Gritting his teeth, he shuffled forward until he could reach it, picking it up with trembling fingers.

He tried to pin down one end of the fabric with his thumb, but his left hand barely obeyed him on the best of days, and this was, by far, not one of those. All of his fingers twitched when he tried to move only one, sending tendrils of agony up to his shoulder. He kept trying, whimpering whenever he touched the wound with the fabric, only for it to slip off a moment later. Tears of pain and frustration welled in his eyes, threatening to spill over the fourth time the fabric drifted to the ground.

In the end, he had to use his teeth to hold the fabric while he wrapped it around his hand and fixed it with something that with much goodwill resembled a knot. Ross took a deep breath. He was still trembling, but the nausea slowly subsided. His gaze wandered to the waterskin. He wasn't going to eat the nasty bread, but he needed water, now more than ever.

With shaking fingers, he picked up the waterskin. It was heavy enough to promise that he wouldn't have to worry about dying from thirst for a day or two. Unfortunately, it was also tightly sealed.

When he tried to pull out the cork, his fingers slipped off. Using his fingernails didn't yield any better results. He just couldn't exert enough force while holding the waterskin with the same hand.

He pushed the waterskin onto his left side. Pinning it under his angled arm was easier than holding something with his left hand, but it still strained muscles all the way down to his missing finger. He relaxed and took a shuddering breath, blinking away fresh tears in his eyes. He had no other choice. He needed the water. Grunting through gritted teeth, he pressed down and pulled on the cork.

*Come on.*

Red bloomed on the makeshift bandage around his hand, but at least he finally got the cork out. Afraid he would spill what he had worked so hard to gain access to, he gave himself a moment to calm down, hoping at least his right hand might stop shaking.

"Ross." A whispered word, the voice breaking halfway through. Then again, slightly louder. "Ross."

Hearing his *name* when he should be alone made him flinch so hard, he almost fell over backwards. He would have dropped the waterskin if it hadn't been sitting on his lap already. Hunched over and with his heart hammering in his chest, his gaze flicked across the dungeon. No one in front of his cell. No one in the direction the bandits had vanished.

Already, he wondered if he had imagined it. Could he have mistaken the dripping of water or the howling of wind for his name? He bit his lip, wondering if he should call out, or if it would be better to ignore what must be a figment of his imagination.

Metal dragged over stone.

"Ross, please. Say something."

"Who's there?" Ross noticed his words were slightly slurred, so he tried to speak more clearly as he called out, "Show yourself!"

The voice that had insisted he speak now was quiet itself. What kind of sick joke was this? Had one of the bandits stayed behind to mock him? They obviously knew who he was, so

hearing his name was hardly much of a surprise.

Something was off, though. He listened, hearing nothing but a quiet noise. It sounded almost like someone was crying. It couldn't be one of the bandits, could it? They were a crude bunch, quick to enjoy needless cruelty, but not the kind to waste time haunting the darkness.

"Who are you?" he asked, trying to sound less harsh. "How do you know my name?"

At first, he thought he wouldn't get a reply this time, either. Then the voice whispered, "What did they do to you?"

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"I..." The muscles in his left leg burned. In his attempt to shift his weight, he put pressure onto his bleeding wound. He groaned. Gods, this was ridiculous. "Of course I'm not," he snapped, taking multiple attempts to get the words out. "They cut off my fucking finger."

He already regretted cursing the moment the words left his lips, and he regretted it more when he heard a choked sob. He had to pull himself together and *think*. This was unexpected, and anything unexpected could be in his favor.

"What is going on?" he asked, carefully enunciating his words. "Who are those men?"

"I don't know."

"Why did they bring you here?"

"They didn't."

He waited, but the person didn't elaborate. Frustrated, he closed his eyes. Breathed in. Breathed out. Getting information was more important than his feelings of annoyance and helplessness. If someone else had brought them here, that meant someone else knew about this place.

"Then who did?" he asked.

"I don't know," they whispered. "I don't know. I don't know."

It seemed like they were crying again. Somehow, the sound cut straight through his heart. Of course he didn't like to see people upset, but this hurt him almost physically. The fingers of his right hand played with the open waterskin, and remembering how thirsty he had been, he took a sip to buy himself some time.

One sip turned into many, and only when the waterskin was half-empty did he lower it and take a deep breath. His mind felt clearer already. Whoever this person was, they seemed to be trapped down here like he was, and it would get him nowhere to treat them like an enemy.

"Are *you* okay?" he asked.

There was no reply.

"How long have you been here?"

Silence.

"Who is bringing you food and water?"

When the silence stretched on, his grip on the waterskin tightened. Whoever had brought them here, they would not return while the bandits were around. He felt miserable after barely a day already, but they were going to die if no one took care of them.

"You need water," he said, forcing his grip to loosen.

The thought of offering what little he had left filled him with despair, but he would never be able to forgive himself if they died and he could have helped. Not that his noble intentions would solve the question of how to get the waterskin to them. He shuffled closer to the bars, pinning the waterskin under his left arm and gritting his teeth against the throbbing pain in his hand.

To his left, darkness swallowed whatever lay behind a part of the wall. Their cell couldn't be too far away though; their voice sounded too clear.

"Are you still there?"

"I have water," they finally said. "But. I'm hungry."

And suddenly, it wasn't the voice of a stranger any longer. It was the voice of a little girl with big brown eyes and trembling lips, staring into the tin box filled with fruit cake she had just helped him open. It was the voice of her a bit older, cutting an apple into slices to share it with him. It was the voice of a young woman, sprawled on his bed as she snatched a sandwich off his plate.

Tears spilled over as the pain in his chest increased. It had taken him months to get over the loss, to accept that she was gone, and now his heart was torn open all over again. A million questions swirled in his mind: Why? Who? *How*? Only one reached his lips, though.

"Irina?"

\* \* \*

*Irina.*

The woman's hand around the metal bar trembled. That was her name, wasn't it? It was strange to be called by her name. Strange to be called anything at all, to hear a voice that wasn't her own.

He was silent again. Waiting for her to reply. To confirm. When she opened her mouth, no sound came out. Instead, she started crying, chest heaving and hands clasped around the metal bars. She wished she could reach him, but she couldn't even see him. The other cells, the ones in the main room, were hidden behind a protruding edge of the wall. She had seen them only twice—the day Mel had dragged her down here and thrown her into the furthest, smallest one to rot, and the day she had tried and failed to escape.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Her voice broke. Perhaps it was for the better that she couldn't see him; couldn't see the disgust on his face and the hate in his eyes. "I'm sorry."



The longing and the guilt, the fear and the hunger; it was all too much. She slammed her arm against the wall. Once. Twice. Her skin was thin and brittle, breaking easily. It didn't quite bleed, but it added a layer of burning to the pulsing pain deep in her bones. She wrapped her hand around her arm and pressed her thumb into the blooming bruise.

"Irina!"

Her head snapped up.

"Have you been here all this time?" He didn't seem to expect a reply, for he blabbered on. "Gods. I thought you were gone. I thought you were..." His voice sounded heavy. Like he was crying. He shouldn't be crying. Not because of her. "You. You're alive. You're alive."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I won't be much longer," she mumbled.

"What do you mean?"

"She's been coming once per week to bring me food. But she can't if they're here, and they don't know that I am here, and if they find me—"

"She?"

Irina bit her lip. She had said too much already.

"Who is she? Who brought you here?" When she didn't reply, his tone became pleading. "Irina, please. Tell me."

Metal scraped over stone as she pulled her legs closer, curling up against the iron bars. She pressed on the bruise on her arm again, buying herself a moment of time in which, by some miracle, he didn't hate her yet. Broken fingernails left little semicircles on her skin. She watched them fade before she opened her mouth.

"Mel," she whispered.

She expected him to call her a liar, to yell at her and call her out for the horrible monster she was. Not only had she killed his brother, now she blamed his sister as well.

Instead, he only asked, "Why?"

"I don't know." This once, it was the truth. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

Silence settled between them. She picked at the bars, but there were no flakes of rust left she hadn't peeled off already.

"So Mel knows about this place?" he finally asked.

She didn't reply. It didn't seem necessary.

"When is the next time she will — would come back?"

"Tomorrow." Irina let go of the bars and craned her neck, counting the pebbles — twice, to make sure. "Tomorrow."

As if to remind her how hungry she was, her stomach growled. Mel wouldn't come tomorrow. She wouldn't bring her food. No one would. With a quiet whimper, Irina wrapped her arms around herself.

Months ago, at the very beginning, she had survived two weeks without. When she had become so skinny, she had been able to slip out of the shackles on her wrists. When she had gathered every bit of strength and attacked Mel the next time she came to visit. When Mel had beaten her senseless, put the shackles on her ankles instead, and left her bleeding in the dark, without food or water.

Irina dug her fingers into the spot where her broken arm had healed badly. The pain did nothing to ground her. Mel hadn't returned for another week. Not certain whether she would return at all, Irina had been sure she was going to die, just like she was sure she was going to die now. She didn't want to die.

"Irina!"

She flinched. Slowly, she raised her head, forcing out a weak noise to show him that she was still there. How long had he been trying to get her attention?

"They left me some bread. But I don't know where you are. If I can reach you."

Her mind was slow to catch up, to understand the implied offer, and when she did, she could barely stop herself from

begging. The noise leaving her lips was somewhere between a whine and a sob, but she was too hungry to be embarrassed by it.

"I have to warn you. It's dirty and —"

"I don't care."

She had been desperate enough before to chew on bits of her tattered blankets and eat the leaves blown into the dungeon by the wind. It couldn't be *worse*.

"Okay." He sounded like he was crying again. "Can you reach out of your cell?"

She pressed herself against the bars and reached out as far as she could, waving her arm up and down. The lack of reaction from Ross made her heart sink, and her arm sank as well.

"I can't see you." He dragged himself over the floor, groaning quietly. "I'm gonna throw this rock. Tell me if you can reach it."

Her heart hammered in her chest as she watched the dark passage. Something flew by, bounced off the wall, and came to rest in the dirt. A small stone. Her fingers closed around it. She trembled as she pulled her hand back.

"Can you reach it?"

"Yes." Her voice failed her, so she swallowed and tried again. "Yes."

"Okay. Good." A pause. "I'm gonna. Tear it into pieces. If I miss with one, I can try again."

She nodded automatically. Anything. Anything! With trembling hands, she watched the darkness. This time, the flying object made no sound as it hit the wall. It fell to the ground, and she snatched it so quickly, she bruised her shoulder on the metal bars. She didn't bother cleaning the piece of bread before she shoved it into her mouth.

Months ago, the taste of blood or the texture of sand would have made her sick. It was a luxury she could no longer

afford. She swallowed without chewing, without tasting, without acknowledging the pressure building in her throat. It had to be his blood, and this thought was almost enough to make her throw up after all.

After gulping down the second piece of bread, she took a sip of water from her bucket and sat hunched over with her head resting on her arms. Deep, conscious breaths held the nausea at bay until she could dare to look up again.

More pieces of bread had followed, all but one of them landing in her reach. She deepened the bruise on her shoulder as she tried in vain to grab it. A whining, frustrated sound escaped her, and she froze. As quickly as her chained feet allowed her, she dragged herself to her sleeping place and back to the bars. Throwing one end of the blanket over the piece of bread allowed her to pull it close enough she could grab it.

She couldn't eat all of them at once, so she wrapped them up in the blanket to keep them for later. Her heart beat wildly, and her arms and legs trembled, no longer accustomed to that kind of exertion, but at least she wouldn't starve today.

"Irina? Are you all right?"

"Yes." She hugged the blanket-bread-bundle to her chest. "Thank you."

Silence settled between them. Her restless hand found the small stone. She picked it up and rubbed her thumb over it; a stone like any other, and yet one she wasn't familiar with. Something different. Something new. She traced every crevice, every edge, wondering if she would live long enough to memorize them.

"Talk to me?" she whispered. "Please."

"What. What do you want me to talk about?"

"Anything. Please. It's so quiet."

He cleared his throat, and he began to talk.

Images flashed through her mind, of how he would sit at his desk, books and scrolls in front of him, and explain various

problems he faced while studying. She had never understood a single thing, but when he ultimately found the solution, he had still thanked her, a smile lighting up his beautiful brown eyes as if she had done anything but sit there and listen.

Irina wiped her tears away and let his voice chase every other thought out of her mind. She wanted to stay curled up against the bars. She wanted to stay closer to him. But she was so, so tired, and she couldn't risk being seen, so she shuffled back into the furthest corner of her cell and hid beneath her blanket, her hand clasped around the stone he had thrown as if she somehow could feel his warmth like this.



## CHAPTER 3

# unanswered questions

The next day came and went, and Mel didn't appear. Ross hadn't expected anything else. Even if she actually cared about Irina's life, she would hardly be sneaking into this place while it was infested with bandits.

As the day went on and there was no sign of turmoil, it became clear that she also hadn't been caught trying to do so. Perhaps she had noticed them in time. It left the faint hope that once his family received the ransom note, she might put two and two together and stage a rescue. It was, however, not a possibility he was willing to bet his life on.

Their lives. He shuffled closer to the bars and leaned his head against them, looking in the direction where the darkness swallowed the passage to Irina's cell. She was running out of time much quicker than he was. His tendency to enjoy sweet baked goods during long study hours assured that the bandits would get rid of him one way or another long before he would be close to starving, that much was certain. Irina, on the other hand, sounded like she was barely holding on.

So when one of the bandits came down to refill the water-skin and returned it together with another half loaf of bread, Ross didn't hesitate to throw the pieces to Irina once they

were alone again. While she ate, he leaned against the bars. Despite knowing he would catch no glimpse of her, it felt better to be as close to her as possible. So many questions were still on his mind, but he didn't dare ask them. Every time he brought up Mel, Irina became so upset, he was scared she would hurt herself.

With a sigh, he bent forward, massaging his left leg. Where the buckles held the brace in place, his skin was sore. The brace wasn't meant to be worn without a break like this, but it was bad enough that his crutch was now rotting somewhere in the forest. Should there be the slightest chance of escape, he would stand no chance without it.

"Ross?"

"Mh?"

"Please talk to me."

Ross took a sip of his water, glad he didn't need to figure out a way to share it as well, and began to talk. He told her about his studies abroad, about the teachers and classes and how stressed he had been all through the finals. He talked about the latest rumors from the capital, and described to her how spring had finally arrived. He chose mundane things, as if the last time he had returned from school, his family hadn't told him that the maid had lost her mind, killed his brother, and then been taken into custody to face her punishment.

The maid. To them, she and her mother had never been more than the help. Beneath them, barely even human, and only worth acknowledging when something had gone wrong and they needed someone to yell at. It made him a bad son and brother, he guessed, that his first thought hadn't been with Brad. At almost a decade younger than him, Ross had never been particularly close to him, and while it was frowned upon to speak ill about the dead, Brad had been an asshole.

No. His first thought had been wondering what he had

done to make Irina snap like that. A question he had known no one in his family was going to answer. A question he had known he would never get a chance to ask her.

It would have been easier, could he have hated her for it, but he might as well have tried to rip his own heart out of his chest. They might not be related by blood, but she was everything to him; a friend, a sister, the one person to truly accept him as he was.

*Why did you do it?*

He didn't ask. If they ever got out of here, there would be enough time for that. And if not...

He cleared his throat and told her about the apple trees in full bloom in the orchard next to his home.

Three more days passed in a similar fashion. The bandits brought him food and water but otherwise ignored him. As far as he could tell, they seemed to be in a decent mood – and they hadn't returned yet to cut off another finger or ear, so he hoped the negotiations were going well.

He wondered who they were in contact with. His mother would probably be willing to do anything to get him back, but unfortunately, she had no say over the household's finances. His father would hopefully decide that his investment into Ross' studies made the price to get the heir back worth paying; Ross had no illusions that his old man would ever make a decision out of love.

Even with a possible release on the horizon, he couldn't shake off his worries. If his family came for him, they couldn't find Irina, as they wouldn't take kindly to learning that Brad's murderer was still alive. If she would manage to hide, he could come back and free her, but the gods only knew how long it would take him to slip away unnoticed. Even with the food he had given her, she didn't have that much time – and it also left the issue of Mel unresolved, who knew Irina was



alive, who knew Irina was *here*, and who would certainly not believe her brother had spent days in this dungeon without noticing it.

He needed a plan. His own possible freedom wasn't worth anything if he couldn't find a way to get Irina out as well. He couldn't lose her. Not again. A bit of the old familiarity had settled between them. Twice, he had even been able to make her laugh—a weak, choked laugh that died too soon, but a laugh. Perhaps he should take the risk and bring up Mel, trying once more to figure out what her motives were.

Before he had a chance to come to a decision, the door at the end of the passage opened. Ross shuffled back from the bars and sat in the middle of his cell, trying his best to look as pathetic as the bandits saw him.

“Dinner time, rich boy,” the bandit said. He threw some scraps of food into the cell and picked up the waterskin close to the bars.

While the bandit fetched fresh water, Ross eyed the pitiful offering. A piece of bread, long gone stale, a slab of cheese, mold growing on one side, and a bruised apple, split in two from the impact. It was disgusting, but slowly, Ross began to understand how Irina had been able to look past it. He had given most of the food to her, and his stomach felt like it was about to digest itself. He broke a piece of bread off and started chewing on it, keeping his gaze lowered as the bandit returned to drop off the waterskin.

“You’re lucky, rich boy. If your family plays nice, tomorrow you will eat roast pigs again. And.” He dragged something metal along the bars, chuckling when Ross flinched hard at the noise. “We will, too.”

Ross didn't look up. Tomorrow. He was running out of time. The bread he was chewing on seemed to turn to clay on his tongue. He forced himself to swallow as he watched the glow of the oil lamp disappear. Footsteps stomped up the

stairs, and the door was slammed shut.

He waited a few more moments, but the bandit didn't return. The food all but forgotten, Ross crawled to the bars.

"Irina?" he called out. "Are you awake?" When she didn't reply, he bit his lip. "Please. I need to talk to you."

"Irina." It wasn't her voice that sounded in the dungeon. "Now who the fuck is Irina."

Ross' stomach sank. No no no. It couldn't be. She couldn't be discovered. Not on the last day. He clutched the bars with his right hand, his grip so tight, his left hand twitched and slammed against the metal, sending sparks of pain from the throbbing wound where his finger had been all the way up to his shoulder.

Footsteps approached. "We've been taking bets what you're muttering to yourself down here all the time," the bandit said while the glow of the oil lamp became brighter. "But you haven't been talking to yourself, have you?"

The last part, he shouted back over his shoulder. Ross flinched, a quiet whimper dying on his lips.

*No. Please.*

"Let's find out who you've been talking to, shall we?"

"No one," Ross whispered. It was all he could do, whisper "no one" over and over again, while the man went from cell to cell, each step bringing him closer to Irina.

\* \* \*

Hearing the shout and Ross' desperate whispers, numb panic overcame Irina. She fought against the stiffness in her limbs and forced herself to move. Her instinct told her to hide under her blankets, but she scrambled away from them and pressed herself into the corner of her cell furthest away from the door. They were coming for her one way or another, and she had to keep them away from her pitiful stash of food.

When the key turned in the lock, she was trembling so hard, it felt like her muscles were going to break apart. The door hadn't opened in so long. As it screeched in its rusty hinges, Irina whimpered. She had dreamed of the moment the door might open, of a chance at freedom, but now she wished it would stay locked forever.

Behind the blinding light of an oil lamp, the man was merely a hulking shadow, his voice the roaring of thunder. Like a trapped animal, she clawed at the wall, but there was no way out. He grabbed her right arm and yanked her forward. Irina yelped as he dragged her across the cell. She tried her best to keep up, but her bound ankles allowed barely any movement.

When he let go of her, she dropped to the floor, trembling from head to toe. Her shoulder throbbed, so she pushed herself up with her left arm only. The flickering light of oil lamps surrounded her, and behind it the breathing, shuffling presence of multiple people.

A gasp made her head jerk up. The bandits had dragged her in front of Ross' cell. Sitting on the ground in the middle of it, he looked just like she remembered. A bit dirty, a bit disheveled, but his light brown eyes were as clear as ever. Eyes that stared at her, wide in horror.

The moment was broken when one of the bandits grabbed her hair and jerked her head up. Tears welled in her eyes as she struggled to push herself up, desperate to relieve some of the strain on her scalp. Only when she was kneeling did the pull subside. Instead, the bandit forced her head back so she had to look up at the others, eyes all but squeezed shut against the light.

"Who are you?"

Instead of replying, she clawed at the hand holding her hair, but it didn't let go. Another man slapped her face so hard, she tasted blood.

"I asked you a question."

"I don't know." It was the first thing that came to her mind, and the only thing she was going to say. "I don't know. I don't know."

"You don't know who you are?"

She whimpered, lips pressed together. The bandit slapped her again.

"Who brought you here?"

"I don't know."

"Who knows of this place?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know." Ceasing her fruitless struggle, she let her hands sink and wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't know."

He hit her again, but she only whimpered, blood dripping from her split lip. Full of rage, the bandit kicked the bars of Ross' cell. From the corner of her eye, she could see him flinch at the impact.

"Who the *fuck* is she?"

For a moment, Ross' gaze met hers, and she desperately hoped he was thinking the same thing. That whatever happened, those bandits couldn't learn they knew each other. Couldn't learn that someone from his family knew about this place.

"I don't know," he said. His words came slightly slurred, like they often did when he was tired or in pain. "She couldn't tell me. I think she doesn't remember."

Some of the bandits sneered at the way he spoke. It sparked a glimmer of rage in Irina's chest that was quickly snuffed out when the bandit holding her shook her.

"Don't play games with me, boy. You called her something."

She couldn't see him anymore through the tears welling in her eyes, could only hear his voice, his words barely discernible, even for her.

"I needed. A name for her." He paused, and he sobbed, and even though she knew he was only pretending, it broke her heart. "Irina is... was my sister. She's dead."

"You hear that?" The bandit laughed as he grabbed her face and squeezed his fingernails into her jaw. "Perhaps you should meet his sister's fate, then."

She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, with as little success as before. Her lips moved on their own. "No, no, please." As if begging would get her anywhere. As if it ever had. "Please, don't."

"You want to convince us to let you live?" He reached into his pants with his free hand, a lecherous grin on his lips. "How about you make yourself useful."

A different kind of dread sank into Irina's stomach; one she had thought she had left behind. His grip kept her from turning her head away, and she didn't dare to close her eyes, leaving her with no choice but to watch as he stroked himself until he grew hard.

She wanted to live. Even before, with nothing to hold onto, she had wanted to live. Ross' presence had sparked a sliver of hope that had buried itself into her chest, hurting almost physically in the face of their crushing circumstances.

In the background, some of the other bandits jeered. The one holding her face pulled his dick out, rubbing slowly up and down. The stench of old sweat and unwashed bodies hit her.

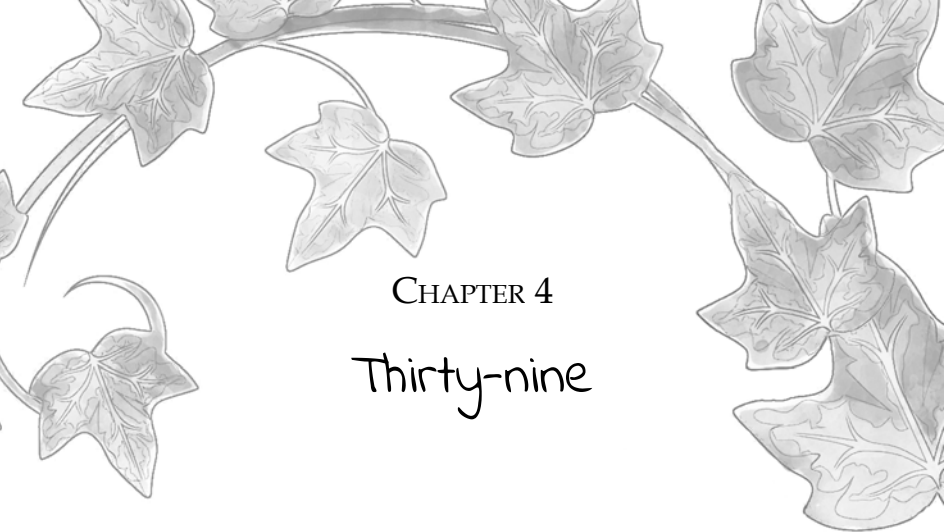
"Come on." He slapped her cheek with his dick. "Be a good whore and open up."

Her lips parted slightly so she could take shallow gasps through her mouth. Behind her, Ross sobbed. She didn't want him to watch. Didn't want him to know how little she was worth. Her eyes flicked to the side, but she couldn't see him, and the unrelenting grip prevented her from turning her head.

"I said." The bandit dug his fingers into her cheeks, pushing his dick inside the moment she had to open her mouth.

"Open—"

She bit down.



## CHAPTER 4

### Thirty-nine

Blood soaked her clothes. Blood covered her face. Blood pooled in her mouth and sat on her tongue and ran down her throat. Her desperate cough brought a stabbing pain in her chest, and she tried to curl up with a pained sob, only to find that her face was pressed against the bars of Ross' cell.

Ross.

Irina blinked frantically, the darkness not receding quickly enough. Even when it did, everything remained tinted red. Her head hurt. Everything hurt. She didn't know why. She couldn't remember, and that scared her more than anything. Blood dripped down in front of her right eye, and above her eye, her head throbbed so painfully, it felt like it had been split in half.

A shadow moved behind the veil of blood. Ross dragged himself across the ground, reaching out for her. A sob tore out of her throat at the look of worry in his eyes.

They were going to kill her.

Her hand found his, trembling, clinging to him as desperately as he clung to her. Then it was gone, ripped from her as two of the men grabbed him and dragged him backwards.

"Ross!"

She wanted to scream his name, but all that left her lips was a bloody gurgle. How much of that blood was hers, and how much was — She bent over, spitting out blood and bile. Even heaving, she still stretched her arm as far as she could through the bars, but it was of no use. He was already too far away.

\* \* \*

Ross struggled against the hands dragging him, but weakened as he was, he stood no chance in the face of the bandits' brute strength. His eyes didn't leave Irina — his Irina — slumping against the metal bars. Blood and tears stained her cheeks, and her eyes were dark with pain and terror.

She still tried to reach for him, even as her body convulsed and she spit blood. Her trembling fingers, covered in dirt and way, way too thin, scratched over the ground until one of the men yanked her arm back and pressed her face against the bars.

"Irina!"

He twisted and kicked out, brushing something, not hard enough to deal damage. In return, the men slammed him against the wall — so hard, it drove the air from Ross' lungs and black dots claimed his vision. As he groaned at the pain, his left arm was pulled away from his chest, and cold metal encircled his wrist. His groan turned into a choked yelp. He tried to twist out of their grasp, desperate to pull his arm back to his chest, to protect muscles that tried to lock up, unwilling to be stretched this far.

When the bandits let go of him, he was chained to the wall with his arms spread out to the sides, the shackles so high, he was almost hanging from them. The rusty metal bit into his skin, and his left arm jerked helplessly. He angled his right leg and pushed himself higher, anything to relieve even a



fraction of the strain on his shoulders.

Irina cried out, and all his own pain was forgotten.

In the short moment he had been distracted, the bandits had strung her up with a rope around her wrists, the other end thrown over the upper bars of his cell. Her chained feet scraped over stone in a desperate attempt to stand, but her toes barely touched the floor. One of the bandits stepped behind her, reaching around her to squeeze her breasts. When he brought his mouth close to her ear, Ross couldn't hear what he was saying, but Irina's breathing picked up with a sob, and her wild, panicked gaze met his.

Ross pulled against the chains, earning himself nothing but searing pain running through his arms. "Don't hu. Hu." The syllables stumbled over each other, so he tried again, focusing on the movements of his mouth despite the panic clawing at his chest. "Don't hurt her. Please."

He might as well have said nothing. Without acknowledging him at all, the bandit took a step back and unclasped his belt. He pulled out the leather and flexed it two times—Ross flinched at each snapping sound it caused—before he put his hands on her back. With a jerk, he pulled apart what, many months ago, might have been a white shift. Now, it was merely tatters, hanging from her left shoulder and loosely wrapped around her waist.

"Look at that." The smirk on the bandit's lips as he traced something on her back was sickening. "Not your first time, is it?" His hand moved from her shoulder blade to her ribs. "Been a nasty little girl, have you?"

Irina pressed her lips together and her cheek against the metal bars. A shudder ran through her, but she had no way to escape the touch. Her feet clung to the horizontal metal bar running along Ross' cell. It allowed her to push herself up, but not far enough to grasp anything to hold onto.

The bandit pulled his arm back, swung the belt, and brought

it down on her back. As her body jerked, she slipped off, her shoulders straining as her whole weight rested on her arms. Her toes searched blindly for purchase, slamming against the vertical bars instead. The belt returned. Pressed gasps for air left her lips, but no sound. Not yet. The tears running down her face did so in silence.

When the third lash came down, Ross wondered if she would survive this. She already looked like a corpse: brittle skin so pale it almost seemed white, stretched thin over protruding bones; dark hair, matted and messy, patches of it missing where the bandits' rough handling had torn it out in clumps; glistening streaks of crimson soaking her threadbare clothes and slowly drying on her face.

At the fourth lash, a quiet whimper escaped her lips, and at the sixth, a choked scream. Her body writhed against the bars, unable to escape the pain. Ross writhed as well—uselessly, involuntarily. His body tried to escape the pain his mind barely registered. He didn't want to count, but he couldn't stop himself from clinging to the numbers—fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.

At nineteen, her feet slipped off the metal bar one last time. At twenty, she gave up trying to stand, hanging limply from her arms, except for when the pain made her flinch. Twenty-two. Blood ran down her side where the belt had wrapped around her torso and torn open too-thin skin above her ribs. Twenty-four. Blood tinted the ropes around her wrists. Twenty-six. Blood dripped from her lips, and he hoped—he prayed—that she had only bitten her tongue.

Ross' own tongue felt weird. Too thick, too heavy. He tasted blood. Perhaps he had bitten himself trying to beg for it to end. His muscles didn't obey him; eyes unwilling to cooperate, blurring the grisly scene, broken sounds stuck in his rigid throat, arms trying to flail, held in place by the chains.

Thirty. Her mouth hung open, but she didn't scream

anymore. Pressed against the metal bars, her half-bare chest heaved with sobs, the skin an angry red and flecked with rust. The bandit didn't stop. He hit her, again and again and again, drawing blood that mottled his face like gruesome freckles. Her movements became weaker with each impact until the only thing telling Ross that she was still awake – still alive – were the agony-filled moans accompanying each breath.

Thirty-seven.

Thirty-eight.

Thirty-nine.

Forty was already half-formed in his thoughts, but the strike didn't come. Out of breath, the bandit stood up straight, wiped his sleeve across his face, and examined the blood-splattered leather of his belt.

Thirty-nine. An odd number to stop on. Ross wondered whether the bandit had counted at all or if he had merely lost track. Whether it had been no measured punishment, just plain cruelty, beating her until her suffering crossed some arbitrary threshold. He hated himself for wasting a thought on it, but he couldn't stop, as if finding the reason behind the number would let the senseless violence make sense.

Irina whimpered. Her feet twitched, but she had no strength left to stand. The bandit put his hand on her shoulder, which pulled another pain-filled whine from her lips. With a grim smile, he grabbed her chin and forced her head back.

"Let's find out if you learned your lesson." His thumb brushed over her lips and smeared fresh blood across her cheek. "If you bite me, next time I won't stop until there's no skin left. Do you understand?"

She didn't reply. Her gaze was glassy, uncomprehending. Ross understood all the better. He tried again to speak, but his jaw was locked in place, each muscle trembling. The bandit dropped the belt and pulled a knife, reaching for her hands. When the rope snapped and she crumpled, Ross whimpered.

The bandit grabbed her throat and pulled her up. There was no tension in her body, no struggle to resist, no attempt to raise her bound hands.

When she was on her knees, he let go, and she collapsed. The bandit caught her by the shoulders and pulled her up again, shoving her against the bars this time. Holding her up with one hand around her throat, he pulled on her jaw with the other, opening her mouth. She didn't react; still didn't when he pushed his thumb into her mouth.

Apparently satisfied with her lack of protest, the bandit reached into his pants, but holding her while handling his dick didn't seem to be as easy as he had expected. After the third time she slid out of his grasp, he pushed her against the bars with his knee on her chest, grabbing her hair to force her head up.

"Hey." He slapped her cheek. Slapped her again. "Do you hear me?"

If she did, she didn't show it.

"Useless," he muttered and let go.

Irina slumped away from the bars. She fell face-down with no attempt to catch herself, an involuntarily trembling heap on the ground. The bandit kicked her hip to turn her onto her back. Her body went rigid and her back arched, as if that could get her away from the pain as rubble dug into her bruised and bloody skin.

The bandit inclined his head and nudged her legs near her chained ankles; probing, considering.

"Where's the fucking keys?" he called upstairs.

One of the others yelled something back. Ross couldn't understand the words, but the bandit obviously did. He grinned, stepped over her, and plucked the keys off the lop-sided remains of a table.

Swirling the keyring in his hand, he returned to her side, kneeling next to her. He reached for her right ankle, fiddling

with the keys until he found the right one. When he peeled off the metal ring, she screamed again—a broken sound produced by a throat that must already be raw. Ross flinched, trembling so hard, his teeth chattered. The terror sat so deep in his bones, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to stop again.

The bandit dropped the keys, flung the shackle to the other side of her still-chained leg, and pushed her knees apart. As he settled between her legs, Irina whimpered. Her bound hands twitched and her legs kicked out in an attempt to crawl away. The bandit leaned over her and slapped her hard. Ross flinched.

"Hold still or I'll break your legs."

She sobbed, but her legs dropped to the sides. Only her chest still heaved as her breaths turned into gasps for air. Ross' lips moved, but no sound made it out. Even if he could have persuaded his mouth to speak, nothing he could have said would have been worth it. His pleas for mercy would only fall of deaf ears, and telling her to hold on would feel like a cruel joke. When the bandit reached into his pants, Ross turned his head away, biting his lip until he tasted blood.

He could close his eyes, but he couldn't escape the sounds. The squelching and sobbing and slapping and moaning crawled under his skin until his very bones seemed to tremble. No numbers for him to cling to, nothing to distract himself with from pain-filled whimpers and lustful groans. He wanted it to be over, wanted nothing more than for it to be over, but when Irina fell silent, and the bandit carried on, his heart seemed to freeze inside his chest.

He opened his eyes, blinking against the blurriness brought by his tears to focus on Irina. Before, a spark of awareness had lived behind half-closed eyes, even as her body had been limp. Now, there was nothing. Undeterred, the bandit slammed into her. Her abused body moved with each thrust, bruised back scraping over the floor, and she didn't so much

as twitch. Ross wanted to look away, but he couldn't. His gaze remained on her face, hoping to see her gasp or cry or blink, anything to tell him she was still alive.

When the bandit came, thrusting into her one last time before hunching over her with a shudder, she still hadn't moved. The bandit didn't care. He wiped himself clean on the remains of her shift before getting up, snatching her hands, and dragging her away. Ross jerked forward, held back by the chains and the searing pain tearing his left arm apart. His pained yell turned into a cough turned into broken syllables desperately trying to become words. He didn't know what he was begging for. It was too late to stop anything, too late to save her, but he had to know if she was still alive.

After a moment, the bandit returned alone. He picked up the keys, went back once more to lock the cell, and walked towards the stairs without sparing Ross a single glance.

Ross let his head sink, gasping for air. She was alive. The bandit wouldn't have bothered locking the door if she were dead. Would he? Would he even have noticed it? Would he have fucked her corpse and then thrown her away like a piece of trash? No. She was alive. She had to be. She had to be.

"Irina?"

She had to be.

"Irina?"

Only silence answered him.

"Irina?"

How often he called her name, he didn't know. Too often. His throat became dry and scratchy, and darkness fell, weighing as heavily on his chest as the silence. Other than his own heavy breaths, only the steady dripping of water echoed through the dungeon.

He sat lopsided, his left shoulder raised to give his arm the tiniest bit more room to bend. At first, he had flexed his fingers, hoping to keep them from becoming fully stiff by the

time someone would be kind enough to let him down. It had quickly become apparent that no one was going to let him down anytime soon, though, and even though the shackles didn't cut off his blood flow, the raised position of his arms still let his hands grow numb.

"Irina?"

He pressed his pounding head against the cold stones, trying to hold back the tears burning in his eyes. The waterskin the bandits had left him was far out of his reach. He couldn't afford to lose any more water, not if he wanted to hold out until his family came for him. And he had to hold out, he had to be lucid enough to make sure they would save her as well.

"Irina."

Was it still her name that left his lips, or just a broken noise that desperately tried to imitate the syllables? He swallowed dryly, feeling the muscles of his throat twitch. It didn't matter, because she wasn't going to reply anyway.

No. She would. She had to. If there was a reason for it not to matter, then because she always understood him, even when no one else did. She had seen him at his worst, and she had seen him at his best—she had always been there, and she couldn't, she couldn't be dead.

"Irina."

\* \* \*

Somewhere in the dark, someone called a name. Her name. It reached her ears but didn't reach *her*. The part of herself that could have reacted to it was hidden deep inside the broken body splayed on the ground.

If she didn't move, then perhaps it wouldn't hurt so much. If she didn't think, then perhaps she wouldn't have to face what had happened. If she didn't react to her name, then

perhaps he would stop calling and forget about her.

For a while, her plan seemed to work. She didn't move, because she was too weak to move. She didn't think, because she was too exhausted to think. She didn't react, because it didn't feel like she would even be able to produce a sound.

It wasn't the great, all-encompassing pain that finally made her stir. It wasn't even the dryness of her aching throat, begging for a sip of water. It wasn't the itching where blood, sweat and cum dried on her skin. It was the tickling of a strand of hair falling into her face.

Her arms twitched in a reflex to push the hair away, but her hands were still tied together, stretched over her head. When she tried to lift them, her shoulders refused to work, only producing a weak tremble.

Like an avalanche set in motion, she became aware of all the other pains: of the pounding in her head, of the stabbing in her chest, of the throbbing between her legs and the burning in her shoulders and, most of all, the agony in her back. There was no way she'd be able to let her consciousness slip away again unless she found a less tormenting position.

She pressed her lips together, held her breath, and pushed with her leg. Agony tore through her body as her back lifted off the floor, but she kept going until she tipped over. Lying on her side, she finally could pull her arms closer. Her shoulders protested, and the rope irritated already raw skin, but the moment she lay curled up on her side, she knew it had been worth it.

All her energy spent on this meager movement, she closed her eyes and focused on nothing but the next shallow breath. The darkness didn't bother her. She had spent more time in this cell in the dark than in what little light the window-slit allowed her and knew every brick and crevice. On the contrary, the darkness was familiar, comforting even. Those bold enough to take whatever they wanted didn't bother hiding in



the dark, they did so in broad daylight—or at least the light of an oil lamp.

*“Irina.”*

He was still calling for her. She hated the despair in his voice, but she couldn’t bring herself to answer. How should she answer? How could she ever face him again after what he had witnessed? Instead, she brought her bound hands in front of her face and tugged on the rope with her teeth. It tasted of blood, old and fresh, as the rough fibers tore her brittle lips open anew. The knot had pulled itself too tight with her weight, but as she wiggled the coils, they slowly came loose.

The first bit of rope rubbed her skin raw as she pulled it over her hand, tears of frustration welling in her eyes every time she slipped off. The next coil came away much easier already. She shook her hand, the movements frantic enough she slammed it against the ground and weak enough it barely hurt.

*Water.*

Her legs felt like they had been wrung out and didn’t want to move, so she dragged herself over the ground. For once, it was her luck that her cell was tiny—the bucket of water came into reach after only a moment. She collapsed in front of it, trembling fingertips resting on the familiar wood.

It took a while before she found the strength to push herself up on one arm so she could dip the other hand into the water and drip it into her mouth. Each drop carried the taste of blood and dirt. She wished she had enough water—or strength—to clean herself, but even with the bucket more than halfway filled thanks to the rain, she wouldn’t dare to waste any of its contents now.

Way too quickly, her strength left her again. Breathing heavily, she collapsed, burying her trembling arm under her. A sob broke out of her, then another; her whole body began

to shake, and gods, it hurt to cry, but she couldn't stop. A few days ago, her life had seemed like a neverending nightmare, but now she wished she could go back to it. She would take the gnawing of hunger over the cramping pain in her abdomen. She would take the endless silence over the terror of knowing that the men were still there.

She would take dying alone and forgotten over sharing her fate with Ross.

"Irina?" He must have heard her. His tone changed, what before had been slurred becoming clearer. "Thank the Seven. You're alive." He sounded like he was crying as well. "You're alive."

So she was. The toneless croak her throat produced in return didn't really sound like it.

"Hold on. Please. I'll get you out. I'll..." He stumbled over the syllables. Tried again. "They'll come for me, and I'll come back." Words were carried away by sobs, and she could picture him trying to regain control over the muscles of his mouth. "Just. Please. Hold on. I'll get you."

Irina pressed her tear-streaked cheek against the floor. It was a futile hope. He must know that as well as she did. If, by some miracle, she wasn't discovered when they rescued him, it would only delay the inevitable. Either Mel would come back to kill her, now that her brother knew what she had done—or she wouldn't, and Irina would slowly starve to death.

It wasn't fair. Frustration built up in her chest, only to be swiped away when another shiver set her back aflame. Fair or not, there was nothing she could do. Her feet were no longer chained together, but the shackle still clung to her left ankle. She could barely move, was too weak to even get up on all fours and crawl. And the door to her cell was locked anyway.

Was it?

As she lay there and listened into the darkness, restlessness overcame her. But what if? What if the bandit had figured she'd be too broken and weak to escape? What if he had forgotten, too busy with putting his dick away?

As much as she wanted to rest, the thought didn't leave her alone. She propped herself up and reached for the bucket, determined to gather a bit more strength. What for, she didn't know. Even if the door was unlocked, she wouldn't be able to escape; wouldn't make it up the stairs or past the bandits.

Lapping up the drops, she didn't think that far. Couldn't afford to think that far. What kept her going was the same desperate, stubborn determination that had made her hold on all those months, knowing that as long as she was alive, it wasn't over yet.

When her thirst was quenched, she gave herself a moment to catch her breath while she tried to move her legs. They were less than willing to cooperate, but once she got them in the right position, she could drag herself forward. Ignoring the pain, she clawed at the ground, fought for every hand's width of progress.

The short distance to the door cost all her strength, making her painfully aware that getting any further would be all but impossible. Not that it mattered. When she closed her hand around one of the metal bars and shook it, nothing happened. Of course, the door was locked. Her held breath escaped her in half a sob and she let her head drop to the floor, still clutching the bar.

"Irina? Are you... you..."

He broke off. What could he have wanted to ask? Whether she was hurt? Whether she was all right? She wished she could tell him she was, even if it was a lie, just to drive this terrible edge of despair from his voice.

"Ross," she whispered.

There was no reply. Her broken voice didn't carry far enough. Frustrated, she slammed her hand against the bars. More pain, but the dull impact echoed through the darkness.

"Irina?"

Slam.

"You're alive."

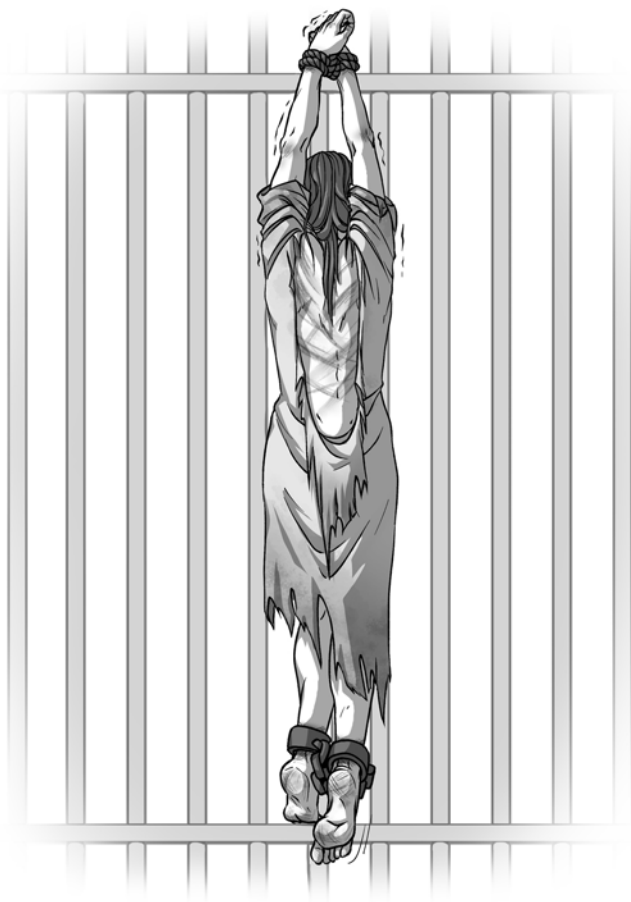
Slam.

"Stop, stop, *stop*."

She pulled her throbbing hand against her chest.

"Please hold on. Please. I can't lose you again."

And she didn't want to leave him again, but she didn't think she was going to get much of a choice in that matter.





## CHAPTER 5

### used

As the last of the day's light faded, Ross gave up on trying to hold any kind of posture. If only his family would pay. If only they would come for him. If only he could convince them to save Irina instead of killing her or leaving her for dead. He would offer anything, give anything, but he knew they wouldn't listen.

All his life, she had been there for him, and the one time she needed him in return, he was useless. Helpless. If only he could pull her into his arms and carry her out of this living nightmare and to safety. Pressing his head against the wall, he imagined it. A spark of magic, enough to let him grab the keys that were so far out of his reach. A body strong enough to pick her up. Carrying her up the stairs and into...

His imagination came to a halt. With the blindfold, he had never seen how the building above the dungeon looked, and he couldn't imagine where else he might bring her, either. As if he had any money, or anything else to his name that wasn't controlled by his father. As if he had any clue about the real world.

Between dread and exhaustion, Ross finally fell asleep. It was a restless sleep – too soon, he woke from the pain in his

neck and the trembling of his limbs. Everything was still dark and silent. He licked his dry lips, wondering if he should call for her.

He wanted nothing more than to hear her voice, to at least hear her make noise, but what if she had managed to fall asleep? He couldn't ruin the only possible reprieve from the pain for her just to soothe his own aching heart. So instead, he listened, but the rushing of blood in his ears was the only sound.

He closed his eyes and tried to pick up where he had left off; impossible dreams of heroic rescues, of safety and comfort. His body was too exhausted to keep him awake for long, and his position was too uncomfortable to allow him to stay asleep for long. Frozen to the core and with a growing headache from the lack of water, he drifted in and out of what felt like unconsciousness rather than restful sleep, until the creaking of metal hinges jerked him awake.

He barely managed to raise his head, his neck stiff and aching from the strained position it had been in for hours. Light spilled through the window-slits, allowing his surroundings to take shape. He had no eyes for rough stones and metal bars, or for food and water lying forgotten on the ground. With new dread sinking like lead into his stomach, he watched the darkness that led to the exit.

Footsteps on the stairs. A dark figure entering the dungeon. Ross' left hand twitched as his heartbeat picked up, his arm almost numb but evidently not numb enough to be still for once.

The bandit stopped when he spotted him. A nasty grin settled on his face as he stepped closer to Ross' cell.

"Time to see if that little bitch learned her lesson."

Ross thought he was going to be sick. As if she hadn't suffered enough. As if she wasn't hurt enough.

"Please, don't."

"Please, don't," the bandit imitated his slurred words.

Ross ignored the spark burning in his chest. Hurt feelings were the least of his problems. As if the bandits would have respected him even if his speech had been crystal clear.

"You'll kill her," he said, focused on the movements of his mouth and fighting back tears in an attempt not to look even more pathetic. "Please. You can't—"

*Be that cold-hearted.* The words got stuck in Ross' throat as the bandit's cold expression sent a shiver down his spine. He was enjoying this. The fear. The pain. The despair. There was no shred of humanity in those eyes for him to appeal to.

"So what." The bandit's grin showed blackened teeth. "She'll stay warm long enough for me to finish."

Fighting against the bile rising in his throat, Ross choked out, "Please." Imagining her dying was horrible enough. Imagining her dying like this... "Please. I'll do anything." As if there was anything he could do, anything he could offer. "Anything."

The bandit sneered. "Anything?" He reached into his pants and stroked himself. "Do you want to offer yourself?"

"Yes." The word slipped out. The shock about it lasted only for a second, then Ross added, careful to speak more clearly, "Yes. Take me instead."

Disgust churned in his stomach, but he fought it down with shallow breaths. He could do this. It wouldn't be the first dick he had sucked. He'd do anything to spare her, *anything*.

The bandit laughed. Laughed right into his face, as if Ross had made a grand joke.

"Sorry. I'm not really into..." He looked him up and down, a scowl on his face. "*That*."

He pulled his hand out of his pants and slapped the bars before he grabbed the keys off the table.

"Please. Don't. Don't." Ross' voice was deteriorating as panic constricted his throat. "Please. Take me instead."



“Shut the fuck up.”

Something slammed against the bars, making him smack his head against the stone wall at his back as he flinched violently. While he tried to blink away the black spots dancing across his vision, the bandit dragged the object across the metal with a horrible screeching sound.

“If you’re so keen on sucking dick, I can cut off yours and stuff it into your mouth if you. Don’t. Shut. Up.”

Three more slams accompanied the last words. Ross flinched with each one, whimpering quietly. Perhaps it was an empty threat. Perhaps the bandit wouldn’t kill their valuable hostage so close to getting what they wanted. It was a risk Ross was not willing to take. If he bled out, he would be of no help to Irina, either. It was what he told himself as he fought to pull in enough air, close to hyperventilating. If he wanted to have any chance of saving her, he had to stay alive.

Irina screamed. Ross sobbed. His leg kicked at empty air, his twitching arm held in place by the chain. He barely felt the pain. A tear welled up under his closed eyelids, then another, but his lips remained sealed. What a fucking coward he was. A useless, pathetic coward.

\* \* \*

Irina’s scream turned into a pained sob as the bandit drove his boot into the blooming bruise on her calf. Her hands clawed at the floor, desperate to pull herself forward. She knew there was no escape. She knew there was nowhere for her to go. Nothing about the panic squeezing her chest was rational.

Her left leg was trapped, but her right one was free. Ignoring the searing pain in her tendons, she swung it, using shackle and chain as a weapon. An angry grunt rewarded her efforts, and the bandit wavered under the dull impact.

She tried to break free, throwing herself forward. Before she could gain any ground, the boot was lifted off her leg, only to slam into her ribs a moment later. The piercing pain that had accompanied every breath during the night returned, wrapping around her chest from the new bruised spot to the old. She collapsed, mouth gaping open but unable to draw breath.

He knelt next to her, grabbed her head, and slammed it against the ground. Blood flooded her mouth. Her lips parted, letting it drip out so she could breathe, shallow gasps that didn't attempt to expand her chest.

She had no strength left to struggle as her arms were grabbed and wrenched back. Wrist on wrist, he bound them so tightly the skin on her back lit up with pain and her shoulders screamed in agony. She would have screamed, too, if she had had the breath to spare.

As soon as the leather around her wrists was secured, the bandit's hand closed around the remaining shackle. "Let's get rid of this before someone gets hurt."

It felt like her skin was coming off as well. Irina sobbed into the floor, toes curling against the pain. He flung the shackles aside and ran his hand up her leg, pressing into the bruises blooming on the insides of her thighs.

His weight shifted. Irina braced herself for the pain she knew would come, but it didn't. Instead, he grabbed a fistful of her hair to lift her head and looped a piece of rope around her neck. Rough fibers dug into the soft skin of her throat as the bandit pulled her up. Blood rushed in her ears, her legs twitching frantically in the desperate attempt to get her knees under her.

The moment the pull relented, she gasped for air and regretted it instantly. The bandit towered over her, his crotch in front of her face, reeking of old sweat and weeks spent without a bath.

"Now listen here, you stupid bitch." He tugged on the rope. "If you bite me, I'll string you up and fuck your corpse. Do you understand?" When she didn't reply, he wrapped the rope around his hand and pulled harder. "Do you *understand*?"

Black spots danced across her vision. She attempted to nod, hoping it was enough, *enough*, and it seemed to be. The bandit let go of the rope and put his hand on the back of her head. His other hand went into his pants, pulling out his dick. In front of her face, he massaged himself until he grew hard before he lowered her head.

"Open your whore mouth."

She obeyed. The will to survive displaced every thought of disgust, every flicker of defiance. Even Ross' distant sob barely reached her, the pain it caused in her heart shoved aside. She couldn't think of him. Couldn't imagine the look of disgust on his face. At least this time, he didn't have to watch.

The bandit held her head in an iron grip as he rocked his hips back and forth. A small, distant part of her figured she should be grateful he was content with fucking her mouth. She didn't think she would have had the strength to work for his pleasure. Even keeping her mouth open painfully wide took all of her willpower, the rope hanging loosely around her neck a constant reminder of what was at stake for her.

She tried not to think of it. Not to think of anything. It would be over eventually. It would be over, and she would live, at least for now. At least for a few more hours. She would live to see Ross get rescued. She had to. Nothing else mattered. Not the utter humiliation. Not the pain in her knees or the burning in her back. Not the salty, putrid taste mixing with that of her own blood as her saliva pooled in her mouth.

It threatened to choke her, but the bandit didn't allow her to turn her head. The more she tried to escape, the more he tightened his grip, until she had no choice but to swallow. Her stomach revolted instantly. She tried to breathe through

it, but it was impossible to escape the rhythm dictated by his thrusts. A whine vibrated in her chest, only making it worse. When bile rose in her throat, she tried to jerk her head away, but his fingers dug into the back of her skull and dragged her back.

The next thrust went deeper than all the ones before, and she lost the fight. She threw up, her heart hammering in fear, her eyes burning in shame. She thought her jaw would break from the effort to keep her mouth open, to make sure she wouldn't scratch him with her teeth.

The bandit cursed under his breath, his words lost in the pounding of her head. When he pulled out, she gasped for air, coughing and sputtering until a punch to her face made her crumple. With her hands tied on her back, she was unable to catch herself, and her chin hit the ground hard. Blackness encroached on her vision. Her airways burned. Her lips and gums felt raw. She tried to curl up, but her legs didn't want to obey her. All she could do was tuck her chin against her chest and suck in too-deep breaths that kept making her cough.

"I'm sorry," she tried to say, but what left her mouth was no word, was barely even a noise. *Please please please*. Only her lips moved, saliva, blood, and vomit dripping off them. *I'm sorry*.

The bandit moved behind her. Irina whimpered. She had to beg, to promise to do better. She couldn't bring herself to. He kicked her legs apart and settled between them, pushing them further until she thought her tendons would snap. As he tore the tatters of her shift away and groped her, a mixture of dread and relief overcame her.

It was better than being beaten to death. Better than drowning in her own blood if he broke her ribs. Better than being strung up and left to suffocate. Better than —

She screamed when he slammed into her, writhing blindly to get away from the pain splitting her in half. The bruises

and abrasions inside her that had died down to a dull throbbing pain during the night now flared back to life with twice as much force. He dug his fingers into her hips, holding her in place so he could thrust harder, no doubt with the intention to hurt her as much as possible.

Her scream was echoed in a too-familiar voice, and Irina pressed her lips together, vowing to cry quietly. Ross shouldn't *know*. She strained her arms until the leather dug into her raw wrists, a small counter pain, but better than nothing. It helped her to pull herself together, to breathe and be quiet. This hurt so much more, but at least she couldn't fuck it up. It would be over. It would be *over*. She told it herself over and over as she focused on the little pains, trying to pull her mind away from the big ones.

The way her bruised cheek scraped over the floor could not fully distract her from the slapping of sweaty flesh against her skin. The rushing of blood in her ears wasn't loud enough to drown out the heavy breaths accompanying each thrust. The burning of her back didn't reach deep enough to keep her from feeling the burning inside her. Her whole world turned into a nightmare of sweaty skin and pulsing flesh, of groping hands and blooming bruises and the constant, all-encompassing terror of wondering whether he would kill her in the end after all.

She didn't have the energy left to be relieved when the bandit finished, swelling and twitching inside her with an obscene groan that would have disgusted her if there had been any more room for disgust. He pulled out and wiped himself clean on the tattered remains of her clothes. She lay motionless, every muscle aching.

She did have the energy to be terrified when the bandit got up and called out, "Bring me my belt when you're done."

Footsteps in front of her cell.

No.

Irina writhed on the ground, legs trembling too much to be of any use. A boot hooked under her left shoulder and pushed her over. Her scream froze on her lips as she came to lie on her ruined back, her arms painfully twisted under her. Another one of the bandits loomed over her.

*No no no please no more.*

No intelligible words made it past her lips, her mouth locked half open in a painful cramp. Why was it still not over. It had to be over.

He crouched down next to her and raised his hand, metal glimmering in the dungeon's twilight. A new kind of panic drowned out everything else. She closed her eyes, tears squeezing past her closed eyelids as her sobs dissolved into hiccuping gasps.

*"Look at me."*

No. She turned her head away. If he was going to kill her, she wasn't going to do him the favor of seeing the terror in her eyes.

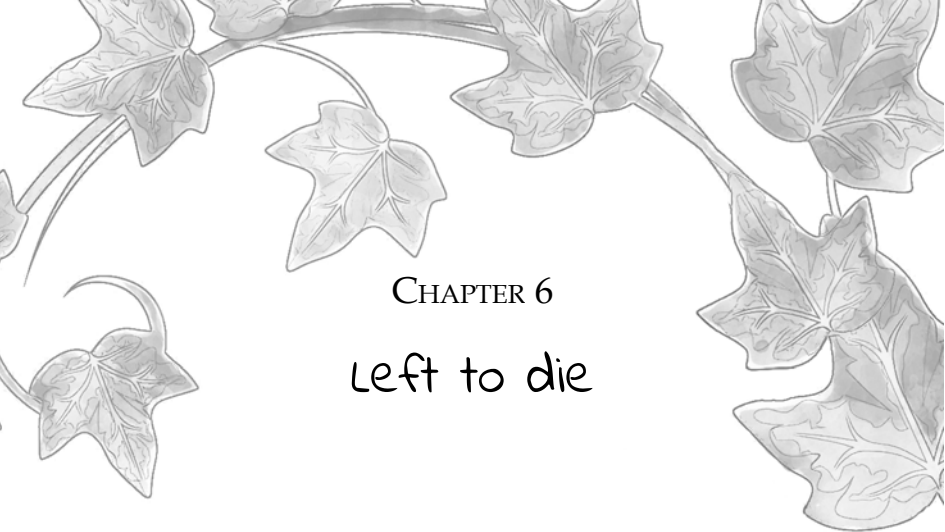
*"I said."* The blade settled on her cheek. Pushing against it.  
*"Look. At. Me."*

Following the movement, she turned her head until it could go no further, but the pressure kept increasing. Blood welled up as the dagger broke her skin. Her gasp was cut short on the feeling of her cheek moving against the blade.

*"Look at me."*

She opened her eyes. Slowly, the shadow above her took shape. Dirty hair. Unkempt beard. Dark eyes. He watched her impassionately, waiting for the exact moment she recognized him as the one she had bitten. As her eyes widened, a sickening grin spread on his face.

*"That's right, bitch."* He pressed the blade deeper into her cheek, cutting through flesh and scraping over bone on its way towards her jaw. *"You'll wish I was using my dick this time."*



## CHAPTER 6

### Left to die

The blood pooling in Irina's mouth threatened to choke her, dripping from her lips as she pressed her unharmed cheek against the ground. When the bandit pulled the dagger back, a drop of blood gathered on the edge, landing on her forehead. She was too frozen in terror to beg him not to kill her, too frozen to do anything but stare at the glistening blade.

The dagger left her field of vision and settled on her collarbone. Irina whimpered as it trailed over her shaking body, the pressure slowly increasing to split her skin in shallow cuts. He took his time carving one line after another, leaving his marks between her breasts and across her stomach. Blood ran in chilling trails down her sides, soaking the tattered remains of her shift.

As the tip of the dagger dug into the flesh above her pelvis, the bandit pushed her legs apart with his knees so he could grope her. For a moment, the wild hope bloomed in her chest that he might not kill her. That this was all he wanted, slicing her open while he violated her with his fingers. It died when the cold metal vanished from her pelvis and moved along her thigh; not cutting, merely teasing, increasing the terror of knowing what was to come.

Irina sobbed. The bandit laughed. A quick motion, and the dagger slammed into her. Irina's scream died in her throat as her back arched off the ground. The pain was overwhelming, unforgiving hardness colliding with already bruised flesh.

The last sliver of hope she had clung to shattered. The bandit pulled the dagger out and rammed it back in again, even harder than before. Irina threw her head from side to side, splattering the blood from her cheek while her chest twitched with breathless sobs.

Ross screamed her name, and the bandit laughed.

"Your little whore is getting what she deserves," he called back. The dagger's handle settled on her leg and moved upwards with excruciating slowness. "Aren't you?"

A nauseating chill settled deep in Irina's bones. She tried in vain to close her legs, her knees pushing against the bandit's hips. He flicked the dagger, slicing open the inside of her thigh with ease. Warm blood ran down her leg, mingling with the slickness from her crotch. How much of it was her own blood and how much was the cum of the man who had come before him?

Taking the warning for what it was, Irina let her legs drop to the sides, offering no resistance as the bandit kept pushing the handle of the dagger into her. Sparks of agony shot through her body, her insides cramping, telling her that it was wrong, so terribly, overwhelmingly wrong. Perhaps this was how he was going to kill her, tearing her apart piece by piece until there was nothing left of her but a bloody husk.

She already felt like one. She had no more tears left to cry, no more breath left to scream. Her arms under her had turned numb, but her shoulders were burning, and she could do nothing to ease the pain. The rhythm of his thrusts carried her on a wave of pain and nausea, but her body was too exhausted to struggle anymore and her head lolled to the



side. Her mind pulled back, clinging desperately to random, fleeting thoughts that were forgotten as quickly as they had come.

The bandit yelled at her. Pressed something hard against her lips. Slapped her face before he repeated his words. Irina forced herself to focus on the sound of his voice, a part of her still willing to please in the hopes that he wouldn't kill her.

"Clean it."

She opened her mouth without thinking. Slick and disgusting, the handle of the dagger settled on her tongue.

"Go on."

He nudged the handle deeper, but she couldn't bring herself to do what he wanted. It took all of her willpower already not to throw up. He grabbed her face with his free hand, holding her head in place as he began to push the dagger back and forth, scraping it over her tongue. The taste of cum and herself was quickly drowned out as the wound in her cheek tore further open. Blood bubbled at the back of her throat and ran from the corner of her mouth. She kept her mouth open wide, not afraid to accidentally bite the unfeeling wood, but afraid he might knock her teeth out instead.

The movement stilled.

"... long enough. The boss says *now*."

Somehow, those stern words made it through the haze of pain, fear, and disgust. Her whimper vibrated against the hilt pressing down on her tongue. *Please*. She didn't want to die.

With a disgruntled noise, the bandit pulled the dagger out of her mouth, but the last, life-ending strike didn't come. Instead, he stood up and kicked her side hard enough to turn her over.

While her body writhed on the ground, helplessly fighting to breathe, he retrieved the belt from her wrists. Before she could fully grasp that she was no longer bound, the door to her cell clacked shut, and the key turned in the lock.

"What did you do to her?" Ross' panic turned his voice into a shrill, garbled mess. "Please! Let me see her. Let me help her, *please*."

They wouldn't be able to understand him. She barely understood him. Perhaps it was better that way. She didn't want him to know.

"Iri—" The dungeon door being slammed closed cut off Ross' attempt to call her name and turned it into a groan. No footsteps followed, no taunting words. The men were gone.

They were gone.

She should have been relieved, but her body was shaking, worse than in the deepest winter. Her heart beat so quickly, as if it was trying to break out of her chest, and her lungs seemed to be unable to suck in enough air. Faintly, she wondered if she was dying. If that was why she couldn't feel her arms, why her legs were dead weight, still spread open like the bandit had left them. If she was bleeding out somewhere, unable to tell under all the agony.

"Irina."

The despair in Ross' voice tore at her heart, but her lips and tongue were as numb and lifeless as the rest of her body. If she was dying, there was nothing she could do about it.

She closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

The slam of the door closing behind the bandit echoed in Ross' ears. The spot where he had smacked his head against the wall as he had flinched pulsed in the same rhythm. It took him a moment to trust the peace, to realize that the door remained closed. They were gone—gone to exchange his life for money.

In a few hours, his family was going to come for him. What should have given him hope only wrapped another layer of

dread around his heart. They would show no mercy to Irina. He tried to figure out what to say, which words were most likely to sway his family into letting her live, but he came up blank.

A trail of blood ran slowly down from his left wrist. When the involuntary spasms of his arm hadn't strained against the unforgiving metal, he had done so himself in the futile attempt to break free. To somehow save her. He still felt like struggling, but he had no more strength left, was barely able to keep his head up, staring into the darkness outside his cell.

Her heart-shattering screams. The bloody knife in the man's hand. The bone-deep silence pressing down on his chest.

"Irina."

She didn't answer. He tried to tell himself that she was merely unconscious; she had lost consciousness the day before as well. But even if she was still alive, how much longer would she be? He couldn't get the image of the bloody knife out of his head, couldn't stop himself from imagining her bleeding out, cold and alone and just out of his reach. If only he could —

He jerked his arm, his head dropping with a choked sob when another drop of blood followed in the half-dried trails of the previous ones. It was useless. *He* was useless.

"Irina."

Ross kept calling her name as the shadows grew deeper, as the last shimmer of light vanished, and still, only silence answered him. He wanted to cry, but his lips were so dry already, his throat so parched, he couldn't afford to lose any more water on useless tears. At least the darkness hid the waterskin, lying out of reach, and the food slowly rotting on the floor next to it.

He stopped calling, telling himself it was to save his strength, that he would hear it if she moved. It was better

than to acknowledge the truth, to accept that she wouldn't answer. Would never answer again.

The memory of empty promises tasted bitter on his swollen tongue. He had told Irina he would come back for her and get her out. Had she believed him? Had she died clinging to hope, or had she known he would let her down?

Guilt chased him into his bouts of restless sleep, conjuring up images of Irina's mangled body; of rotting flesh falling off her emaciated limbs and dead eyes staring at him with all the accusations he knew would never have left her lips. Every time he jerked awake with his heart beating wildly in his chest, the darkness seemed to move, shadows in the corner of his eye that were gone when he turned his head. The pounding in his head grew in intensity until he thought it would burst, but he couldn't escape the pain any more than he could escape the nightmares.

When the first light of dawn crept through the window-slits, pale and colorless, he stared ahead without seeing anything. What remained of his world was a mess of blurry shapes, gray and gray and gray and gray. He could barely remember how the world outside looked, the green of an awakening spring taking over muddy browns. How many days had passed since his capture? How many hours ago had the bandits left to meet with his family? Not that it mattered, because there was another truth he had to accept.

He wasn't going to need the right words, because no one was coming for him.

Ross wondered if the bandits had broken their word, or if his family hadn't paid after all. How much would his life have been worth? He would never find out. Accepting that he was going to die should have filled him with terror, but he was too tired, too empty. Only grief filled the space where before hope and determination had told him to hold on. Perhaps it was better that she was already dead. She would have

died anyway, starving slowly while suffering all the pain the men had inflicted.

If only he could have held her one last time.

\* \* \*

Irina blinked. Above her, the ceiling was tinted in everlasting twilight as the first pale light of morning fell into the dungeon. She wondered what had pulled her out of her blissful nothingness. Something had changed, but nothing *could* have changed. She was alone, covered in blood and grime, and waiting to die one way or another.

She listened half-heartedly, but she didn't think it had been a noise. That would have set her on edge, and she was relaxed—as relaxed as she could be while feeling like every bone in her body had been snapped in half. Wishing she could just drift off again, she closed her eyes, but now that she was aware, she couldn't ignore the discomfort on top of the pain any longer.

The sticky feeling of her skin. The dryness of her throat. The cold, not only emanating from barren stones she lay sprawled upon, but a bone-deep chill that made her shiver in irregular intervals, because she didn't even have the strength left to keep shivering.

She turned her head and tried to focus on the blurry heap that was her blanket. Moving her arm was so hard, but the promise of a little comfort was too tempting. Unfortunately, she was too far away. Her hand dropped to the floor. No matter how cold she was, it wasn't worth moving the rest of her body.

A tiny spark wandered from her chest to her fingertips, and the edge of the blanket shuddered. Irina stared at it, her heart already beating up to her throat while her mind still tried to catch up with it.

The shackles. They were gone.

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply — at least as deeply as her bruised ribs would allow her. Think. She had to think. The morlit had suppressed her magic for so long, she had all but forgotten about it. She certainly hadn't expected for it to return this quickly, like a dormant seed sprouting after the first rain following a drought.

If she could hold onto that spark. If she could grow it. There could still be hope. She had been whipped before. She had been raped before. Perhaps never quite as brutally — a thought she pushed aside to focus on something she could cling to. She had *survived* before, and perhaps, just perhaps, she could survive again. For the first time since Mel had brought her here, she had a chance to get out, no matter how small.

Not like this, though. She had to pull herself together. Magic was life, and gods knew there wasn't much left in her. Denying herself water and rest wouldn't help matters, so she gritted her teeth and pushed herself up on her arms. Agony set her back aflame, but she ignored it and pulled herself forward, dragging useless legs behind her like dead weight. She had no strength left to wrap herself into the blanket, but merely dropping down on it already protected her from the cold. Staring at the ceiling, she waited for her heartbeat to calm down.

Food. She wasn't hungry, but she knew she had to eat. Her hand felt blindly for the hidden scraps of bread Ross had shared with her. She grabbed the smallest piece she could find and put it in her mouth, ignoring the way the wound in her cheek gaped as she moved her lips.

As she chewed on the piece of bread, it turned from hard as stone to slimy. She could have sworn it tasted like metal and salt, turning her stomach at the memory of blood and sweat and cum. With a shudder, she forced herself to keep chewing. She needed the food. When it was finally soft enough

to swallow, she barely managed to keep the bite down, bile already burning at the back of her throat. Tears welled in her eyes as she took shallow breaths to fight the nausea. Worse than not eating would be to waste her body's limited strength on throwing up. Water would have to be enough, then.

Drinking was just as painful, and the water she licked off her dirty fingers tasted just as bad. Muffled by the thick walls, the persistent static of a rain shower filled the air. What wouldn't she give to lay down in the rain, let it wash away all the dirt and pain. Taste it, sweet and cool. If there was nothing else left for her outside those dungeon walls, at least the rain would be waiting for her.

Curled up on the blanket, she drifted off into a fitful sleep. The pain followed her into her dreams, and when she jerked awake, she didn't feel rested, but the spark of magic in her chest was back. It paled in comparison to what it once had been, but it might just be enough. A few more sips of water gave her a moment to steel herself.

She stared at her trembling fingers as she pulled her arms under her and propped herself up. Calling it a crawl would have been generous, but she made it to the door. Her fingers closed around the iron bars, and she pulled herself halfway up before slumping against them. Of course, the door was locked, but this time, she stared into the darkness of the corridor with determination instead of despair. There was no reason for the bandits to bother with taking the keys with them, which meant they had to be *somewhere*.

If only she could see further. The ongoing rain dimmed what little ambient light made it this far under the earth. The keys might be closer to Ross' cell. His name was on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it down. He hadn't called for her in hours; at least she didn't think so. His voice might have been the only thing able to pull her out of the far-away place her mind had fled to during the night.

Perhaps he was asleep. Or perhaps he was gone. His family would have been wise to waste no time in saving him, and he would have tried to get them out of here as quickly as possible, well aware that they would kill her if they found her. He had also promised to come back for her, but he must have known as well as Irina that she wouldn't have enough time for that. Now she might get this time after all, if only she could—

Metal glistened between dirt and debris. She tilted her head, blinking. There it was again. A step and a half in front of her cell—impossible to grab if she had to rely on the reach of her arms alone, but certainly possible now.

She closed her eyes and focused on breathing, on waiting for her heartbeat to calm down while she coaxed the spark of magic into her fingers. With a sense she had never known how to describe, she reached out and wrapped a tendril of her magic around the keyring, not lifting it, merely dragging it along.

Pain bloomed behind her eyes. She squeezed them shut, focusing only on the strange feeling of her magical sense. The keyring moved slowly, a few times even slipping out of her grasp, but then her outstretched fingers touched cold, smooth metal.

She pulled herself further up so she could try the keys on the lock until she found the one that fit, regretting her too-quick movements instantly when nausea slammed into her. Leaning against the bars and breathing through her mouth, she waited for it to pass before she carefully turned the key. The door didn't resist as she shuffled away from it and pulled it open.

The corridor stretched out in front of her, threatening and promising at the same time. One more time, she stretched, prying the key out of the lock and closing her fingers around it. If Ross was in his cell, she would only waste valuable time having to crawl back for it.



Clutching the keys, she pulled herself out of her cell, holding her breath as she passed the threshold, a part of her not convinced that it wasn't a dream, that she wouldn't wake up and find herself still trapped.

It was real, though; the metal of the keyring against her palm, and the dirt under her fingernails, and the coldness of the stone scraping against her bare torso, what was left of her clothes hanging in tatters that offered her no protection. It was real, and she was free.

She crawled past the corner blocking her view of Ross' cell and froze. Not only was he still in his cell, he was also still chained to the wall. An involuntary whimper escaped Irina's throat as she took in his limp shape. No wonder he had stopped calling her name. To be forced to sit in that position for such a long time, he must be completely exhausted, not to mention in pain. She didn't even want to imagine what kind of torture it must be for his left arm, his left side. He must have passed out eventually—a small mercy, if she thought about it.

Somewhere in the darkest corner of her mind was another possibility, one she refused to acknowledge. There was no reason for him to be dead. The bandits had been busy taking their aggressions out on her before leaving, and he hadn't been down here long enough to die of starvation, no matter how much of his food he had given to her. Water, on the other hand...

Her own pain was all but forgotten. She tried to push herself up to her knees, collapsing instantly when her legs refused to stay in position. Frustrated with the lack of cooperation, she clawed at the floor, dragging herself forward while her feet pushed as well as they could. Blood ran down her cheek, inside and out; clinging to her neck and filling her mouth with the taste of metal. She lowered her head and let it drip out, not allowing it to slow her down.

His cell wasn't locked; why bother, when he couldn't move? She squeezed inside, struggling to get the door open far enough. Her head swam, and flashes of heat ran through her body despite the cold. She was moving too fast, straining herself too much, but she couldn't stop now. She was almost there. Her trembling arms kept failing her, and every time, it took her longer to find the strength to push herself up.

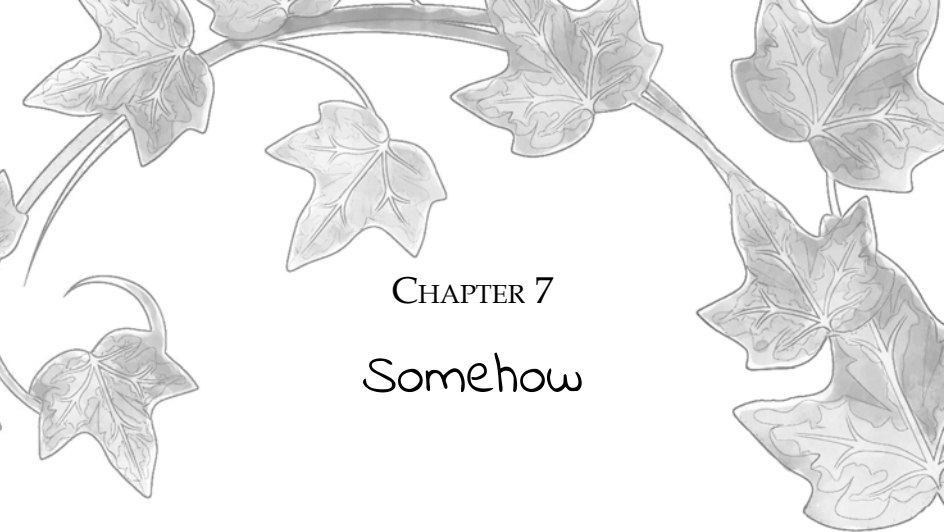
Her hands were shaking as well. The keys jingled as she dropped them, and she hastily grabbed them again, the key-ring digging into her palm with how tightly she clutched it. Too tightly. Metal snapped, and the keys slid off the loop one by one, clattering to the floor.

*No no no.*

Too many keys for her to hold like this. Which was the right one? Her vision swam, but she blinked the tears away, trying to think, to *think*. Two were smaller than the others, but only one of them was rusty. She closed her fingers around it, praying that she was right.

As she looked up, a shiver ran through Ross' body. His low groan of pain made her insides clench. Then he raised his head, and Irina could have cried with relief. His beautiful, bright eyes were open, their unfocused, far-away gaze becoming clear when he spotted her.

He didn't say anything. She didn't, either; her cheek was bleeding enough already, and there were no words that couldn't wait. Key in hand, she pulled herself forward. He was alive. Nothing else mattered. He was alive, and she was going to get him out.



## CHAPTER 7

# Somehow

Ross stared at the grisly sight in front of him, a terrified scream stuck in his throat. Like in his nightmares, Irina looked like she had crawled out of her grave to take revenge for how he had failed her. With a few remaining scraps of fabric around her shoulders and waist, she was all but naked, her skin was covered in dried blood and dark bruises, and fresh blood seeped out of a cut that split her cheek in half.

Her gaze met his, dark eyes so full of pain—and love. Ross forced his lungs to squeeze the stale air out, sucking fresh air in. He had looked into those eyes a million times, knew them better than his own. Irina was alive—alive and, somehow, free.

As she reached the waterskin, a spark of hope bloomed in his chest. *Please*. His desperate need for water mingled with the pain of seeing her so hurt and weak, trembling arms barely able to support her weight as she kept approaching him. If only he could get his lips and tongue to cooperate, but she passed the waterskin without casting so much as a single glance at it, and his pleading whimper died somewhere in his throat.

When she crawled past his outstretched left leg, it decided to spasm, bumping into her. The impact, no matter how light, was enough to knock her down. She whimpered, clawing at the floor with trembling hands. Ross tried to hold still, tried so hard to hold still while she struggled back up and continued on her way towards him, slowly, but undeterred.

*I'm sorry.*

His throat was too parched to form the words but not parched enough to hold back the pained groan as she reached for his chest and dug her fingers into his shirt. The added weight as she pulled herself up would have made him scream if there had been any strength left in him to scream.

When she clung to his shoulder, little pinpricks of pain raced from his wrists down his arms and along his back to his hips. What was she doing? His head was throbbing, and it was so hard to keep his thoughts from scattering, but something clanked as she stretched, and he understood. She had the keys. He leaned his head to the side, feeling her shoulder under his cheek. If only he could hold her. If only he could do anything to help.

Metal screeched over metal, and she slumped back with a frustrated huff. He could feel the tremors running through her body, the too-quick rising of her chest. She was clearly at the end of her strength, but she didn't give up, lunging at the shackle again.

Her efforts pressed his hand against the wall, grinding metal and stone against his raw skin. She missed again, stabbed the inside of his arm instead. Ross felt a fresh trickle of blood, but he didn't register the pain, drowned out by wild, desperate hope.

Irina whimpered. Once more, she stretched, and once more, she slid off, and her body went limp. Ross could do nothing but watch as she collapsed in a bloody heap on the floor.

*"Iri... Irina."*

He forced the name out, no matter how hoarse it sounded. She didn't react.

"Irina!"

No. She had been so close. So close. She had to wake up, get this damn key into the lock. The key. Where was it? His gaze flitted across the floor, trying to spot a shape that didn't fit amongst the dirt and rubble. No luck. Was she still holding it? No, her hands were empty.

Had he even heard it fall? At last, he craned his neck, and the key grinned at him, protruding from the shackle. He pulled against it, but the metal held fast. The shackle was still locked. A dry sob rose in his chest, choking him.

*Irina. Please wake up.*

It hurt too much to keep calling her name; his head and his throat and even his tongue. He pressed his head against the wall, knowing that he would cry if he had any tears left. This couldn't be how it ended. Not after everything. Not so close to getting out.

He angled his good leg, hip and shoulders protesting against the movement as he nudged her. She only needed to wake up, hold on a moment longer, and turn the damn key. But she didn't, not even as his left foot decided to join the attempt and kicked at her calf. He pulled his right leg back, unable to make himself kick her harder on purpose, to hurt her even more. Gods knew she was hurt enough already.

Looking at all her injuries, remembering her screams and sobs, made him feel sick. He turned his gaze away, wishing once more that he had any tears left to cry. Perhaps it would ease the persistent pounding of his head, even if he wasn't sure whether he would have deserved such relief.

Time passed. The light began to fade. Another day almost over. Ross stared into the furthest corner, details he had been able to see a while ago now hidden in shadows. Night was about to fall, and he didn't think he was going to live to see

the morning. He wondered if she would. If she would ever wake up again, only to find herself with his corpse. If she would be haunted by the same kind of nightmares as him.

Movement in the corner of his eye made him flinch. He turned his head, his neck stiff and aching, and blinked in an attempt to banish the dizziness. His breathing picked up as Irina's eyelids fluttered.

"Irina?"

His voice felt like gravel and sounded even worse, but he had to reach her. If only she could get his hand free, he would find a way. He had to. But her eyes, although open, went right past him, and she made no attempt to move. Instead, a shudder ran through her body, growing in intensity until she was shaking so much, he could hear her teeth clack together.

Blood bubbled in the corner of her mouth, and more blood ran from her nose. He threw himself forward, every bone aching, every muscle burning. It didn't help. He was trapped, and she was dying, and there was nothing he could do.

"Ivy." His voice broke on the name like his heart. "Don't die. Please. Don't—"

Her movements stilled. Her eyes rolled back. He jerked against the chains again, not even in the hope of breaking free, just because the pain it caused was easier to bear than the one gripping his heart.

The shackle released his left wrist, and it dropped down. The movement left agony in its wake as if his arm and shoulder had been torn apart, but his scream died to the lack of air in his lungs. Too weak and stiff to move, he stared at the ground in front of him, panting. How...? Why...? It couldn't...

He took a shuddering breath and banished all those useless thoughts. It didn't matter. What mattered was that his hand was free. He had a *chance*. He pulled his arm closer, telling each muscle what to do while the feeling rushed back into his limb, replacing numbness with a terrible burning sensation.

Reaching Irina with one hand wasn't enough, he needed to get the other one free, and for that, he needed the key. He craned his neck to take a look at the lock. The key was still stuck inside, so it was at least not out of his reach.

Time slowed down to a crawl while he waited for his arm to come back to life, for his fingers to listen to his command and move. When they finally twitched, it had become too dark to see if Irina was still breathing. She had to be. He bent his fingers a few times. Flexing the spot where the smallest finger was missing was painful and terrible at the same time, but it couldn't be helped. He clenched his teeth as he instructed his muscles to ignore the burning pain and raise his arm.

He knew he would not be able to grasp the key, so he pinned it between two fingers and wriggled until it came free. His heart hammered in his chest as he raised his hand until he could take the key with his teeth. He wasn't going to risk his hand fucking him over by flinging the key across the room.

The pain in his right arm was almost as bad as the one in his left; stiff muscles protesting about having to work after two days of being forced into the same position, feeling returning in a rush of fire and ice. He ignored the pain as the shackle dug into his wrist and pulled himself closer, lips stubbornly closed around the key.

It was too dark to see the lock; almost too dark to see anything at all. The key scraped over his lips and bumped into his teeth as he tried to fit it into the too-small opening, almost dropping it a few times. His neck ached from trying to find the right angle, and his jaw ached from keeping his lips closed around the key. The taste of rusty metal mixed with that of his own blood seeping from his raw lips.

When the lock finally opened with a quiet clack, he was past caring about pain or dignity. He dropped to the floor and pushed himself away from the wall, crawling on his stomach

to the spot where he remembered the waterskin. His fingers found the smashed, half-rotten fruit before they found the worn leather, clutching it like a lifeline.

He barely gave himself time to sit up before he tore at the cork with his teeth, spitting it out in front of him the moment it came free. He almost choked on his greedy gulps, and even though his bleeding lip tainted it, the water was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted.

Only when he almost choked on it did he slow down, allowing himself to breathe between much smaller sips. He forced himself to stop before he could empty the waterskin, looking in the direction where only the faintest outline of Irina's crumpled shape was visible. She might need water as well. Who knew if she still had water in her cell, if she had been lucid enough to drink.

He felt for the discarded cork so he could seal the waterskin, pinning it under his arm as he dragged himself across the floor. She didn't stir as he touched her body and felt his way upwards until he found her shoulder.

"Wake up." He shook her. "Ivy. Please. Wake up."

No reaction. Ross followed her arm down to her hand, grasping her fingers. Her skin was cool, but it wasn't the coldness of death. He could hear her regular breaths, even feel her pulse when he slid his thumb up to her wrist. She was alive. She had saved him. Now it was on him to figure out how to save her in return.

For endless minutes, he just sat there, staring into the darkness, clutching the waterskin with his left arm and Irina's hand with his right. She needed food, water, warmth, but he couldn't bring himself to let go of her. What if he got lost in the dark, didn't make it back to her? The thought that she might still die, that he might not be there to hold her, was unbearable. Besides, it would help neither her nor him if he hurt himself while trying to find the way out. He could only hope

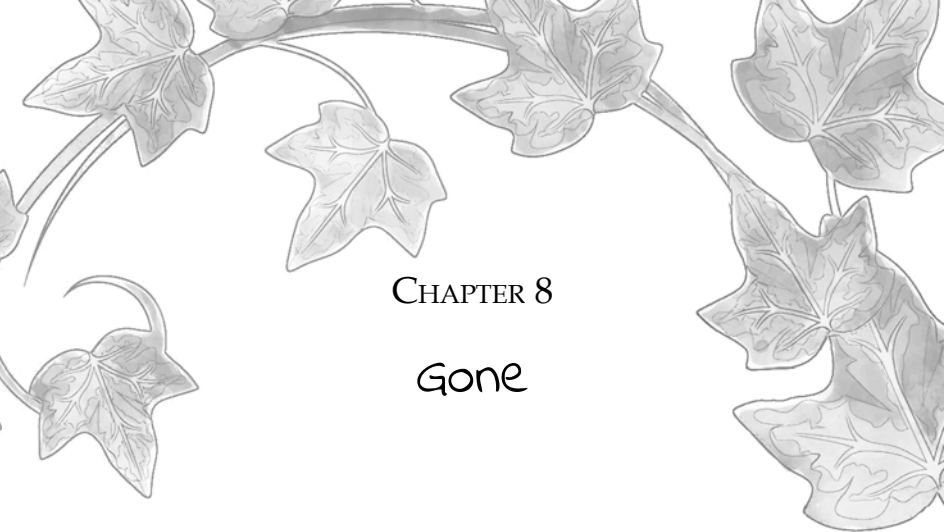


that she would hold on until the morning, though realistically, there was nothing he could do until she woke up anyway.

His hand wandered up to her shoulder, grabbing her as best as he could. After two days of being chained to the wall, even the hard stone floor was comfortable in comparison, and he didn't hesitate to pull Irina as far on top of him as he could, trying to keep her away from the cold.

She was still alive. Still breathing. He clung to her as exhaustion took over, leaving him so dizzy, it felt like the cell was spinning around him even though he was lying down. Just a few hours of rest to give his body time to recover. With the first light of day, he would go and find a way out of here, for both of them.





## CHAPTER 8

### Gone

Irina awoke shivering, her hand grasping at something that wasn't there. How strange, to remember warmth when it was as cold as it had always been. Colder even; she wasn't lying on her blankets but on the bare floor of her cell, small stones digging painfully into her unprotected chest and stomach.

That wasn't right. There was no rubble in her cell. She had made sure of that months ago so she could crawl from one end to the other without hurting herself. As she tried to prop herself up, the pain rushed back into her body, and she sank back down with a choked whimper.

Fabric slid over her back, a featherlight touch and the softest thing she had felt in forever. The thought was pushed into the background as memories trickled back: Her magic. The key. Ross.

*Ross.*

She forced herself to turn her head, glad that her cut cheek was well away from the ground. Frantic blinking drove back the swirling darkness, allowing her surroundings to take shape. Pale twilight. Gray stone walls. Empty shackles hanging from rusty iron chains.

Ross was gone.

She curled in on herself, relief and sorrow forming a knot in her stomach. The fabric scraped over her sensitive skin again, and she grabbed an edge and pulled it closer to her face. His robe. After years of taking care of his wardrobe and laundry, she would have recognized the embroidery anywhere.

Her thumb brushed over the fabric to make sure her eyes didn't deceive her. So he had been here. It hadn't been a dream. She couldn't remember actually unlocking the shackles; everything after spotting him was blurry at best. The key. The pain. Feeling so hot and so cold and so sick. She must have passed out, but not before getting him somehow free.

She knew he must have been in pain and desperate to get out. She knew she wouldn't have been strong enough to escape with him. She knew he had been worried about leading his family straight to her. None of the reasons managed to ease the overwhelming sadness and loneliness of knowing that she was alone again.

Staring blankly ahead, she tried to find the spark that had kept her going; the longing to feel the spring rain on her skin, the wish to see Ross saved. But the rain was gone, and Ross was gone, and she was so tired. Tears welled in her eyes, slowly at first, then with such intensity, the sobs shook her exhausted body. She pulled the edge of his robe closer to her face, pressing it against her unharmed cheek.

Irina was so busy feeling sorry for herself, she only heard the footsteps behind her when the door to Ross' cell creaked in its hinges. No. No more. Terror and the need to get away displaced every other thought. She pushed herself forward, but she was already in the corner, trapped between cold stone and unforgiving metal. Her fingers slammed against the iron bars, trying to break free, even if the only thing she was going to break that way was her hand. She had to get away, get away, couldn't breathe, couldn't—

Her hand was caught. Held. She sobbed, lacking the leverage to pull her arm free. The person said something, but she didn't listen. Didn't care. Not again. If they killed her for disobeying, so be it. She pulled her legs closer, pressed them together, and tucked her head between her shoulders.

*"Ivy, please."*

The old nickname cut through all the defenses she had put up, tethered her to reality for long enough to realize that there were no groping hands. No pushing and pulling. No new pain. Only one person knew this name, and he would never hurt her.

*"It's okay. It's me. You're okay. Breathe."*

Yes. Breathe. She gasped for air, only to start coughing, tears still running down her face. Her body was shaking, filled with too many emotions and too little energy left to process them. But he was here, and he was safe, and for a moment, nothing else mattered.

When the tension left her, Ross let go of her hand to scoot closer. He lifted her head onto his lap and let her cry until her tears dried up, fingers clutching the fabric of his shirt. Even then, he didn't move. He only stroked her temple, safely away from the cut.

*"I'm sorry."* His voice was husky, the words all blurring together. *"I couldn't wake you up. I was looking for— It's okay. I won't leave. I'm sorry."*

For the moment, she let herself fall into his words, let them drive away the sorrow of being alone. She knew it wasn't true. He had a home, a place where he belonged—and she didn't. But right here and now, he was with her, and perhaps that was going to be enough to get her through this day.

A few more minutes passed before he moved from her temple to her hand, loosening her grip and interlacing his fingers with hers.

"Do you think you can walk?" he asked. He sounded calmer now. "Come upstairs. It's not much. But there's a bed. And water. And." He paused before he laughed. At least she figured it was a laugh, even though it sounded more like a sob. "What right do I have to say I missed the sun?"

Every right. She would have said it, but the persistent pulsing of her cut cheek told her that trying to speak would be an unpleasant experience. So she did the next best thing and extracted her hand, searching for the ground next to his leg so she could push herself up.

She already knew she wouldn't be able to walk before she made it into a halfway sitting position. To get upstairs, she didn't have to. Her body ached, and her arms trembled, and the blood rushed in her head, and nothing of it mattered, because he hadn't left her alone. With renewed determination, she got her knees under her and started to crawl.

\* \* \*

Ross scrambled to his feet, pulling himself up on the iron bars before he bent down once more to pick up the crude wooden stick he had found. One end was broken off—it had probably once been part of a shovel or broom—but the wood was smooth to the touch and held his weight, and that was good enough.

He watched with concern as Irina began to crawl without even trying to get up. Not that he could blame her. Compared to the daylight above, it was dark as fuck down here, but even the little light falling through the window-slits was enough to see the miserable shape she was in. Under skin covered in dried blood and darkened bruises, he could see the outline of every single one of her bones. Not for the first time, he wondered how she was still alive, but he was so, so grateful for it.

As much as he would have liked to carry her, that was not an ambition his body would agree with. But she only had to make it up the stairs, and he would be able to take care of her. Bring her water to drink and clean herself. Take a look at her wounds. Dig through the supplies the bandits had left behind in the hopes of finding something to eat.

His thoughts were already racing in several directions as he picked up his robe with the end of the stick and slipped it on, so he wouldn't have to carry it when his good hand was already busy. The fabric brushed his bare legs where it fell down to his knees, and he was more than glad that he liked his shirts to reach the middle of his thighs. His pants were outside, drying in the morning sun. Pain and thirst were not the only issues with being chained in one spot for days.

Ross followed Irina as she crawled out of the cell and into the direction of the stairs. He couldn't help but notice how her arms shook, how she barely moved her legs, feet always close together despite being unrestrained. As if she had forgotten how to move without shackles. Perhaps she had.

His gaze wandered to her ankles, to angry wounds, swollen and most likely infected. His sister had done this. What for? What was the point of such cruelty? And why hadn't she come back, why had no one come for him?

Ross shook his head and caught up with Irina at the foot of the stairs. It was probably best not to think of his family while he had more urgent things to take care of. He would have enough time to pick through the layers of betrayal later.

Each step seemed to take forever, but Irina wasn't giving up. She clung to the stone edges with the same stubbornness she had used to unlock his shackles. Ross followed one step behind, determined to make sure she wouldn't slip off, even if his chances of actually catching her were rather slim.

"That door to the left," he said when she arrived at the top of the stairs.

Irina gave no indication that she had heard him, but she kept going, dragging herself along between piles of rubble and stubborn weeds growing under the leaking roof. She reached the doorway and crawled inside, having to pause more and more often on her way through the room while Ross could do nothing but watch helplessly.

In front of the bed, she all but collapsed, leaning against it with her shoulder, her head dropping onto the wooden frame. Ross lowered himself to the ground in front of her.

"You need water."

With glassy eyes, she watched him pick up the cup. Having found a few tin dishes in the remains of a collapsed shelf in what might have once been some kind of kitchen, he didn't think they had been left behind by the bandits. Luckily, time and elements had been unable to destroy them.

Irina grasped his wrist as he approached her with the cup, but there was no strength behind it. She merely followed his movement as he brought the cup to her lips and let her drink, her arm dropping to her side before the water was gone.

Gods, she looked so exhausted, so weak. So hurt. Ross put the empty cup down and raised his hand, but she flinched before he could touch her. Cursing his lack of thinking, he quickly pulled his hand back, leaning away from her for good measure.

"I'll get more water." He picked up the stick, rubbing his thumb along the worn wood in an attempt to soothe his raw nerves. He'd have to touch her soon enough, because she didn't seem to be in any condition to take care of her numerous wounds herself. "Try to get up onto the bed, if you can. It'll be more comfortable."

Not that there had been anything left of the former mattress but a few blackened lumps of moldy straw, but he had spent the better part of the morning gathering grass and piling it on the wooden frame. Covered with a blanket, it was a passable



attempt at a bed; it was for sure better than the bare stones down in the dungeon.

With a last, worried glance at Irina, Ross grabbed an empty bucket and limped out of the room.



## CHAPTER 9

# unbroken trust

Their supplies—or lack thereof—were a constant weight on Ross' mind. All the bandits had left behind were a couple of blankets sporting more than a few holes, a broken knife, and what had remained of their last meal; a hardened loaf of bread the only thing that was still edible.

At least water wasn't going to be an issue. Inside a courtyard surrounded by decrepit walls was a covered well he used to fill up the bucket. Next to it, on the low branch of an elderberry bush, hung his pants, swinging softly in the wind. They weren't dry yet, so he left them behind as he dragged the bucket back inside, step by step by miserable step.

He needed his right hand to hold the stick, and he didn't trust his left arm with carrying any kind of weight. The tension of his muscles seemed to get worse by the hour. Well; of course, it was getting worse. Just like the bandits hadn't bothered kidnapping him with his crutch, they had emptied his bag, and his pills were now rotting in the forest somewhere.

When he reached the room, he already wanted to cry from exhaustion. He gritted his teeth and pushed the feeling back. All those years, she had been there for him, and now that she needed *him* for once, he wasn't going to let her down.

Ross shoved the bucket all the way to the bed, all but collapsing next to it. Somehow, Irina had made it up, lying on her stomach with the side of her face buried in the blanket. Fresh blood glistened in the grisly wound on her cheek.

"Irina?" he whispered.

Her eyelids fluttered but ultimately remained closed.

"I need to look at your wounds. Try to clean them." He arranged his supplies around him, giving her a moment to register his words. The filled bucket and an empty one, a bowl, and the softest bit of fabric he had been able to find. "It'll hurt. And I'll have to touch you. I'm sorry. I'll try to —"

Her hand twitched. Ross broke off and dropped the rag to take her hand. Even though she was trembling, she clung to him with more strength than he would have thought possible.

"May I?" When she remained silent, he added, "Please?"

There was no reply he could make out, but somehow — through the slightest twitching of her hand, the barely noticeable change in her posture — he felt her affirmation. When he slipped his fingers out of her grasp, she whimpered. It was the first sound he had heard her make since she had stopped crying, and it broke his heart.

"Okay," he whispered, offering her his other hand. She clutched it without hesitation.

Ross bit his lip to keep himself from making any noise as the pain in his severed finger flared back to life. The wound was healing badly, but it was healing, and his left hand was mostly useless anyway; giving her comfort was by far the best thing it could do. He placed the bowl of clean water closer to the bed and began to work.

Bloody droplets ran down Irina's chilled skin as Ross cleaned her face. The watery red painted streaks on a too-pale canvas littered with dark blues and purples and almost blacks. He tried not to imagine what had happened inside

the cell, not to allow his imagination to supply the images to match the sounds that had burned themselves into his memory. It didn't work particularly well. Dried blood and dirt weren't the only things caked to the corners of her mouth.

He wrung out the rag and prompted her to turn her head so he could look at her other cheek. Even though she was clearly exhausted, she did so without hesitation, not even complaining when he had to take his left hand back to help with keeping her hair out of the way. She merely closed her eyes and kept her hand slightly outstretched. Calm. Trusting.

How could she still trust anyone after all of this? How could she still bear to be touched by him?

When he was done with her head, he took her hand again before he moved lower, cleaning her shoulders and arms. The skin on her wrists was swollen and rubbed raw, the marks left by the rope overlaid by a second set of fresher ones. Another puzzle piece fitting into a picture that became grimmer with every passing second. It was a miracle she had been able to free herself. A miracle that had saved his life as well as hers.

To start on her back, he had to cut loose the last scraps of her clothes, discarding them without a second thought. Underneath, the full extent of her injuries became visible: scrapes and cuts and streaks of darkening bruises. Between it all were the thin, faded scars of older lashings — much older.

He recalled the bandit's mocking words, the glee of finding out that she had been abused before. Dread settled like a stone in Ross' stomach as he moved the rag across her back, almost too afraid to touch her. When? How? *Why?*

From the time she had been a small child, she had lived at his family's mansion. How had he never noticed, why had she never told him? His thoughts were racing, and he dug through his memories trying to remember a time when she had looked hurt, a transgression that might have warranted such treatment in the eyes of his family, any sign —

Irina squeezed his hand, a pained whimper on her lips. Ross flinched back and lifted the rag, realizing that he must have pressed down too hard, lost in his useless thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

It became harder to form the words, but he knew she would understand him. She always did. And she did calm down, closing her eyes and loosening the grip on his fingers. He gave himself a few more moments for his nerves to settle before he continued, determined to keep focused on his task.

Fetching fresh water gave him a much needed reprieve, but it also cost him valuable energy. He barely made it back to the bed, and he had to sit and catch his breath for several minutes before he could continue. Luckily, she didn't need much help to roll onto her side, allowing him access to her front.

Her chest was a better and a worse sight at once. There were fewer bruises, most of them looking like the result of being handled roughly or dragged over the ground, but nasty cuts snaked their way from her collarbone to her pelvis. They weren't too deep, but her struggle had frayed the edges and driven dirt into the bloody flesh.

When he started cleaning the cuts, Irina whimpered. She squeezed his hand, and his arm jerked in response. Irina didn't let go, and she didn't seem spooked by the sudden movement. Of course she wasn't. It wouldn't scare her. It was this thought that allowed him to remain calm and ignore the antics of his body. If his arm tried to escape or his leg twitched under him, unhappy with how he was sitting on the floor, so be it.

Slowly, he washed out the wound between her breasts. Her broken fingernails dug into his flesh, too close to the missing finger. Ross took care to make no sound. What was his pain compared to hers?

"I'm sorry," he said when she began to cry, tears running down her cheek in silence.

He hated the blood, and the fear of what might happen if her wounds got infected, and the images his mind conjured up, but the worst part was that he was causing her pain, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He *had* to do this, even though every single one of her tears cut straight into his heart.

He wrung the rag out one last time, dumping the dirty water into one bucket and refilling the bowl from the other. As he pulled a blanket over her exposed torso, he realized that he had been wrong. The worst part came now that he was done with her chest and abdomen.

"Irina?" he whispered, squeezing the rag.

She said nothing, but her fingers in his hand twitched slightly.

"I. I need to. Keep going. But." He swallowed. "I don't. Know."

Gods. He could just. Do something else. Move to her legs instead, take care of the wounds on her ankles. But leaving her with this filth on her was wrong, and she obviously was too weak to do it herself.

"I can stop. If you need — if you want me to. If you don't... don't want to be touched." He didn't *want* to do this, but there was so much blood. Some of it looked much fresher than it should have, and while he was scared of hurting her, he was more terrified of losing her after all. "I'd like to. Try. And you tell me if I can't. You can't."

He wasn't making sense, the words fleeing quicker than his stubborn mouth could form them. She seemed to understand anyway. Her breathing picked up, and she held onto his hand with a tension that hadn't been there before.

Ross didn't speak. He didn't move. He just waited, using the opportunity to lean against the bed and give his back and shoulders a moment of rest.

"Okay," she finally mumbled.

“Okay,” he whispered in return.

She pulled back her hand and pushed herself over, burying her face in the blanket. He wondered if she liked the smell of grass, if she even noticed it. If it would help to remind her that she was no longer trapped down there, that he was only trying to help.

Before, she had mostly been calm, only tensing up when he had touched her wounds. Now, she was basically rigid, every muscle so tense, she trembled under his touch. Under all the dried blood seemed to be a cut across her inner thigh, but he would never be able to see how badly she was hurt if tears kept blurring his vision; it was hard enough already with his left eye refusing to work together with the right one.

Focus. He had to focus. He washed away blood and dirt until he ran out of clean water, all but fleeing the room, a slurred explanation leaving his lips. Dragging a fresh bucket back inside took twice as long as before, and not only because of his rapidly diminishing strength.

When he dropped to the floor in front of the bed, she hadn’t moved at all. He could only tell that she was conscious by her frantic breaths, and by the way she clung to the blanket, twisting it in her grasp.

He wished he could find something to say, words to tell her that it wasn’t so bad, that he was almost done. But it was bad, and he was not almost done. A suffocating weight pressed down on his chest as he pushed her legs apart so he could reach everything. She was still bleeding. He stared at the rag, the droplets of red on it too vibrant to be old. His thoughts were racing, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing but clean her up, let her rest, and hope for the best.

Slowly but thoroughly, he freed her skin from dried blood and other residue, tinting bowl after bowl after bowl of water a reddish brown. Only when he reached her knees did it feel like he could breathe again. He fetched a new bucket of water

and continued cleaning all the scrapes and cuts down to her ankles where he had to stop at the strips of raw flesh. Every attempt to touch them made her flinch, until he had to pin down her leg while the grass-stuffed fabric muffled her agonized cries.

Those wounds must have been left untreated for far too long. In fact, he had no reason to believe those shackles hadn't been on her ankles the whole fucking time she had been down there. Again, he thought of Mel, and again, he pushed down the glowing anger inside his chest. That wasn't important now. The only thing that was important now was to save Irina.

He was no healer, but before his parents had given up on finding a way to cure his condition, he had spent a lot of time during his childhood in a nearby temple of Thyrvís. If he was lucky, the knowledge he had soaked up would be enough to identify some kind of healing herb growing nearby. Anything to calm her swollen skin and prevent further infection.

Not today, though. Today, they were both at the end of their strength. He had nothing to wrap around the wounds, no piece of fabric clean enough he didn't fear it would make everything worse. Perhaps it wasn't necessary. The wounds weren't bleeding much, and she surely wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

With shaking hands, Ross dropped the rag into the empty bowl.

"I'm done," he tried to say, but what left his lips was barely even a word.

Irina didn't react. Her eyes were closed, but he didn't think she had lost consciousness. Her hands grasped at the blanket, and she was shaking from head to toe.

"Ivy?"

The moment he touched her hand, she curled up with a sob. Ross pulled back as quickly as if he had burned himself,



watching her helplessly. Perhaps she needed a moment. A moment, and some space, no matter how much he wished he could hold her until they both would wake up from this nightmare.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, barely more intelligible than before.

His hand still shook as he grabbed the edge of a blanket to pull it over her legs. Irina flinched when the fabric touched her, whimpering with her head tucked as far in between her shoulders as it would go. Ross almost fell in his haste to get away from the bed, catching himself on the wall at the last moment and clinging to it until he managed to get his left foot properly under him. Then, he dumped the dirty water out of the window and left everything else on the floor as he snatched his stick and fled the room.

The sun was already setting, and Ross still sat on the ground in the courtyard, leaning against a wall and staring at nothing in particular. Half of the water he had fetched for himself from the well, he had lost again through his tears, the last of them still drying on his cheeks.

He didn't know what to do. Oh, he knew what he *had* to do, but they had no food, no medicine, nowhere to go—fuck, he couldn't even make a fire. The lack of fire also meant he should get inside before it became too dark. He flexed the fingers of his right hand, looking from the wall to his stick in an attempt to find the best way to get his aching body up.

On his way back inside, he clung to the wall. Being tired always made the spasms worse, and he was more than tired; he could barely keep his eyes open. Perhaps he would be able to think more clearly in the morning. No matter how dire their situation, it was no longer completely hopeless. Ross' already slow steps came to a halt when he reached the room.

"Irina?" he called out to make sure he wouldn't startle her.

She didn't answer, but his hope that she had fallen asleep vanished as he came closer. She was shivering, even more violently than when he had left her, and her breaths came way too fast. New dread formed an even bigger clump in his stomach as he sat on the edge of the bed.

Her forehead was too warm to the touch, but her hands were like ice. Ross clutched her fingers. Of course, his efforts had come too late. Her body was already fighting against an infection, whichever of her many wounds might be the cause of it. If only she had enough strength left to win this fight.

No. He couldn't think like this. Unwilling to let go, he used his left hand to wipe his tears away, smacking it against his chin in the process. For a moment, the room seemed to spin around him. He closed his eyes and took a few measured breaths until the vertigo dissipated.

Painfully aware that his body might soon decide to make him rest, he pulled the bucket closer and picked up the rag, dabbing cool water onto her forehead. Irina whimpered, but her eyes remained closed. His attempt to get her to drink remained unsuccessful as well, and another bout of vertigo made him put down the cup and prop his head in his hand.

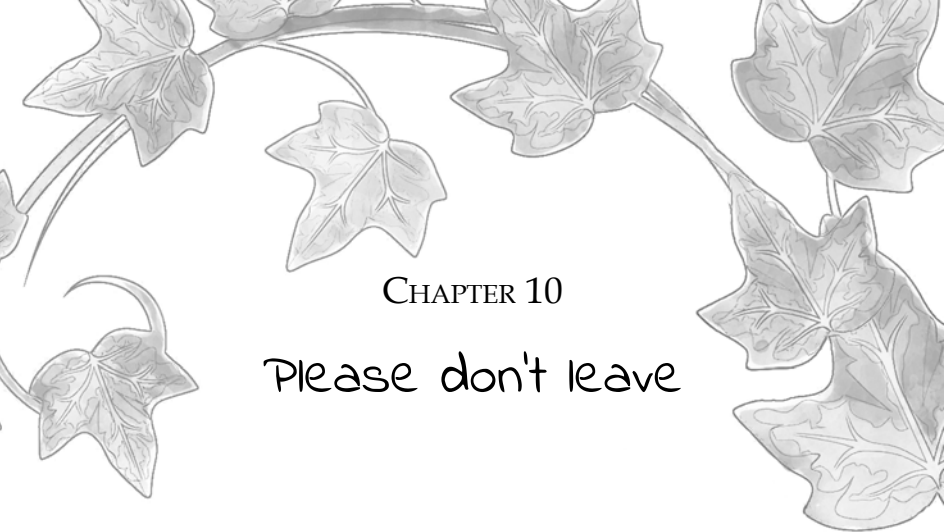
He needed to sleep, and she needed to stay warm, and without a fire, there was only one way to accomplish it. He could only hope it wouldn't freak her out; that she would either sleep through the night or recognize him quickly, should she wake up.

To make room for himself, Ross pushed her away from the edge of the bed. The lumps of grass moved with her, leaving an almost barren, blanket-covered spot for him. He was too tired to care. Pinning his rebellious left arm down with his own weight, he took his spot at her side, pulling the blanket over both of them.

Lying next to her, he could feel her shivers with his whole body. He shuffled as close as he could, but it wasn't enough

to fill the void in his chest, to displace the fear for her life and the loneliness of the past months. Hoping it wouldn't hurt her, he put his arm around her, burying his face in her neck.

As long as he held onto her, he could tell himself that she wouldn't leave him.



## CHAPTER 10

# Please don't leave

"Ivy? You need to drink."

Irina whimpered, unwilling to be conscious as Ross' voice pulled her out of her sleep. It did not feel like she had slept at all. Her limbs were as heavy as her eyelids, and every attempt to move so much as a single finger hurt.

Cool water on her lips. She opened her mouth, only realizing that she was sitting upright when the water found its way down her throat instead of getting spilled all over her cheek. Something was behind her, holding her up. Soft and hard and strong and safe. Ross. She leaned into his chest and nuzzled her head against his shoulder.

He was so warm, and she was so cold, and so, so tired, but he didn't let her drift off. Stubbornly, he followed her mouth with the cup. Irina's lips parted, because that took less effort than turning her head away. At least the water brought momentary relief from the burning inside her chest.

When the cup was empty, she whined for more, and whether he understood or had planned to give her more all on his own, the cup returned, filled with fresh water. Irina drank greedily; too greedily. Her chin bumped into the cup, which sent a splash of water across her face.

Ross caught her as she jerked forward. Irina clung to his arm, crying and coughing and gasping for air. Every muscle from her jaw to her hips ached, blood rushing in her ears and pulsing in her bruises and tasting like rotten metal on her tongue. She dug her fingers into Ross' arm, only letting go when he pried her hand off with a pained yelp.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, she slumped in his grip. Each breath rattled inside her lungs, but she had no strength left to keep coughing.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay." His touch displaced wet, sweaty hair. How could the fingers that had been so warm while holding her hand feel so cool on her forehead? "You're going to be okay."

She wished she could believe him, but it hurt so much. Throbbing and stabbing and burning and piercing. She couldn't move without it hurting. She couldn't breathe without it hurting. She couldn't even think without it hurting. If only she could drift off again, but her coughing fit and the struggle to breathe had left her as wide awake as she was exhausted.

"Ivy." He held her close, the only thing keeping her from panicking completely as the lack of air sent her heartbeat spiraling out of control. "Just breathe."

She tried. If only it didn't hurt so much. Keeping her breaths shallow didn't deliver enough air, and an involuntary gasp set her lungs on fire. She coughed, which turned into a whimper, then a sob.

Ross kept holding her, and rocking her, and whispering encouragements that got lost between his failing speech and her failing strength. Hoping to catch a glimpse of the face she had missed so much, she pried her eyes open. As she blinked furiously to drive away the blurriness, she realized that it had been a pointless effort. He was behind her. All she could see were derelict walls and broken furniture.

That was no sight worth the effort, so she let her eyes slide shut again.

The next time Irina opened her eyes, everything was dark. Wrapped in the blanket and Ross' embrace, she was warm, but she didn't feel warm. If anything, she felt even colder than before. Her body was shaking so hard, her teeth chattered.

She pressed herself against Ross, trying to soak up more of his warmth without waking him up. What wouldn't she have given to hear him tell her that everything was going to be all right, but he always had such a hard time sleeping, and he had done so much for her. He needed the rest. She, too, needed more rest. It felt like she had slept forever and not at all.

"Ivy."

His voice found its way through the sludge inside her head. Why was he awake? She tried to blink her eyes open, but her eyelids were too heavy. Behind them, however, the darkness had been replaced by the soft glow of daylight, brighter than it had been for months.

"Please." He dabbed a wet rag across her forehead. His voice sounded like he was crying. "You can't die."

Her heart beat too quickly, wanting to break out of her ribs one moment, falling eerily silent the next. A weight pressed down on her chest and sat heavily in her stomach. It felt like fear, but she wasn't afraid. She was sad, because if she died, it would hurt him, and the last, the absolute last thing she ever wanted to do was hurt him.

*I'm sorry.*

Her lips moved, but she didn't have the strength to speak. Each breath wheezed inside her lungs, molten pain and dizziness. Her fingers twitched, the only movement she could muster. He grasped her hand instantly, pulling it close to his chest.

“Please don’t leave me.”

She didn’t want to. The thought was all she clung to as hours passed between unconsciousness that brought no rest and wakefulness that brought no clarity. Cold water and warm hands, hot breath and freezing limbs. Lungs that seemed to drag each breath through mud. A few times, she awoke with a gasp for air and with her heart racing in her chest, but even on the edge of panic she was never able to stay awake for more than a few minutes.

Ross never left her side. Whenever she could muster the strength to make a noise, he always called her name, always took her hand. Always tried to make her drink. Always begged her to keep fighting.

She soaked up his warmth, and she tasted herbs in the sips of water, and she tried to fight. Every time darkness reached for her with the lingering promise that her pain could be over, she let his voice and touch cradle her. The pain was worth it, if only she could stay with him a moment longer, could let his embrace displace one more memory of endless hours alone under the earth.

Something clattered loudly to the ground. In the echo of metal on stone, Ross cursed. Only when her teasing words died on a tongue that was dry and heavy and tasted like rotten meat did Irina remember that she was not in his bedroom. Her eyes flew open, and her gaze fell upon a dirty ceiling, spiderwebs of cracks adorning the plaster where it hadn’t yet broken off completely. If the vaguely familiar sight hadn’t been enough, her aching body would have surely reminded her of what had happened.

The attempt to lift her hand sent ripples of pain through her back. She whimpered, and Ross was at her side in an instant. He dropped to his knees in front of the bed, propping himself up with his left arm so he could reach for her forehead.

Whatever he found there, it made him smile, tears spilling over as he stroked her cheek. Irina stared at him, her confusion about his behavior quickly displaced by worry as she noticed his haggard appearance. He looked so much older than she remembered, as if he hadn't aged merely six months but the same number of years. Gaunt cheeks and red-rimmed, hollow eyes spoke of a lack of food and sleep, but at least he didn't seem to be hurt.

"Irina?"

Her eyes snapped up, meeting an expectant gaze that told her he was waiting for something. She hadn't heard his question, but she had one of her own.

"How..."

It was more of a croak than a word. Ross scrambled backwards, snatching a tin cup off the floor. It must be what had caused the noise. He dipped it into a bucket of water and returned to her side.

Drinking slowly gave her a moment to sort her thoughts. She had no idea how long she had been out of it, but the weakness of her limbs and mind was a familiar one. She knew she needed food, and soon, but her body hadn't yet caught up with the fact, and she didn't feel hungry.

"How long was...?" she asked when the cup was empty. The pain in her throat made her feel queasy; from screaming and... other things she did not want to think about.

"Two days." Ross took the cup and slid off the bed. He didn't look at her as he said, "You had a fever, and you were... I didn't know what to do. I thought I was going to lose you."

When he looked up, tears were shimmering in his eyes, just like in her memory. Unlike in her memory, he attempted a smile, though.

"Can you sit up? You need to eat something."

Irina's body was a collection of healing wounds, sore



muscles, and fading bruises, but the persistent ache that had sat deep in her limbs during those last two days was gone. She gritted her teeth and pushed herself up, leaning against the wall for support as her stomach dropped and her world tilted.

“Are you okay?”

Ross sat next to her, steadying her between the wall and his body. Irina slowly blinked her eyes open and raised her hand. It wouldn’t stop trembling.

“I don’t know.”

She should be dead. The thought came all of a sudden, a mix of sorrow and relief settling in her chest. She wanted to live, but she didn’t know how. What she was going to do. Everything she had ever known was gone—except for Ross, and he couldn’t stay with her.

He put his left arm around her, and she leaned against his shoulder. At least for now, he was still here. He put the cup to her lips to help her drink. After every single sip, she had to turn her head away, fighting against the rising bile as she swallowed. She was no stranger to stone-hard bread softened with water. The slimy texture of the salty globs had never before bothered her this much.

When the cup was empty, he pulled a wad of plain fabric closer. “It’s my shirt,” he explained, offering it to her.

She looked at his bare torso, partially hidden behind the two halves of the robe he had put back on without any kind of undergarment. It was a relief to see no injuries; no scrapes, cuts or bruises, nothing to indicate that the bandits had taken their anger out on him as well.

Irina sat still while he pulled the shirt over her head and held it so she could slip her arms into the sleeves. She was grateful for his help, for not having to move her arms too much, but the effort left her exhausted all the same.

Leaning against Ross, Irina let her gaze wander. The

building was in worse shape than she had thought at first glance, walls mere years away from crumbling completely and littered with moss and weeds. But in one of the walls sat a square, showing streaks of vibrant blue and green that filled her chest with so much longing, tears welled in her eyes.

"Can I—" She snapped her mouth shut. It was stupid. They had much more important things to worry about, and she shouldn't waste her strength. But Ross looked at her like he would grant her any wish, and a beam of warm, golden sunlight fell through the window, and she whispered, "Can I go outside?"

"Of course."

He looked so sad. She didn't want him to be sad. She shouldn't have said anything, but he was already standing, offering her his left arm.

"Do you think you can walk?"

Irina wasn't so sure about that, but she had to try. Just like the promise of freedom had made her crawl through the pain, the promise of wind and sunlight made her pull herself to the edge of the bed and put her feet on the floor.

Standing up caused another bout of dizziness, but this time, she was expecting it. Clinging to Ross' arm, she closed her eyes and breathed slowly until it faded. With his help, she made it out of the room and across a hallway that was in equally bad shape.

The light outside was blinding. As they stepped through one last doorway and into an overgrown courtyard, Irina squeezed her eyes shut in reflex, peeking through almost closed eyelids to soak up her surroundings. Everything was so bright and so warm. Green and blue and white and brown and wonderful.

She took a few steps forward onto a patch of grass and fell to her knees. The pain was forgotten as she brushed her hands through the grass. Soft. So soft. So alive. Whistling in

the wind. Tickling her arms and her thighs. She wanted to laugh, but it came out wrong; everything was wrong, was too much, but it was still better than before.

She dropped to her side and rolled onto her back, ignoring the pain of healing welts and bruises as she watched fluffy white clouds pass by on a perfectly blue sky framed by green leaves swaying in the wind. The rain she had dreamed of was absent. It was probably for the better. The warmth of the sun was pleasant on her skin, displacing the lingering memories of freezing cold. Ignoring all the pains in her body, Irina stretched out and let her eyes fall half closed.

Ross lowered himself next to her, much more carefully. She watched him with concern. He always had a moderate amount of difficulty walking, but on this short way, he seemed to have struggled more than usual. The stick he used couldn't be great, and he was barefoot, just like her. No wonder he had trouble between all the rocks, roots, and rubble.

He lay down next to her, inviting her into his arms, and how could she say no? She snuggled up to him, feeling his chest rise and fall under her hand and his fingers tangle in the rat's nest that was her hair.

Irina barely noticed how much time passed, how the wind picked up and the light became dimmer. Vaguely, she was aware of the sun sinking behind the trees surrounding the courtyard, but after the cold of winter and the chill of death, a cool spring breeze didn't bother her, and after months on the barren stones, the earth was as soft as any mattress.

Ross seemed to notice it, though. First, he held her closer, pulling his robe over her the best he could, but eventually, he nudged her shoulder.

"Irina?"

"Mh?"

"We should go back inside. The sun is setting." He grasped her hand that was resting on his chest. "And we need to talk

about what we'll do now."

His words seemed to suck all warmth out of the air. Irina shivered, all too aware that the peace was treacherous. The hope was treacherous. She had nothing, belonged nowhere; wherever he would be going, she wouldn't be able to follow him.

Seemingly unaware of the turmoil inside her, Ross smiled as he pulled her up into a sitting position.

"Don't worry. I have a plan."

\* \* \*

"Your family's hunting lodge?"

Trying his best not to be discouraged by Irina's incredulous tone, Ross nodded. They sat side by side on the makeshift bed, huddled under the blanket against the chilly evening breeze.

"Last year, we were about to spend our yearly fortnight there, but it obviously didn't happen after you—" No. Not good. "After my brother died." Well, that wasn't much better, but it would have to do. "I don't think anyone went there afterwards. There will be supplies. Food. Fire. Beds. Real beds."

He smiled. She didn't return it.

"But aren't you going home?"

Ross could only stare at her, skin and bones and bruises all over. "Without you?" he blurted out. Did she really think he would leave her alone? Like this? After everything?

Avoiding his gaze, Irina watched her hands as she picked at the blanket. "I can't come with you," she whispered. "I know I can't. Your family—"

"They can go fuck themselves," he interrupted her. "They didn't come for me."

He wondered if they had messed it up, or if they had never intended to pay, pushing a few more possibilities aside to

consider at a later time. The exact reason why they had left him to die wasn't important now. What was important was getting Irina to safety. From picking at the loose fibers, she had switched to picking at her skin. Ross grabbed her hand.

"You saved my life, Ivy. You. Not them. I'm not going back." It felt good to say it out loud. "I'm not going back." When he saw her helpless, confused gaze, he added, "I will stay with you."

Her mouth moved. He waited patiently. She had been through a lot. She had almost died. Giving her enough time to process his words was the least he could do, but that she even had to process them—that she truly thought he would leave her behind—broke his heart.

"How long?" she eventually whispered.

"As long as you'll have me, I guess." When his clumsy attempt to lighten the mood fell flat, his smile turned into a frown. "Ivy. I thought I lost you. I thought you were *dead*. I won't leave you again."

He would never forget coming home to celebrate his graduation, only to find out his life had been torn apart and no one had even bothered to inform him until he had asked where Irina was. Leaving him in the hands of the bandits to die was only one of the reasons why his family could go fuck themselves.

Slowly, his words seemed to get through to her. She looked at their hands and returned his grasp, even daring to lean against his shoulder.

"But what will we do?" she asked. The open-ended question sounded as helpless as he felt.

"I don't know," Ross admitted. "It depends on what we'll find. If anyone is looking for me. First, we'll need to get our strength back. And then—" His heart beat wildly in his chest, overwhelmed by worries and possibilities. It was pointless to dream of building a new life when he couldn't even be sure

how they were going to survive the coming weeks. "We'll see."

"The lodge." She looked at the window as if she might be able to spot it outside. "Where is it?"

Taking his best guess at how much of the area she knew, Ross tried to describe the way. Unfortunately, he only had a vague idea of where the prison was, so they would have to backtrack for a while until he would be able to spot familiar landmarks. From his family's mansion, it was only a few hours, but unlike a hunting party, they had no horses—Irina didn't even have shoes.

"Do you think you can walk that far?" Ross asked.

"Have to," she mumbled into his sleeve.

As much as he hated to admit it, she was right. The longer they remained here, the worse their situation was going to get. They needed a truly safe and comfortable place to recover—and food. Gods, he hoped there would still be supplies in the lodge.

He sat with her for a few more minutes before he freed himself to make use of the last bit of daylight. With a crudely carved piece of wood, he smashed half of the leftover bread into pieces so they would dissolve more quickly. He hadn't dared to stray far from the building, but whenever he had gone outside to fetch fresh water or relieve himself, he had taken a quick walk around and gathered everything he had been able to identify. While he had taken the roots and leaves for himself—nasty bitter and sandy things that had at least kept his stomach from attempting to digest itself—he had saved the berries for Irina.

It was a pitiful excuse for a meal. When he offered Irina the bowl, she shot him a questioning glance.

"What about you?"

"I'm not the one who has been starving for months." He didn't feel great, but one more day without food was not

going to kill him. He wasn't so sure about Irina. "Please. Tomorrow evening, we will be at the lodge."

Slowly, she took the bowl from him. Whatever reservations she might have had at first, they were forgotten the moment she began to eat. She gulped down the contents of the bowl so quickly, Ross was worried she might get sick.

"Thank you," she said when she was done licking the bowl clean. Her hands trembled as she handed it back.

"We should get some rest soon. Tomorrow will be hard." Ross turned the empty bowl in his hands. "I would like to look at your wounds. The ones on your ankles worry me the most, but we need to keep all of them clean."

Irina lowered her gaze. She nodded as she picked at the skin on her wrists, which were adorned with a band of bruises. His own wrists looked worse, but they were hidden in his sleeves, and Irina didn't seem to have noticed them yet.

"Okay," she whispered. When she unfolded her legs, she grimaced and bent over. "But I need to go outside first."

"Of course. Do you need help?"

She shook her head too quickly, a tension to her posture that hadn't been there before. Even though she barely made it onto her feet, Ross remained sitting and only watched as she staggered out of the room. How often had she allowed him to do something himself when he had insisted he didn't need help? It was only fair to believe her now, even if it tore him apart to know that she was in such pain.

To distract himself, he began preparing the poultice, if it could even be called that. The amount of healing herbs in the courtyard of the abandoned prison was meager at best; most of the space had been taken over by mint plants, which might very well have escaped the building's kitchen decades ago.

In the middle of crushing the herbs to mush, he froze. Someone shouted outside. His heart leaped into his throat, not calming down even as he realized that it wasn't a shout.

Irina was crying. She must have wandered close to the window without realizing it, because he didn't think she wanted him to know.

As the fading adrenaline left him shaking all over, Ross put the bowl down and wrapped his arm around his legs, fighting his own tears. He had to cling to the hope that the lodge was still stocked, that tomorrow night, they would have a place to truly rest.

The sound of stumbling footsteps made him look up. Clinging to the doorframe, face splotchy and eyes red, she looked as shaken as he felt. There was no point in asking her whether she was all right, so he didn't. She dragged herself onto the bed, and she lay down on her stomach with her arms tucked close to her face, and she cried quietly as Ross sat next to her to clean and bandage her ankles.

She was still crying when he crawled under the blanket and put his arm around her.





## CHAPTER 11

# Together

Ross awoke with the first light of dawn, feeling stiff and sore all over. He shuffled away from Irina, slipping out from under the blanket and onto the floor. As quietly as possible, he prepared the meager rest of the bread and the last few berries for her, leaving the bowl to soak as he made his way outside to refill the waterskin.

His attempt to walk unaided ended with him clinging to the walls and hobbling across the courtyard, only to slam into the well. Even if he put his brace back on, he wouldn't be steady enough on his feet to attempt the hike without the stick. With no free hand, taking everything useful with them would be a challenge, but if they didn't make it before nightfall, he didn't want to be stranded in the forest without supplies.

When he returned, Irina was still fast asleep, so he risked another excursion. He hadn't been back down in the dungeon yet, and he really, really didn't want to go back down, but he needed something to tie together their bundle, and as much as he hated it, he knew there had to be some rope down there.

He pulled open the door and pushed a bit of rubble in front of it to make sure it wouldn't close behind him. The

air coming from down below was freezing, sending a chill down his spine. It was so cold, he trembled as he descended into the darkness, scooting from step to step on his butt so he wouldn't tumble down the stairs.

The air was stale and smelled of wet dirt and piss. Taking shallow breaths through his mouth and ignoring the fluttering of his heart, he pressed on. He had to pull himself together. He had only been down here a few days and he was already freaking out. Irina had survived months down here. Always in the dark, always alone, always one missed visit away from finally starving to death.

In front of his cell, he froze. He knew there was nothing of use in there, he had stared at each crack and pebble for hours, so why didn't he move on? Why couldn't he tear his gaze away from the empty shackles?

He didn't have time for this. Clutching the stick so hard the muscles in his right hand felt almost as tense as those in his left, he shuffled forward, all but dragging his left leg behind. Light fled from him as he entered the short passage that led to Irina's cell, and with it, the air seemed to flee as well. There wasn't enough left to fill his lungs, to make them expand against the constricting pressure of his own ribs.

It took barely five slow, shuffled steps to get there, but when he reached Irina's cell, he was shaking so hard he had to lean against the wall for support as he looked around. The walls and the floor were barren, the small window-slit near the ceiling and a rusted grate on the floor the only things breaking the monotony of rough stones. A bucket stood in one corner, catching water that dripped from the ceiling in a painfully slow cadence, and a pile of crumpled, threadbare blankets lay in another. The dim light was merciful enough to hide any bloodstains he knew had to be there.

Half a year. She had been locked in this tiny hole for half a year. How had she not completely lost her mind? And the

winter. She had been here during the *winter*, with nothing to protect her from the bitter cold.

Ross forced himself to keep looking. He had come down for a reason, and that reason wasn't to wallow in horror about misery he could no longer change. He spotted the discarded shackles, connected with a too-short piece of chain, and a piece of rope, the ends tied together to form a loop. He picked up the latter and stuffed it in his waistband, distinctly paying no attention to the darkened stains on the worn fibers. He was in no position to be picky.

Not sure what he was expecting to find, he picked up the blankets one by one. There were three of them, but between the thin material and copious amounts of holes and frayed edges, they barely amounted to one complete one. Under the last one, tucked away against the wall, he discovered a stash of objects. Ross lowered himself to better inspect them: Dried leaves. One half of a walnut shell. A pebble. Some twigs and a few bones. The bounty of an outside world that had been just out of reach for her. With trembling fingers, Ross picked up something he couldn't identify.

He turned it in his hand, and the object took shape. A humanoid figure, like a little doll, made from scraps of fabric and... was that hair? He dropped the thing as quickly as if it had burned him.

He struggled back onto his feet, clinging to the cold wall until his left foot was done freaking out about the physical exertion and mental anguish. More quickly than it was wise, he hobbled out of the cell and towards the stairs, bumping into walls and metal bars each time he faltered. He scrambled up the stairs on all fours, dragging the stick behind him. He needed to breathe fresh air, to see the sky; to hold Irina in his arms and promise himself that he would never, ever lose her again.

\* \* \*

Irina awoke slowly, clinging to the remnants of sleep that had been, for once, truly restful. She wasn't scared. She wasn't cold. She was in pain, but as long as she didn't attempt to move, it was bearable. Breathing in the smell of drying grass, she blinked her eyes open, finding the spot next to her empty.

"Ross?" she called, barely raising her voice above a whisper. What if he was gone? What if she was alone?

No. He had told her he was going to stay. She pushed herself up, clinging to the blanket and the warmth trapped beneath. Most of her many aches were beginning to fade. The wounds on her ankles burned, and taking a too-deep breath still stung in her chest, but moving her arms no longer made her want to burst into tears, and she could dare to lean against the wall with her back.

She listened, resisting the urge to probe the inside of her cheek with her tongue or touch the outside with her fingers. That particular cut seemed to have trouble healing as quickly as the others, no doubt because it was impossible to keep the area still while speaking or drinking.

Dragging footsteps, and the sharp, hard impact of the wooden stick sounded. The wound in her cheek twinged as she couldn't stop herself from smiling the moment Ross' shape appeared in the doorway. His face was glistening wet, the edges of his sleeves and neckline soaked. He must have refreshed himself at the well. The cold water had left his eyes bloodshot, but upon seeing her, he returned her smile.

"You're awake."

He grabbed the bowl off the lopsided table near the window and hobbled across the room.

"Here. It's all that's left."

While Ross sat down next to her, Irina contemplated the not very appetizing looking sludge decorated with three sad looking berries. What wouldn't she have given for a single

berry a few weeks ago. Now, the slimy texture was all she could think about.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I have already eaten."

It was a lie, and a pretty blunt one at that. But there was no point in arguing about it, because he was right. She was in much worse shape than him, and she needed every bit of strength she could muster to make it through this day.

They sat in companionable silence while she ate, slowly getting the hang of how much she could dare to put in her mouth so she managed to swallow it before the urge to gag became overwhelming. If Ross noticed anything, he was kind enough to keep it to himself.

She still licked the bowl clean, not willing to waste so much as a trace of the food he had so graciously kept for her. When she handed the bowl back, the taste of berries lingered on her tongue. Perhaps they were lucky and would find more berries in the forest. The sooner they were on their way, the better, but there was one thing she had to do before they could leave.

"I... need to." She gestured at the door before quickly pulling her hand back into her lap. "... go."

Following her gesture, Ross' expression turned from confusion to understanding. He nodded, shuffling aside to leave her plenty of space to slide off the bed without touching him. Irina staggered outside, feeling each step in her aching limbs and dreading the coming journey. Walking. For hours. She felt like collapsing from merely leaving the building to relieve herself.

Despite her quickly increasing despair, she managed to stay quiet this time. It burned terribly, and she could only hope that those wounds would soon heal as well. Not that she had checked how badly she was hurt. It wasn't like she could do anything about it, she told herself, so it didn't matter.

She went to the well afterwards to wash herself. All the water in the world wouldn't be enough to make her feel clean, but it was a start. Having proper clothes would be even better, but she was grateful enough Ross had given her his shirt. He liked them long, and she was a bit smaller than him, so it reached almost down to her knees. She used the sleeves to dry off her face, wincing when she came too close to her wound. Hopefully it wasn't bleeding again; she didn't want to ruin his shirt.

When she returned to the room, Ross sat on the bed. With his left leg stretched out in front of him, he was fighting with the brace. She plopped down next to him and watched him for a moment, frowning when he slipped off and slammed the thing against his foot. Before he could try again, Irina snatched the brace.

"Hey! What...?"

She put the brace aside and reached for his leg. The skin in the middle of his shin was rubbed raw and scabbed over, the injury a few days old. His leg twitched under her touch, but she pulled it back undeterred and inspected the wound. It was already healing, but it would still be painful to put the brace back on.

Perhaps some padding would help. She grabbed the edge of the blanket and used her teeth to rip a strip off, spitting out fibers as she straightened the piece of fabric. It wasn't overly clean, but it would be better than nothing, so she tied it around his leg as carefully as possible.

Instead of putting the brace back on yet, Irina rubbed her thumbs over the spots on his calf she knew troubled him the most, slowly increasing the pressure. Ross was clearly exhausted, worried, and in pain; no wonder his muscles were this tense.

"What are you – oh." He dropped backwards with a sigh.  
"Mhm."

With a faint smile that didn't tug on her wound too much, Irina put one hand flat against his leg to offer him some warmth. The other hand massaged strained muscles, trying to get them to relax at least a little bit. He had done so much for her; she was glad she could ease some of his pain in return.

After a few minutes, she reached for the brace. It looked mostly like a boot, but it was much sturdier, keeping his foot firmly in place. Unfortunately, it was also much harder to put on. One last time, his leg tried to escape her grasp, then his foot slipped into the leather and she began to close the clasps over the scrap of fabric.

"You don't have to do that, you know."

Irina looked up, muscle memory keeping her fingers going. She couldn't interpret the intention behind his words, and his expression was not helping, either. Did he no longer want her help? It was what she had literally been ordered to do most of her life. Just because there was no one here to order her around didn't mean she would stop.

"I know," was all she finally said.

"Okay." Ross pushed himself up and put his feet on the floor. "Thank you."

His hand twitched in her direction. Even though it was his left one, the movement didn't seem involuntary. She took it, careful not to come too close to his missing finger. He was hurt, too. How easy it was to forget that when he took care of everything.

Irina shuffled closer and dropped her head onto his shoulder. He was shaking, so she put one arm around him without letting go of his hand. After a moment, he leaned against her, stiff and careful. Irina pulled him closer until he finally gave in and all but collapsed in her arms, clinging to her as desperately as she clung to him.

They sat for a while, neither of them saying a word. Feeling him so close, the nervous, restless fluttering in her chest

calmed down, and she could have remained like that forever. It was Ross who decided it was time to move on, slowly letting go of her.

"Thank you," he said when he straightened up.

Irina cast him a confused glance, but he was already leaning forward and didn't notice it.

"Here." He picked a bundle off the floor and offered it to her. It looked like tree bark held together with scraps of fabric. "I tried to... Well, they're not very good. But perhaps they'll help."

Shoes, it dawned on her when she pulled the two pieces apart. A vaguely sole-like shape made from strips of tree bark, with thin strands of fabric to keep them in place. They probably wouldn't last long, but she was grateful for every moment she didn't have to walk barefoot. She put them on, ignoring the twinge in her thighs and abdomen as she pulled up her legs so she could reach her feet.

"We should get going," Ross said when she was done.

Wriggling her toes in their makeshift shelter, Irina nodded. She watched in confusion as he took one of the wadded up blankets—no, not a blanket any longer. With a piece of rope, he had turned it into a bag, no doubt to carry their meager belongings. The tin dishes clanked, but the bundle was too big to contain only them.

Ross stood up and flung the belt over his shoulder so the bundle came to rest on his hip. Extending his hand in her direction he said, "Come."

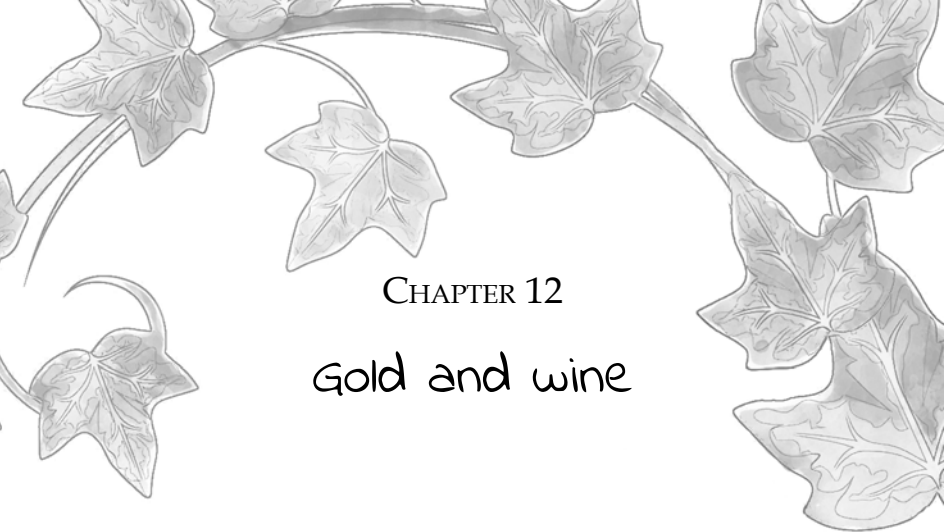
Irina let him pull her up, giving his hand a little squeeze before she let go to hand him the stick that was lying on the bed. Standing on the makeshift shoes felt weird, but what didn't feel weird after all this time under the earth? Walking over a floor that wasn't made of roughly hewn stones. Feeling the sun on her skin and the wind in her hair. Hearing the calls of birds, clearly, not muffled through arm-thick walls.



She followed him out of the building and through the courtyard, casting one last glance back. Under the vegetation that had taken over this place, the derelict buildings were barely visible, crumbling walls overgrown with ivy and young trees stretching their branches through holes in the roof.

"Are you okay?" Ross asked.

Irina tore her gaze away and attempted a smile. Her dreams of escape had never led her much further than up the stairs. She had been painfully aware that she had nowhere to go. But unlike in her dreams, she wasn't alone. Embracing the faint spark of hope in her chest, Irina nodded, turning her back on the prison and looking ahead towards her future.



## CHAPTER 12

### Gold and wine

Several hours later, the sun stood high in the sky, and Irina's spirits were fading. One of the shoes kept slipping off, a few of her wounds had started to bleed again, and she was bathed in sweat, even though it was far from hot. She had grabbed a stick for herself, a gnarled piece of wood with the bark long fallen off, but it didn't help much against her exhaustion. The strap of the bundle she had taken from Ross pressed painfully against healing bruises, no matter how often she shifted it in an attempt to find a more comfortable position.

She had no idea where they were or how much further they had to go, and there was no point in wasting her breath with asking. Knowing the answer wouldn't change the facts. Instead, she looked around with wide eyes.

The world was full of color and so alive. Everywhere she looked, insects hummed and crawled and skittered about. Deep emerald climbing vines wrapped around the branches of trees whose leaves were so bright, they seemed to glow. The sun broke through the canopy in thin rays that painted moving patterns onto the forest floor, and the tips of her fingers were red from the berries they had found along the way.

Even with those berries, her stomach was still painfully empty, just like her mouth was painfully dry. They were rationing the bit of water they had taken with them. The few streams they had come across had been so shallow and muddy, Ross had insisted it would be more dangerous to drink from them than to go without.

While she considered asking him for a moment so she could open the bundle and take another sip, Ross froze, turning to stare into the distance.

"Do you smell that?" he asked.

Irina stepped up next to him. Breathing slowly, she tried to figure out what he meant, but all she smelled was moist earth under decomposing leaves—until a gust of wind carried another scent with it, making her frown.

"Something's dead." Clinging to her walking stick with both hands to give her shoulders a moment of rest, she sniffed, but the smell was gone as quickly as it had come. "Something big."

"Probably just a deer," Ross said, clearly more to convince himself than her. "We need to keep going."

He began to walk, so Irina followed, looking around nervously. The smell became stronger, soon persistent enough it didn't fade anymore even when the wind ceased, and she raised her free arm to cover her nose and mouth.

They had to be close. She could only hope that whatever had died hadn't attracted scavengers—or that whatever had killed it wasn't still around. Irina pushed a low-hanging branch aside with her stick and shrieked.

"Ross!" she screamed.

As he hurried towards her she stared into the empty eye sockets of the dead man in front of her.

\* \* \*

“Oh— oh, gods.”

Ross came to a stumbling stop next to Irina, finding the cause for her scream in the dead body nestled in the layer of ivy on the ground. A body that, by the looks of it, had been dead for a while. The discolored fabric of his clothes was stretched tightly over his swollen torso, and scavengers had taken the eyes and torn off bits of skin, leaving chunks of exposed flesh crawling with maggots.

As disfigured as the man was, Ross recognized him instantly. It was one of the bandits; the one who had been first in line to hurt Irina, whose belt had left marks on her back before he had raped her in front of Ross. He did not feel sorry for the piece of shit, but the growing unease in his stomach displaced any kind of satisfaction he could have felt.

Next to him, Irina gasped and took a step back. She must have recognized him, too.

“Are you all...” Ross raised his head, but a figure behind her caught his attention. “Oh no,” he muttered, walking past her to the second body.

It was in equally bad shape; skin bloated and greenish, eyes gone, clothes soaked with bodily fluids. Ross took shallow breaths through his mouth, which didn’t help much. It felt as if he could taste the stench.

“What happened?” Irina whispered. She was as pale as a sheet.

“I don’t know. Let’s—” His tongue stumbled over the syllables as his inner turmoil cost him some control over his muscles. He raised his stick to push a branch aside. “What’s that?”

Behind the tree lay a small clearing, barely even worth the name. Knee-high grass filled the area that was surrounded by forest from all sides. And there, collapsed in various poses of distress, were the other three bandits.

Driven by curiosity and slowed down by disgust, Ross stepped out from between the trees. The bandits wore what

they had been wearing the day they had left; which didn't say much, because he was pretty sure those were the only clothes the men had owned. One lay curled up on the ground in front of a fallen log, another sat slumped against a broad tree, and the third seemed to have fallen face-down. No pools of blood, no obvious injuries that weren't bite-marks, no signs of a fight. For them to be left like this, they must have died almost at the same time. It was unsettling.

Ross shuffled closer to the one lying in front of the log. It was the one he had assumed to be their leader, even though all he could use to identify him were his clothes. The scavengers had done short work of his face, leaving gaping holes where his eyes and nose had been.

Something glinted in the grass. When Ross probed the ground with his stick, he found a coin, half buried in the soil. Not any coin—a gold coin. He pondered how to pick it up. His knees were wobbly in a way that had nothing to do with his condition, and he didn't like the idea of letting go of his stick and risking a fall face-first into a decaying body.

"Irina?" When she came over, he pointed at the coin with his stick and asked, "Can you get that?"

She picked up the coin and wiped it clean on her shirt before handing it to him. He pushed the unease of asking her to do things for him aside. They had much more pressing matters to deal with, like the question of what the fuck had killed five men.

Irina stared at the coin in his hand. "That's so much."

To her, it must be; to him, not quite as much, as he shamefully realized. What could feed a family for several months was barely enough to pay for a new piece for his wardrobe, merely a small part of the tuition at the boarding school his parents had sent him to. There was only one explanation for how the bandits had gotten their hands on the coin.

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't know," he said. The words felt wrong on his tongue. "Let's keep looking."

While Irina wandered off, Ross combed through the grass surrounding the fallen log. Behind it, he found an empty bottle, poking it with his stick. Watching the light catch in the deep blue glass made Ross feel sick to his stomach.

Glass was expensive; pristine, evenly colored glass like this even more so. He recognized the bottle from his parents' wine cellar, knowing that the wine was his father's favorite.

Various possibilities swirled in his mind. He had readily assumed that his family had refused to pay after all, but finding the bandits dead like this changed everything. No fight. The gold. The bottle. The answer was so close, but he couldn't think when the air was so thick, he could barely breathe.

Irina returned to his side. "Over there are the remains of a campfire, and I found an empty bottle. And over there is a basket with food. Most of it seems to be rotten, but perhaps we can —"

"No!"

His shout made her flinch. Ross shoved the coin into his makeshift bag, extending his arm in her direction while cursing himself for being the cause of the wide-eyed look on her face. When she reached for his hand, he pulled her closer.

"Don't touch it, Ivy." He spoke slowly, as clearly as possible, despite his heart's best attempt to jump out of his chest. "I think they were poisoned."

He wouldn't have thought it possible for her to become any paler.

"Did you touch anything?" he asked, voice breaking apart in a shrill squeal.

She shook her head, and Ross thanked the Seven for it. He clung to her hand, focusing on the fact that she was solid and warm and very much alive while he waited for his heartbeat to calm down.

"Let's go," she pleaded.

Ross nodded. His legs still felt rather wobbly, but the quicker they put some distance between themselves and this grisly site, the better. As she took his left arm and put it around her shoulders, Ross closed his eyes, hoping a few moments would be enough to banish the dizziness and allow him to focus.

"Ross?" Irina whispered.

It had to be enough. He looked at the canopy, watching golden light and green leaves and not thinking at what lay at their feet at all. When he pointed the stick in the direction they had to take, Irina began to walk, leading him slowly but steadily away from the rotting corpses.

The branches of the trees closing behind them. Warm sunlight filtering through the canopy. The soft embrace of last year's fallen leaves under his soles. Ross had hoped he would be able to breathe easier once they left the stench of death behind, but the smell lingered, sticking to his clothes, his hair, his very airways.

*Can we –*

There wasn't enough air in his lungs to speak. He wheezed, then gasped, trembling as a sudden panic overcame him.

"Ross?" Irina's steps slowed down. "Oh, shit."

She nudged him sideways, closer to a tree. When she began to lower herself, he let go of the stick, clinging to her instead. He barely noticed how hard he sat on the ground, the pain displaced by diffuse terror.

Everything was spinning, and blackness billowed in front of his eyes. When he slumped to the side, Irina caught his head before it could slam against the ground, lifting it onto her lap. Ross grasped her arm to steady himself against the sickening feeling of the world tilting at the edges, only realizing he had squeezed too hard when he heard her hiss. He let go instantly, digging his fingers into the soft ground instead.

*I'm sorry.*

His lips moved without a sound. She put her finger on them anyway, a featherlight touch that made him tremble.

"Shh."

\* \* \*

Irina watched Ross stare straight past her, his mouth opening and closing ever so slightly with each gasp for air. It would have been easy to assume that the sight had been too much for him, that he was merely squeamish; a typical spoilt and sheltered rich boy. But this was Ross, who enjoyed the scariest, goriest horror stories, who found slugs and spiders and snakes delightful, who had once gotten into trouble for dissecting a dead rat so he could see what it looked like inside.

"Ivy?"

Ross' voice was raspy and weak. She guessed the old nickname more than she understood it. Perhaps it was just unfortunate timing for his exhaustion to catch up with him. He had given her so much, taken so little for himself.

"I'm here," she mumbled while she rummaged around in the pack. "I'm here."

She pulled the cork out of the waterskin, noticing with concern how little water there was left in it. When she put it to his lips, he drank slowly, taking breaks in between sips to catch his breath. Irina gave him the remaining water, only putting the waterskin away when the last drop had fallen between his lips. Her body had been pushed to the edge more often than not during those past months. She was sure she could make it for another day without water, but she couldn't make it without *him*.

"We need to. Keep moving," he said.

Her fingers brushed through his hair. She didn't want to keep moving. She wanted to collapse on the ground, where



the leaves were so soft and smelled of earth and nature and outside. But they had to, no matter how tired she was, no matter how much each step hurt, so she asked, "Do you think you can get up?"

Ross nodded. With her help, he managed to get back onto his feet, but he still seemed unsteady, so she didn't let go. It took her a moment to get bag, limbs, and walking sticks sorted, then they were on their way again, fighting their weary bodies for every single step.

After a while, Irina wasn't so sure anymore if she was steadying him, or if it was Ross who dragged her along. Her strength was fading as quickly as the day's warmth and light. She had finally lost one of her shoes and not bothered to stop for it, knowing that it was only a matter of time before it would fall off again. Her feet ached anyway, no longer used to standing, let alone walking, and thorns and nettles had left their marks on her bare legs. Ross tried his best to steer them around the thickest parts of the undergrowth, but dead and living plants alike made it hard for him to find a way.

"It will get dark quickly in the forest." Between two steps, he pointed to the canopy. "But the silver moon is almost full. If we can get closer to the edge of the forest." He hesitated, barely noticeable. "We could still make it."

Irina merely nodded. Anything to finally reach their destination, to find some water and a place to collapse, never to get up again. Just because she knew she wouldn't die of thirst yet didn't mean that it was any more pleasant to feel the lack of water take hold in her body. She might have even ignored Ross' warnings and taken water from a stream, no matter the risk, but they had not come across another one.

"Okay." He nudged her shoulder. "Give me the bag."

"No." She tried to take a step but didn't have enough strength to pull him with her. "Let's go."

He sighed. "Ivy..."

Another attempt to move, and he gave in, taking the lead again. How he could even tell which way they had to go was a mystery to her, but she trusted him, and she was much too exhausted to think about it.

The light faded, deepening the shadows around them until there was nothing left but blackness filled with the rustling of leaves, the humming of insects, and the faint calls of night-dwelling creatures. Moonlight flashed through openings in the canopy, not enough to light their way, merely enough to fuel their hope. They stumbled more than they walked, clinging to each other in search of comfort and stability alike.

Ross' gait became more and more erratic, but it was Irina who fell, scraping her shin open on the log that had been in her way. Blinking away the tears and biting down on a whimper, she struggled back to her feet. Her shoulders hurt. Her legs hurt. Her toes hurt. The second shoe was gone as well, as was her walking stick. She couldn't remember losing them.

"We reached the edge." Ross nudged her head with his. "Hold on a bit longer, Ivy."

His words didn't make sense until they stepped out of the forest. After the darkness between the trees, the moonlight was almost blinding. It illuminated the soft slope of a vast field that bordered on the forest, whatever had been sown there not yet grown enough to hinder their movement.

Trusting Ross' lead, Irina let her eyes fall shut, only blinking them open from time to time against the uneasiness of wondering whether she was about to walk into something. Faintly, she was aware of how the dug over earth turned into grass, then into gravel, then into sand. Above her, the moonlight hid behind clouds, and clouds turned into branches. The air was cold, but Irina was too warm, sweat plastering her hair and shirt to her skin. Thirst, pain, and exhaustion filled every single one of her thoughts, leaving no room for anything else.

"Ivy? We're here." Ross put his hand on her cheek. "We made it."

She blinked. Everything was spinning around her. The moon, so white and bright. The forest, looming and dark. The hut in front of her, put together from neat, sturdy logs. Ross nudged her towards the door, pulling it open with a hand that was trembling as much as she was.

Darkness encompassed her, but the light falling through the doorway was enough to paint the silhouettes of the interior in a faint gray. Some shelves. A table and a few chairs. A ladder. On the frayed rug in front of the cold fireplace, she allowed her legs to finally give way under her. She was out cold before she felt her body hit the floor.



## CHAPTER 13

# Too much everything

“Ivy? Ivy!”

Ross fell to his knees in front of Irina, ignoring the pain shooting through his stiff leg. His hand felt along her body, but it was too dark to see whether she had any injuries; any new injuries, that was. Perhaps she was merely completely exhausted. He hoped she was merely completely exhausted. With trembling fingers, he pulled the pack out from under her to make sure she was lying in a comfortable position.

He emptied the pack and pulled out the ropes, unfolding the blanket. It now sported a few more holes than it had before, but was it still better than nothing. Spreading it over her, he could feel her shiver, and when he put his hand on her forehead, it was too warm to the touch. If only her fever didn't come back. He knew she would have needed more rest, but they had had no other choice than to leave.

When he leaned back, his legs felt like all of his bones had turned to mush. Terrible, painful mush. Gods. *He* was completely exhausted, but they needed water, and he had to try to get a fire going. He snatched the empty waterskin and dragged himself over the floor to a chair, clutching the seat with his good hand to pull himself up. His stick was gone,

lost somewhere in the dark, so he hobbled from chair to desk to wall, always looking for the next thing to hold onto.

At least outside, the moonlight illuminated the way to the well, though it was no help in getting the boards that covered it off. He had to push with all his weight to get them to budge, and the crank didn't want to move, either, so he ended up pulling the bucket up with hand, teeth, and feet.

When he had finally pulled up the bucket of wonderful fresh water, he was trembling all over, but he didn't dare to sit down, merely leaning against the well with his hip. He drank, and he washed his hands and face, and he drank some more. With the refilled waterskin, he limped back inside and sat on the rug next to Irina. He was not going to get up again.

Dark as it was, it took him a while to find steel and tinder, but he was lucky, and the person who had prepared the hut for the hunting party had already piled wood in the fireplace. He added a handful of twigs and wood chips and took a piece of char cloth from the tinderbox. His left hand didn't want to grasp the flint, but he could at least pin it against the floor.

In theory, it should be easy. Strike the flint with the steel, get some sparks, ignite the cloth. Unfortunately, reality wasn't that easy. He was too tired to control muscles that barely obeyed him on the best of days, and every time he moved to strike the flint, his left hand wanted to mimic the motion, pulling it out from where he was going to hit.

With quickly fading strength and patience, Ross considered his options. Holding the flint with his right foot was his next best bet, but then he wouldn't have a good angle to strike it. He tried it anyway, and it went exactly as badly as he had suspected.

Striking the steel with too much force—and anger—he slipped off and slammed his hand against the flint. How shameful that he couldn't even get a flame going. That was

what maids were for, his family would have said. Well, he had already decided that his family could fuck themselves.

To stop himself from cursing, he sucked on his aching thumb. He didn't want to wake Irina up. She would have had no problem making fire, but he didn't want to bother her. For once, *he* wanted to take care of *her*.

The pulsing in his thumb subsided, and his thoughts cleared. He was doing it all wrong. He had long learned that he had to do things differently, and this was no exception. There had to be a better way.

After a moment's consideration, he grabbed two pieces of wood and pinned the flint together with the char cloth between them, holding the construct down with his weight. It took him a few tries to adjust the position of the flint before it sat firmly enough, but once he could strike it, it didn't take long for the sparks to ignite the cloth. Ross blew carefully into the embers, watching them glow brighter. When he bedded the spark in a wad of thin, dry fibers, they quickly caught fire, and he hurried to throw them into the fireplace.

As the fire took over the piled wood, the spark of pride in his chest burned almost as brightly. All things considered, it was a rather unimpressive achievement, but it was one nonetheless. One of many things he would have to figure out on his own in the future. Finding a place to live. Earning money. Making sure his treacherous —

A quiet sniffing noise pulled him out of his thoughts. Irina was awake; and she was crying.

"Ivy." He pushed his tools away from the fire and scrambled to her side. "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer. One of her hands twitched in the direction of the fire, the orange glow reflected in her dark eyes.

"Ivy?"

With a whimper, she tried to pull herself closer to the flames, and Ross understood. How long had it been since the

last time she had seen fire? Had felt its warmth? Had been able to wash herself with warm water and enjoy a warm meal? Comforts he had taken for granted all of his life now seemed like a luxury to him as well.

"Stop." When she came too close to the flames, he caught her hand and held it in place. "Don't hurt yourself."

Irina looked from the fire to him, but she didn't struggle against his grip. Her eyes were brimming with tears. Afraid that he might be hurting her, Ross let go. She pulled her hand against her chest and curled up, making herself as small as possible as her tears spilled over and she began to cry.

"It's okay. We're safe. We made it." Not sure if touching her wouldn't make it worse, he could do nothing but watch her helplessly. "We're safe."

She was trembling from head to toe, shaken by sobs that left her gasping for breath. A few more times, Ross repeated his words, but enunciating his words clearly was exhausting, and he was already so exhausted, and his words didn't help at all. Perhaps she would tire herself out soon, but seeing her like this broke his heart.

"Ivy?" he whispered.

When she didn't reply, he wrapped his arm around her, ready to pull back at any moment. She didn't seem to mind, even scooting closer until she was lying halfway on his lap. It shouldn't feel so good to hold her when she was so shaken, but she was here, in his arms, which meant he could finally protect her. Too little, too late, but he was never going to let her go again, and anyone wanting to hurt her would have to get past him.

Slowly, she seemed to calm down. Ross' head dropped, and he jerked awake, his left arm and leg twitching in unison. He wouldn't be able to stay awake much longer, but before he allowed himself to sleep, he had to make sure she drank something. He reached back and felt blindly for the waterskin.

"Here," he said when he had found it. He pushed it towards Irina. "Water."

She drank greedily, barely taking the time to breathe. The spilled water that ran down her chin and soaked her shirt didn't seem to bother her, and when she handed him the waterskin back, it was all but empty. Ross didn't bother looking for the cork in the dark.

"We should sleep. You can have the blanket."

There had to be others, but the fire's light didn't reach far enough to explore the whole lodge, and he was too tired to do so anyway. It was warm enough inside; much warmer than in the dungeon or the broken building above it. He pulled the blanket up to her shoulders, giving in to the urge to stroke her cheek before he took his hand back.

Far away enough from her so he wouldn't touch her or kick her accidentally, he lay down, pinning his left arm and leg down with his weight. It was his best bet at getting any sleep. Without his medicine and exhausted as he was, his muscles were tenser than ever. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on something that wasn't his aching left hand, fingers locked in a painful spasm. The smell of old wood. The crackling of the fire. Irina's hand grasping his robe.

Ross' eyes snapped open in time to see her tuck her head against his chest. Her sleepy movements were uncoordinated, but her intention to share the blanket with him was obvious. He pulled it half-heartedly over himself, just enough so she stopped struggling with it, then put his arm around her. Her movements stilled. Her breathing calmed down. Ross closed his eyes again. If she was comfortable with this much closeness, he wasn't going to complain.

\* \* \*



Irina awoke shortly after dawn, feeling warm—truly, completely warm—for the first time in so long. For a moment, she just lay there, alternating between watching the almost burnt-out embers in the fireplace and watching Ross.

He was fast asleep, with strands of messy hair falling into his face, a few days' worth of pitiful stubble on his chin, and dark streaks on his nose and cheek. She didn't want to wake him up, so she refrained from touching his face, but her fingers found the hem of his robe all on their own. Grabbing it. Holding it. All but clinging to it. Her nightmare had felt so real; being back in her cell, bleeding and starving and dying, and Ross was *gone*.

Listening to his breaths, she slowly calmed down. He wasn't gone. Not yet. How long he was going to stay remained to be seen, but thinking further ahead than the next day didn't feel real yet anyway. She was free in a way she had never been; free to go where she wanted, do what she wanted, live how she wanted. The mere thought overwhelmed her.

Way less overwhelming but much more irritating was the fact that she needed to pee. Not only would she have to leave the warmth behind, everything would fucking hurt the moment she tried to move. She had no other choice, though. Careful not to wake Ross up, she scrambled out from under the blanket and onto her feet, almost collapsing right away. Biting down on a whimper, she hobbled to the nearest shelf, clinging to it as she inspected her feet. Walking the last part of the way barefoot had caused more damage than she had realized.

Slowly, she put her weight back onto her feet, breathing through clenched teeth. It was only pain; nothing she wasn't used to. As long as she managed to walk, it didn't matter. The pain in her feet as she walked didn't matter. The burning in her crotch as she sat on the toilet didn't matter. The bite of the well's rope against her palms didn't matter.

She pulled up a bucket of water and plopped down next to it, leaning against the well. After quenching her thirst, she washed her face, each drop of water dripping down her chin filling her with giddiness. So much water. More than she could ever need. Enough to wash herself whenever she wanted. Perhaps she would do so later, when she had gathered a bit more strength and searched the lodge for something to wear. There was little point in putting on the same clothes afterwards.

She took another sip, just because she could, and pulled her foot onto her lap. The injuries looked insignificant for how much it hurt, a few scrapes, cuts and bruises on her soles, nothing more. When she washed them out, the water burned in her open wounds, but the coldness was soothing, calming her burning skin. Eyeing the oozing mess of discolored skin around her ankles with dismay, she sprinkled some water over them as well, whimpering through clenched teeth at the pain it caused.

When the bucket was empty, she didn't bother pulling up a second one. She should probably go back inside, she thought, but she couldn't bring herself to move. Her fingers brushed through the soft grass, over and over and over again. It tickled her skin, and it smelled like spring, and she couldn't get enough of it. She traced the petals of a tiny, pale blue flower, soaking up each detail as if seeing it for the first time. She let a beetle crawl over her hand and pushed the urge to just *eat* it far, far into the background. She was out. Out. Suddenly, the well at her back was too cold, too hard, too much like a wall. She pushed herself away and toppled over, crawling two steps before she collapsed in the grass.

The wounds on her chest protested at the strain, as did the bruises on her back as she rolled over. Perfectly blue sky stretched above, framed by perfectly vibrant trees, swaying softly in the perfectly warm breeze. It was all she had longed

for and more, so why was she crying? Why was her heart racing in her chest, why couldn't she be happy and grateful?

When the first sob broke out of her, she curled up and buried her face in her arms in an attempt to block out the world. Her tears soaked her already wet sleeves, falling and falling and falling because it was all too much: the beauty, and the pain, and the hunger, and the light, and the feeling that she was still down there, and worst of all, that for a moment, a terrifyingly short moment, she had wished she was.

\* \* \*

It was in front of the well Ross found her, after waking up to her spot empty and frantically searching the room. In his panic, he forgot to grab the stick, and by the time he remembered, he was already clinging to the doorframe and hearing her muffled sobs.

He approached her slowly, limping with each step. The piece of fabric she had put between the clasps and his skin must have slipped away, but he could take care of that later. Once he took the brace off, he would have a harder time walking, and before it came to that, he had to make sure that she was safely back inside and got something to eat.

"Ivy?" he whispered.

She didn't react. He closed the distance between them, sinking awkwardly onto the ground next to her.

"Ivy?"

When he touched her shoulder, she flinched, staring at him with wide-open eyes. Had she hurt herself? He didn't see any blood, but considering the miserable state she was in, that was hardly reassuring.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, "I'm sorry I'm sorry." A hiccup interrupted her apologies, and when she

caught her breath, she whispered, "Thank you." New tears spilled over as she kept repeating both phrases, the words a jumbled mess broken up by sobs.

Ross shuffled closer and pulled her into his arms. At least she wasn't afraid of him. At least she let him hold her, let him cradle her head while she cried into his chest. He wondered if she would ever fully recover after what she had been through. Not only physically; he couldn't even imagine what kind of toll such torment had on one's mind. Whatever it took, no matter how much time, how much care, he wouldn't let her down. Not again.

"Why don't we go back inside?" he asked when she had calmed down far enough that he didn't fear his words would set her off again.

She nodded against his chest and untangled herself from his grip. Her movements as she got up were slow and stiff, be it from pain or from exhaustion. One more reason to get her inside where she could sit down.

Irina wiped her hands off on her shirt and extended them in his direction. Of course, she offered to help him. In the gesture, in the way she looked at him, he caught a glance of her old self, of kindness and stubbornness, and he couldn't bring himself to refuse. When he took her hands, not only did she pull him up, she put his arm around her shoulders and steadied him as they walked back to the lodge.



## CHAPTER 14

### Hard tack, soft pillow

Ross brought her back in front of the fireplace where it was his turn to help her settle down. While Irina pulled the blanket around her legs, he grabbed his stick and went off in search of food. He didn't remember where it was stored – the times he had accompanied his family on their hunting trips, they had brought enough servants with them so no one had had to lift a finger. Because of course they had. He slammed a cupboard door closed and leaned the stick against the wall next to it so he could rub his eyes.

A loud clank made him lower his hand and open his eyes in annoyance. Of course, that useless piece of wood had taken the opportunity to fall over. Oh, how he missed his crutch. He bent over carefully, hoping he wouldn't join the stick on the floor. It lay across a thin, straight line, sectioning off a part of the wooden floorboards. The sight brought back a memory: The food was stored in a cellar under the lodge, keeping it cool and dark. With renewed vigor, he sat on the floor and pulled away the rug covering half of the trapdoor.

The air wafting up from the cellar was musty and cold. As he lowered his legs into the dark hole, he hoped that some of the food was still edible. The ceiling was too low for him

to stand upright, and walking hunched over with his head ducked low pushed the pain from his leg to his hip and up his spine.

He should have brought a lamp. Outside the small circle of light falling into the cellar from above, he could only make out rough shapes, and without knowing what was rotting away on the shelves, he had little desire to feel his way around. He shuffled forward, knocking against some objects that looked too solid to be a mass of moldering refuse.

A few tin cans sounded hollow, but the box next to them was filled. As he carefully shook the box, the contents sounded solid enough, so he decided to take it with him. The longer he stared into the darkness, the more he could make out. Long, thin shapes were hanging in front of the far wall. When he touched them, they were solid, wrapped in some kind of fabric, and when he brought his fingers to his nose, they smelled of smoke and salty fat. Sausages. Those things could be kept for a long time, couldn't they?

On the shelves to his side were some crates he didn't feel like inspecting too closely without light, but he had no such reservations about the row of glass jars next to the crates. If whatever was inside was rotten, he would not have to touch it that way, but perhaps they were lucky.

He moved back and forth, shoving items upstairs one by one, and when he finally fought his way back out of the hole, he was covered in sweat and dust. His leg burned with every step he took, but he could hold out a moment longer. To prepare the food, he had to find a pot—he had seen some while searching for food—and fetch water.

Finally in front of the fireplace, he pried open the box, finding neatly stacked biscuits that were unfortunately hard as rocks. He tried to nibble on one and couldn't even break a piece off. A shame. At least the jar contained honey, but honey and sausages alone were not enough, and the mere

thought of having to climb down a second time made him want to cry.

"You're not supposed to eat them like that," Irina said. Lying on her side with her head propped up on one hand, she was watching him. When he cast her a questioning glance, she added, "You're supposed to cook them. Kinda like you did with the bread. It's not very good, but those things last forever. They probably brought them for the servants."

The way she said it without a hint of resentment, merely stating the fact that people like her always got the scraps. How he wished to do better, to give her everything she deserved, but those biscuits were all he had, and he was grateful enough for them already. He dropped a few into the pot of water and put it close to the fire. The flames were blazing again; Irina must have put new logs into the fireplace.

His bravery in examining a low crate of apples had paid off; the two tiny things he had taken were soft and wrinkly, but not rotten. He cut them into thin slices, adding them together with a spoonful of honey to the sludge that was slowly taking shape. It looked just as unappetizing as the gooey mass he had produced at the abandoned prison, but he hoped being warm and sweet would make the taste more palatable.

The biscuits took their time to soften up, so he left the occasional stirring of the pot to Irina and limped across the lodge to face another opponent: The ladder leading up to the loft where the beds were, and with them all the bedding and, he hoped, some spare clothes.

He only had to make it up once, he told himself as he reached for one of the rungs. He would throw down everything he could get his hands on, sleeping on real beds be damned. He could do it. His right arm was plenty strong, if he ignored the fact that he was also plenty exhausted. He pulled himself up, even though his muscles were trembling from the strain the moment his feet left the floor. His left leg was more of a dead

weight than help, while his left arm at least kept him from faltering when he reached higher.

He made it up three rungs before his foot slipped off and shot through the ladder. His body slammed against the wood, bruising his chest and straining his shoulder. For a moment, all his weight rested on his fingers, and he could feel them lose their grip. There was no way to catch himself, no time to call for help. He tucked his head between his shoulders so his back would take the brunt of the fall and pressed his left arm against his chest so it wouldn't twist under him. The impact drove the air out of his lungs and kept him from screaming as his leg twisted painfully, caught on the ladder.

Blood rushed in his head while darkness filled his vision. His heart hammered in his chest, driven by the fear of not knowing how badly he was hurt. Should he try to move? His right leg was stuck, but he could feel it pounding in the rhythm of his too-fast heartbeat.

"What happened?" Irina dropped to her knees next to him, her hands hovering over him. "What were you doing? Are you hurt?"

"Don't. Know."

While that only answered her second question, it didn't feel too out of place for the first one, either. What the fuck had he been thinking? He couldn't afford to get hurt. If he broke his bones, she would be as good as on her own; worse, she would have to take care of him. And if he died, after everything, because he couldn't even climb —

"Hey. Look at me. Look at me."

Between two gasping breaths, Ross pried his eyes open. Irina reached for his cheek, a smile on her lips that didn't reach her eyes.

"It's okay. I'll check. Just stay calm. Can you do that?"

He wasn't sure how to nod with his head on the floor, and his mouth wasn't willing to form any words. Perhaps



the fluttering of his eyelids was enough of an answer for her, or perhaps she merely stopped waiting for one, crawling towards his legs.

Her mere presence dispelled some of his panic. He had taken many falls in his life, and she had been with him for most of them. He stared at the ceiling and at the edge of the cursed loft, while she freed his leg and felt along it looking for injuries. A few spots would surely bruise spectacularly, but nothing seemed to be broken.

"Can you move your foot?"

He gritted his teeth and wriggled his toes, and then, because the movement was hidden by his shoes, his whole foot. Apparently satisfied with the result, she checked his left leg for injuries next. When she felt along the edge of the brace, he couldn't stop himself from hissing. Her quiet, disapproving noise told him that she knew exactly this pain didn't come from the fall. She quickly undid the clasps and pulled the brace off, and he knew better than to object. Besides, the relief was instant, amplified by the fact that she massaged his calf as she checked for injuries a second time.

"Looking good," she said as she put his leg down. She didn't ask him to move that foot. "How's the arms? All in order?"

He raised his right arm, meeting her halfway and grasping her hand. "Wonderful," he said. His left arm sat comfortably on his chest, and he didn't think it was worth the trouble of moving it. It had been out of the way.

Irina gave his fingers a little squeeze before she moved on, checking the back of his head down to his shoulders. Her fingers pressed against sore muscles and scratched over his scalp, and he almost regretted it when she was done with her examination.

"No blood," she announced. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Her middle and index finger hovered in front of his face.

"Four?" he said. If the severity of his double-vision was any indication, his eye must be pointing far inwards, and he was too tired to attempt to control it.

She cocked her head. "That's okay, then." Her hand came to rest on his left cheek, fingertips brushing his temple. "Make that six and I'd be concerned."

Ross swallowed, overwhelmed by a sudden feeling in his chest, too painful and too beautiful to name it. She knew. She always knew. With her, he never had to pretend to be someone, to feel like someone he wasn't, for the better or for the worse.

"Seems like you were lucky." With a smile, she grasped both of his arms, not yet pulling, merely holding his hands. "Think you can get up?"

Ross nodded. With her help, he was sure he could.

"So. What *were* you doing?" Irina asked when he sat in front of the fireplace, the blanket placed around *his* shoulders for a change.

"The bedding." Ross nodded in the direction of the loft and regretted it instantly as the movement pulled on his sore neck. "It's upstairs."

"You risk your life for a pillow and a blanket?"

"A down pillow." He sighed theatrically. "You know how spoiled I am."

He sure as fuck wasn't going to tell her that he wanted *her* to be comfortable more than anything. The last thing he needed was to make her feel guilty for his own clumsiness.

It took Irina a moment to recognize the joke for what it was, but when she did, she laughed. She really, truly laughed. The pain throbbing in his back and leg was forgotten as he grinned back, his heart filled with a warmth he had missed so dearly for so long.

"You stay here." She pointed at the wooden spoon sticking

out of the pot. "Make sure the food doesn't burn."

Ross scooted closer to the pot. The fire had calmed down, but the embers were glowing brighter than ever. Behind him, Irina walked towards the ladder.

"Ivy."

She paused and turned around, a questioning look on her face.

"Are you sure? Your feet."

Instead of bothering with a reply, she merely scowled at him before she grabbed the ladder and climbed up with a speed he could only be envious of. He had no idea where she found the strength for it.

"What do you want, your highness?" she called down.

"Just throw down everything. Pillows, blankets. There should be a chest somewhere. If we're lucky, there are clothes inside."

Plain clothes, for the servants or anyone unlucky enough to end up in a puddle of mud while chasing a boar. They would do. If there was one luxury he wasn't going to miss, it was clothes with too many clasps and buttons and laces.

A gust of air made the fire flicker as Irina began to throw everything down. Several blankets, two quilts, and pillows in various sizes piled under the edge of the loft, then wood scraped on wood, and a heavy weight slammed against the wall; she must have found the chest. A flurry of clothes followed, pants, shirts, even a cloak and some cheap canvas shoes. This once, they really seemed to be lucky.

"What are you doing?" he asked when a suspicious moment of silence was followed by a strained groan.

She didn't reply. Instead, one of the mattresses appeared at the edge of the loft, being slowly pushed until it landed on top of the pile of fabric. Irina appeared behind it with a grin on her lips and jumped down, landing splayed on the spoils of her adventure.

Ross blinked. Something about her fall had been off, a vague dizziness in his mind telling him that physics didn't work like that.

"Now we can make you a proper bed," she said as she emerged from the pile of fabric. She was even paler than before, with sweat beading on her forehead and a slight tremor to her every movement. The ease of her movements had been nothing but a show.

He reached out for her. "Come sit down."

Irina ignored his offer in favor of having two hands free to lower herself, but she did sit down so close to him, her knee brushed his thigh. She leaned back on her hands and closed her eyes.

While she caught her breath, he filled two tin cups with water and two bowls with the porridge of questionable origins. Cutting into the sausage revealed it to be still good as well, fatty, thoroughly dried meat that was so salty, he could barely stop himself from licking the slice he had cut off to test it. No banquet had ever tasted as wonderful as those scraps he had put together.

"Ivy?" he asked when the too-quick rising and falling of her chest had settled. "Do you think you can eat something?"

She cracked her eyes open and took the bowl he offered her.

"Why the nickname?" she asked. "You haven't called me that in years."

The spoonful of porridge in his mouth seemed to turn to ash as he swallowed. Because she was his little Ivy, and he had missed her so much. Because he had thought he would never see her again, that she had died without a chance for him to say goodbye. Because it felt like a miracle that they could have a second chance, and if only she let him, he wasn't going to fuck it up again.

"I haven't been a very good friend in years," he said,

thinking of all the times he should have done better, too busy with trying to be a good *son*, as if he could ever have been good enough.

"You're not —"

She broke off and stared into her bowl, extremely focused on pushing the apple pieces around. Before taking so much as a single spoonful, she pushed the bowl away and scrambled back to her feet, swaying so hard, she had to catch herself on the mantelpiece.

"I'm not hungry," she mumbled. She didn't look at him; she looked at the pile of blankets and clothes. "May I take some new clothes?"

Her tone turned the knot in his stomach into lead. Submissive. Afraid. This wasn't the Irina who had sneaked into his bedroom and stolen food from his plate.

"Take whatever you want," he choked out.

She quickly picked out two pieces and all but fled outside. Ross stared at the door, torn between the urge to run after her and accepting that she needed some space. Perhaps he needed a moment as well. He had to pull himself together. She had been terribly hurt, she was clearly traumatized, and he couldn't take every single thing she said personally or he would ruin everything.

He finished his porridge without tasting anything and then spent a few minutes staring into the empty bowl. He could go to the well, which would offer him various excuses to follow her without making it overly obvious. He could fetch fresh water. Putting on new clothes sounded like a good idea as well, and they would be easier for him to carry than the kettle. He had washed his pants and robe, but without soap, the stench and stains didn't want to vanish fully.

Instead of struggling to his feet, he crawled to the pile of fabric, picking through plain linen pants and soft wool shirts until he found a set he liked. His stick was lying nearby, so

he picked it up and pulled himself up on a chair. Without the brace, he had to walk much more carefully if he didn't want to risk a sprain or fall, but at least his shin hurt less.

He found Irina in front of the well. She was naked, scrubbing herself with the wadded up shirt she had been wearing before, her hair dripping with water. She didn't look up when he approached, but the sudden tension in her posture told him that she had noticed him.

Ross froze and lowered his gaze, staring at the grass in front of his feet. Perhaps he should have gone back inside, but every step he didn't have to take twice was one he was grateful for. Keeping his eyes on the ground, he shuffled around the well, bringing it between them so she would have to turn around to see him.

She had never shown any shyness about seeing him naked, but then, she had never had any choice, had she? Ordered to take care of him from the time she had been a child, made to cater to his every need with no regards for her own comfort or health. Ross swallowed the bitterness and leaned against the well, needing the stability as he focused on stripping awkwardly out of robe and pants. Neither piece of clothing would do well as a washcloth. Too stiff, too rough, too large. Irina cast a glance back over her shoulder and seemed to come to the same conclusion.

"Here," she said as she threw him the wet ball of fabric.

Ross failed to catch it, too slow to react. That he had to pick it up from the grass didn't lessen his gratitude, and neither did the fact that properly washing himself was almost impossible without a thing as simple as a sponge on a stick. When she pushed the bucket of water next to him, he soaked the shirt and rubbed his chest, his face, his hair.

The water was so cold, he wondered if his lips were turning blue already, but it felt too good to be clean. How he wished he had taken the time to search the lodge for some kind of

soap to get the last of the dungeon's stench out. He splashed more water into his face than necessary before he pondered how he was going to deal with the rest.

"Let me."

He hadn't noticed that Irina had approached him, and her voice, suddenly so much closer than it should have been, made him flinch and drop the shirt. She took it and scooted closer, her own fresh shirt clinging to her still-wet skin. Without hesitation she began to take care of his legs.

For a moment, Ross let himself enjoy the help, before he remembered the fucking thought he had had a few fucking minutes ago.

"Ivy, wait." He took a step backwards. It was enough to bring him out of her reach. "Why are you doing this?"

Irina looked at him with a quizzical expression. "It's what I'm here for," she said.

She couldn't have hurt him more if she had slapped him. Ross grabbed the edge of the well so hard, he thought his joints were going to pop.

"No." He could barely stop himself from covering his exposed body. "Please stop."

A look of hurt crossed her face, quickly replaced by sadness. Slowly, she put the shirt on the edge of the well before she retreated, back to the spot where the pants she had chosen for herself were waiting for her. He had done something wrong. Again. He had to find better words, had to explain himself, but that was a conversation best held dressed, so he picked at the clothes he had brought. The shirt was plain enough, the few lacings more decorative than functional, but getting his arms into the sleeves while he was still wet was a huge pain.

Putting on pants without falling over wasn't any easier – if not for the well, he wouldn't have managed at all. He cursed under his breath as his left foot missed the opening for the

fourth time, his right leg growing tired of holding all his weight.

When he finally managed to pull his pants up, he was exhausted, sweaty, and miserable. He tried to push his annoyance down as he rounded the well, finding her sitting hunched over with her arms wrapped around herself.

"Irina?" he asked, not sure whether her given name or her nickname might upset her more.

Her head shot up. She had obviously been crying. Ross forgot about all his reservations, all his worries of doing the wrong thing. He sat next to her, and when she only watched him silently, gathered all his courage and put his arm around her.

She didn't seem to mind. Her fingers played with the fabric of his pants, and her head dropped onto his shoulder. She felt so small next to him, like what was left of her could vanish at any moment. Ross pulled her closer, but merely holding her wouldn't fix this. They needed to talk.

"Ivy?" He nudged her shoulder. "You are not my maid. You are my friend." He would have called her his sister if that wouldn't have put her on the same step as the treacherous snake that was related to him by blood. "More than my friend. You are the most important person in my life."

Her wide-eyed gaze met his. He didn't look away. He had to make her believe him.

"Then why don't you want me to help you?" she finally asked.

"I don't mind your help." In fact, he very much appreciated it, but not when it came at the cost of her self-determination. "I just don't want you to think you *have* to. You're not here to... to *serve* me."

She gave him another quizzical look, as if the difference was a puzzle she couldn't quite solve. Perhaps she couldn't, and how could he expect her to? He had fucked off to boarding

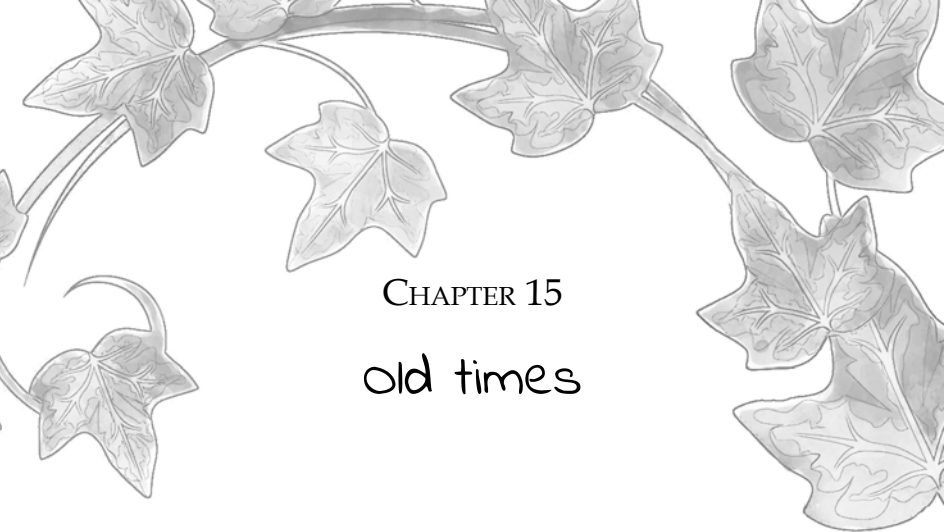


school and left her alone with his horrible family, and any worries he had pushed aside with the elusive promise of taking her with him once he graduated.

He hadn't been there when she had needed him, so why should she forgive him? He hadn't treated her like a friend, so why should she see him as one? But she didn't pull away from him, and her hands clung to his shirt, and maybe, just maybe, she would give him a second chance.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay," she whispered.



## CHAPTER 15

### old times

Irina had thought they were friends once. That was before he had left her behind to go to school and his mother had made it more than clear that any such notions had been nothing but foolish daydreams of a foolish child.

"Let's go inside?" Ross sounded almost pleading. "You really need to eat something."

Perhaps he was right. She certainly felt lightheaded enough to collapse at any moment, but then, that was not a new feeling. Being clean, being dressed, being *held* was. She didn't want to get up.

"Ivy? Please." He pushed her until she sat upright, looking her over. "I'm worried about you."

She didn't want him to worry. Irina forced herself to nod, regretting it instantly when the dizziness came back with full force. She breathed slowly, feeling over the grass to find the last things she had taken out with her: the shoes.

She padded the soles with scraps of fabric and pressed her lips together as she squeezed her feet inside. The shoes were a bit too small, but washing her feet had reopened the wounds, and he surely wouldn't be pleased if she left bloody footprints all over the place.

They struggled to their feet, clinging to the well and each other. Irina grabbed Ross' stick and handed it to him, but even with it, he looked like he was about to collapse. With her hip pressed against him, she could feel him tremble. The fall might have taken a bigger toll on him than he wanted to admit.

His words lingered in her ears as she wrapped her arm around his back. They didn't make sense. Why should she no longer want to help him just because no one told her to? Did he think she would want to see him struggle, want to see him in pain? How could he claim she was the most important person in his life and not see that he *was* her whole life?

At least he accepted her help this time. Her own legs didn't feel too steady, either, each step accompanied by a sharp, burning pain in her groin and the twinge of the badly healing cut on her thigh. She held onto him as much as she steadied him, walking with him inside where she led him to a chair and helped him sit down.

"What are you doing?" he asked when she limped over to the pile of fabric.

Irina grabbed the edge of the mattress. "Making you a bed."

She looked around the room. The walls were lined with shelves and cupboards, and the massive table with its chairs took over much of the remaining space, which didn't leave her many options. She pulled the mattress onto the rug in front of the fireplace, spread a few blankets on top of it, and arranged two pillows at one end.

"Come." Back at the chair, she extended her hands in his direction. "Get some rest."

He put his hand in hers. "And then you'll eat something?" he asked before he pulled himself up.

She nodded, less forced this time. The return to their comforting familiarity had calmed down her frazzled nerves, and

if not for the pain leaving her slightly nauseous, she would surely have felt hungry. With her help, Ross settled on the mattress, sighing with relief. As she massaged his leg, he kept his pointed gaze on her until she plopped down as well and grabbed her bowl.

Even though the porridge was barely lukewarm anymore, it was the most wonderful thing she had ever eaten. So creamy. So sweet. The bits of apple could have made her cry if she hadn't been crying so much already. She tried to eat slowly, but after a few moments, her restraint went out the window and she shoveled the contents of her bowl into her mouth until there was nothing left.

Not without regret, she put the empty bowl aside, but it was probably for the better that Ross hadn't made more. Her stomach was already protesting, no longer used to such things as fruit and honey. A few slices of the dried sausage were still waiting for her, but she decided to play it safe and leaned back instead, allowing herself a few moments of just sitting there. Safe. Fed. Warm. Things she had thought she would never be again. Just like she had thought she would never see Ross again.

She met his gaze, the golden depths of his eyes as warm as she remembered. When he looked at her like that, she was almost willing to believe his words, to believe that there was only her and him and nothing else mattered.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Irina touched her cheek, her collarbone, her chest. The cuts were taking their time to heal, but unlike the one on her thigh, the skin around them was no longer red and swollen. Her body felt too warm, and everything hurt, and she was so tired, but she was also happier than she had been in a long, long time.

"I don't know," was what she finally settled on.

Ross nodded like he understood. She suspected he might,

better than anyone else. Not willing to dwell on the state of her health, she grabbed the empty bowls and struggled to her feet, making sure she faced away from Ross as the pain made her grimace. An indignant noise behind her told her that Ross didn't agree with her decision to clean up. Well, too bad. What was he going to do, chase her down and tie her up?

"Ivy..." he said in a tone that promised another lecture about what she did or didn't have to do.

"Be right back," she interrupted him.

She limped outside and dropped bowls and pot at the well before continuing on to the outhouse behind the lodge. It was a clear step up from having to squat against a house wall, but any hope that a more comfortable position would help with the pain every time she had to go had proven to be futile.

Bent over, she fought with her tears, rubbing the aching wound on her thigh despite knowing that it would only make it worse. Burning, throbbing, pulsing; she didn't even know where one pain ended and another began. Her left arm struck the wall of the outhouse, and for a short, glorious moment, that pain was the only thing that was left, blooming across her skin and awakening in bones that had never quite healed right.

Irina dug her fingers into her arm, but the pain faded too quickly. She slammed her arm against the wall again, one, two, three times more. Pain pulsed from her elbow to her wrist, relief tainted with guilt as she wondered what Ross would think about the bruises that were bound to appear.

After staggering out of the outhouse, she took her time cleaning the dishes, using every opportunity to sprinkle cool water over her face and neck until she was hopeful that every trace of her tears was gone. The pain, and the despair, and the terrible feeling of restlessness, there was nothing Ross could do about any of it, and she didn't want him to worry any

more than he already did.

When she finally went back inside, she avoided his gaze anyway, looking for things to tidy to keep herself busy. The pain accompanied each step, slowly growing in intensity until it was almost as unbearable as the restlessness fluttering inside her chest. From time to time, Ross made another disapproving noise, but he did not try to stop her.

With the bowls back on the counter, the waterskin refilled, the fire stoked, the clothes sorted on two chairs, and the blankets stacked at the foot of Ross' bed, there was nothing of importance left for her to do. Almost nothing.

"May I take a look at your leg?" she asked.

Ross' eyebrows furrowed. He sighed. "Will you stop asking if I say no?"

"No."

The corners of his mouth twitched, and her heart hammered in her chest. It felt so good. So normal. So right. He rolled his eyes, but he did lean back without protest as she sat next to him.

She rolled up his pants, still slightly wet. The skin on his shin was rubbed raw, bleeding enough to tint the inside of the fabric, but not enough to soak it yet. She had already sacrificed one of the pieces of clothing for her shoes, a plain shift that was wide enough they would have fit into it together. With a sharp knife, she cut another strip off, wrapping it carefully around his leg to keep his wound and his clothes safe at the same time.

"Don't put that thing back on before it's healed," she said, tying the bandage off with a knot. "Not even like this."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll hide it. In the loft."

Ross snorted. He knew she would never do so.

"Rude," he said.

"Mean," she replied.

She pulled the leg of his pants back down and placed both hands on his calf, feeling along tense muscles as hard as rock. After the dungeon, the march, and the fall, it was no wonder. She began to massage his leg, starting out with a light touch and watching his reaction for any indication that she was hurting him more than helping.

"Why are you doing this?" he mumbled.

"Because I want to," she said stubbornly.

Ross huffed, but even after all this time, she still seemed to remember all the right spots, because he did not try to deter her again as she made her way along his leg up to his hip. Most of the time, that was where her efforts ended, but being chained to a wall for such a long time had surely left its mark on the rest of his body. She shifted closer to his head.

"Let me see your arm."

When he didn't protest, she gently pulled it away from his chest, unsure about his current range of motion. Under her fingers, strained muscles quivered, reluctant to give in to the massaging touch. She raised her gaze, finding his eyes shimmering with tears.

Irina froze. "Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head as he raised his good arm to brush her cheek. "Thank you," he said with a husky voice.

Irina looked down at her hands. This was normal. This was what she *did*. She knew the relief wouldn't last, but if it would help him find some rest, it was more than worth the effort. From his shoulder, she made her way down to his hand, fighting tears as she had to stay clear of the ring of healing skin around his wrist and the spot where his finger was missing.

"If you don't stop, I might just fall asleep."

"Good." There was nothing left for them to do, nothing to take care of. To rest and recover was the best thing either of them could do now. "Then sleep."

She moved his hand to his chest and returned to his leg, picking up where she had left off. Slowly, his eyelids stopped fluttering. His breathing became calmer. Irina toned down her efforts, using the warmth of her skin more than pressure.

Before he could fully fall asleep, she grabbed his shoulder and rolled him onto his left side. When she pulled a blanket up to his shoulders, he said something, but the words were too slurred to make out, even for her. She decided against asking him to repeat himself.

Once she was content that he was settled, she grabbed one of the remaining blankets for herself, only to tear up when her hands sank into it. It was thick and made out of soft wool. No stains, no holes, no fraying edges. She rubbed the fabric between her fingers, soaking up the sensation of the fibers against her skin.

She should find another one, the voice in her head said. It was too good for her, it said. The voice sounded like Mel, like Ross' mother, like everyone in this damn family but him. She pushed the voice aside and hugged the blanket to her chest. Ross already had the best ones, one made from even finer wool, and the thickest quilt to keep the cold of the floor away from him. She could have this one.

"Ivy."

Irina's head shot up. He pushed his right hand over the mattress, reaching out for her. His eyes had trouble staying open, but he tried to keep his gaze focused on her.

"Don't go."

With puzzlement, she stared at his hand. Where was she supposed to go? He couldn't think she would be leaving, could he? But he seemed to be distressed, and perhaps it would help if she slept close to him.

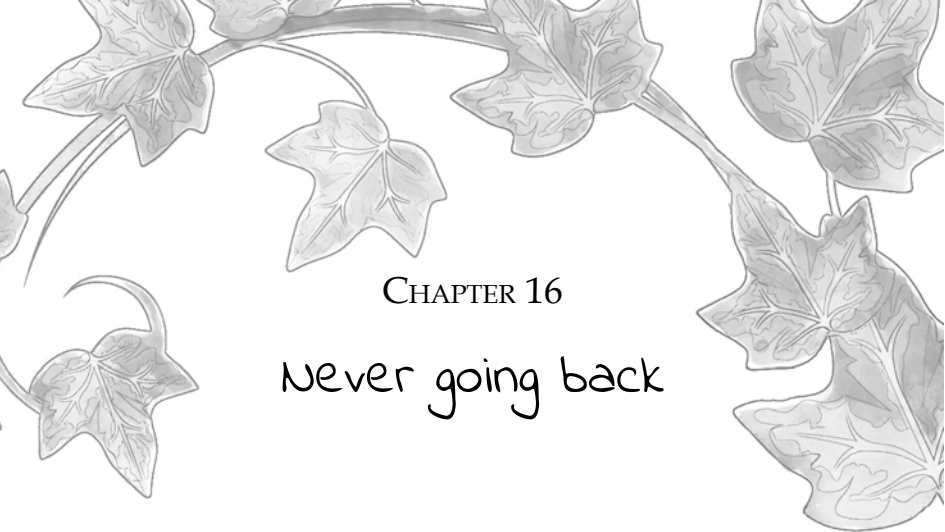
"Ivy," he mumbled again, clearly mere moments away from falling asleep.



When she pushed her hand into his, his whole body shivered as he relaxed, and she couldn't bring herself to take her hand back. She didn't really want to, either. Every moment she spent touching him was one moment in which the constant fear of being left alone was pushed into the background.

Hesitantly, she shuffled onto the mattress. In the abandoned prison, it had been different. They had needed each other's warmth. Between the actually sturdy walls and the remains of the fire, the lodge was warm enough, but she was tired, and the mattress was big enough for two, and perhaps it was another kind of warmth they needed.

Her muscles burned in protest and relief alike as she stretched out next to him. A bit of wriggling brought the blanket over her legs, and her head found its spot on his chest all on its own. Dizziness washed over her like a wave. She closed her eyes, feeling the steady rising and falling of his chest under her forehead, and for the short moment before she passed out, everything was all right.



## CHAPTER 16

# Never going back

"I'm fine. Really."

Ignoring Irina's protest, Ross felt along her pelvis, exerting slight pressure on his way to where her thighs met her hips. While his fingers focused on her body, his eyes never once left her face. Sometimes, she was all right with being touched, and sometimes, it freaked her out, and as far as he was aware, she didn't know what kind of day it was going to be until it happened.

"We will see. Move your leg."

She lifted her leg and wriggled her foot without breaking eye contact, staring him down with that stubborn expression on her face he loved so much. Well; he could be just as stubborn. After watching her limp around for a while, each day in seemingly more pain than before, he had insisted on figuring out what was wrong. He couldn't be sure—he certainly was no healer—but he would have bet a sizeable amount of his favorite fruit cake on a fractured pelvis.

"The other."

Her muscles moved under his touch as she followed his orders with the smallest roll of her eyes. By arguing that even if he was wrong, rest was exactly what she needed, he had

finally gotten her to stay mostly in bed. In return, she had bullied him into picking his stretching exercises back up, which was only fair, he thought. He had already dropped the ball in the weeks before his graduation, and after his return, exercises had been the last thing on his mind.

"Hold it."

No hint of pain on her face. No discomfort, either. She even nudged his shoulder with her big toe.

"Okay." He let go and threw his arm up in surrender. "You're fine. I guess."

"Yes!" She pushed herself up into a sitting position and grinned. "Finally. Now, you."

Ross took her offered hand and let her pull him onto the mattress. Irina scooted closer and massaged his shoulder and arm in an attempt to get him to relax. Without his medication, his muscles were tighter than ever. At night, they kept him from finding sleep, and during the day, they kept him from moving properly, and he hated that he couldn't just walk into the next town and ask a herbalist for a replacement for his pills. His face was too well known, his condition too specific, the gold coin they had found nothing to casually buy supplies with. They were only safe as long as his family thought them both dead.

Irina unfolded his clenched fingers, at least as far as they would go without pain. The few times it did hurt, he tried not to let it show. That his range of movement had deteriorated was his own fault, and those exercises were easier with her. Everything was easier with her, even wondering how the future might look.

Summer was just beginning, but before it came to an end, they would have to figure something out. He wasn't going to bet their lives on the hope that his father would be too distraught by the loss of his two sons to skip the hunting trip a second year in a row.

While she moved on to his leg, he let his mind wander. Irina had recovered well—much better than he had feared, if he was honest. A few of her wounds had taken too long to heal, and she still grew tired easily, but she had put some weight back on and was no longer looking like someone had pulled too-thin skin over a skeleton. Her hair was thin and dull, but clean and untangled, only missing a few strands that had been too matted to salvage, and on days when the weather was warm and dry, he had helped her sit outside, so she was no longer so terribly pale, either. If he didn't know what had happened to her, he would never have guessed it.

Her mood was a whole different matter. Left alone with her thoughts, she could go from dreamy to absent to sobbing her eyes out in the blink of an eye. He never knew what might set her off, make her lash out or tremble in fear, until it was too late. Sometimes, it was hard to deal with it, but he *was* going to deal with it, because he couldn't lose her again.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

She was holding his ankle, but a quick recollection of the motions told him that they had finished his exercises without him even realizing it. Slowly, Ross retrieved his limbs. Next to some old and dusty hunting equipment, he had found a couple of fishing nets. Their supplies—including a huge bag of oats that, without a doubt, had been meant for the horses—were far from exhausted, but they wouldn't last forever. Stretching their meals with freshly caught fish and wild plants was both helpful and a welcome change.

"Want to come with me when I check if we'll have fish today?"

A grin lit up her face, as bright as the sun. The lake was too far from the lodge, the terrain on the way there too uneven, so she hadn't yet accompanied him on his twice-daily excursions. All but vibrating with excitement, Irina helped him into the brace before putting on her own shoes.

"Can you take the basket?" he asked over his shoulder while he picked up his stick.

They had tried to make a better one, but without the right tools, every attempt had been faulty in one way or another. Branches taken from the forest had splintered or broken apart in the most unfortunate moments, so he had returned to the one he had taken with him from the prison. At least this one had proven to be faithful.

Ross slipped the strap over his wrist—the only alteration he had made, so he could let go if needed without having to collect the thing from the floor. When he looked up, Irina was already at the door, clutching the empty wicker basket to her chest. She laughed and all but ran outside.

Insects buzzed between the trees. The air was warm and smelled of blooming grass and sunshine. The dry, fallen leaves crunched under their soles. Irina walked next to him, slowing down her steps to match his pace. From the corner of his eye, Ross watched her take in her surroundings, like a sponge soaking up every splash of color, every breeze carried by the wind.

The moment she spotted the lake shimmering through the trees, she ran ahead. Ross followed with a smile, carefully picking his way between low hanging branches until he broke through the edge of the forest and overlooked the lake.

All things considered, it wasn't a very impressive view. None of the sparkling blue, smooth as a mirror surfaces one might find in a picture. The water was dark, somewhere between muddy gray and green, with a few fallen branches drifting between clusters of duckweed and sea roses. Pond skaters darted back and forth, and where fish swam close to the surface, it rippled in quickly expanding circles.

Irina walked along the muddy shore, the toe of the foot closest to the lake playing with the water. Ross followed her to the

spot where the first net was anchored to the exposed roots of a tree. He used his stick to lift the net, finding no fish in it.

The second net was empty as well, but in the third, a sizable bass was struggling against its fate. Irina helped him pull it out of the water and hold it still as he killed it, untangling it once it stopped moving. Putting the net back in the water was much easier with her help, too.

With the main ingredient for their meal secured, they took the long way back to the lodge, past some blueberry bushes with the first few berries already ripening. Irina plucked a handful into a big maple leaf, to keep them away from the fish as she put them into the basket. When they passed a small clearing, a few bushels of young nettles followed, carefully plucked with a leaf wrapped around their stems.

Something seemed to weigh on her. Her gaze, so happy and carefree before, had darkened, and once, Ross thought he saw a tear in the corner of her eye. Perhaps it was just one of her sudden mood swings. He would give her a moment before he made sure there was nothing going on he could help her with.

Half an hour later, a fire burned in the fireplace, the pot of fish stew bubbled lazily, and they sat side by side on the mattress, feet outstretched. It could have been a perfect moment, but she was crying again, and this time, there was no mistaking the tears on her cheek for a trick of the light.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a quiet tone.

Irina wiped her eyes. "I'm happy."

Ross took a closer look at the lines of her mouth, at the darkness in her eyes. She didn't look happy. He waited to see if she would elaborate, and when she didn't, he nudged her shoulder with his.

"Isn't that a good thing?" he asked.

"I wish we could stay here forever," she whispered. "Like this."

That wasn't very helpful. He turned her words over in his head, trying to make sense of them. He wasn't sure if he had mentioned the need to leave before next fall, but he might have. She couldn't be that attached to the lodge, could she?

"We'll find something better," he promised with a smile. "How about a place with a real bed? A real stove?"

Nevermind the question of how they would be able to afford that. He would have to find employment, but he considered his chances rather slim. What good was his family name if he couldn't say it, his degree if he couldn't show it?

Irina gave him a quizzical look, as if he was the one who didn't make sense. "But aren't you going home?" she mumbled, head tucked between her shoulders.

"What? No. Why?" Through the turmoil, Ross focused on speaking as calmly and clearly as possible. "I told you I'm not going back."

"Yes, but. I'm better now. And." Her head ducked even lower. "I'll be fine. You don't have to. Stay."

The words came out forced. Fresh tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. Had she spent all those weeks thinking he was going to abandon her once she was recovered?

"Of course I will stay. In a few weeks we will need to figure out where to go, but we'll go together." He took her hand. "I won't leave you. I promise."

Big, dark eyes searched his face. She might trust him with her life, but she didn't seem to be able to comprehend how important she was to him. How much it would kill him to lose her a second time. How much he loved her.

"I couldn't go back even if I wanted to." It was another angle, and one he normally wouldn't have chosen, but if she was unable to believe her own worth, perhaps he could make her believe in a threat. "Do you remember the bandits? The wine bottles?"

She nodded mutely.

"Those bottles. I'm sure they were poisoned. And they were from my father's wine cellar."

Irina's eyes widened. "Are you saying he killed them?"

"No." Ross couldn't suppress a bitter laugh. "He wouldn't have bothered with poison. He would have grabbed some armed men and cut those bandits down." In fact, Ross was quite sure that was exactly what his father would have done, even if it would have cost his remaining son his life. "My mother wouldn't have done anything without consulting him, and Greer. My uncle. Well. He wouldn't have done anything, period."

Other than drinking the wine instead of poisoning it, that was. Irina nodded along, as if quietly agreeing with his characterizations.

"Mel," she whispered.

"Yes." A part of Ross was relieved that she had come to the same conclusion.

"But why?"

"After you— After Brad died. She was the oldest, but our father wanted *me* to inherit the family estate. It's the whole reason they sent me to school in the first place. Because they didn't trust her to take over if something happened to our brother."

And like a fool, he had gone with it, desperate to prove that he could be more than a burden, more than his disability. Now his family finally gave him a chance, but not because of what he had achieved—merely because of what was in his pants. "If there's no one left but her, father can't ignore her any longer."

There would never be another heir, either; his messed up birth had made sure of it, as his mother had never grown tired of accusing him of.

"So she pretended to pay..."

"She gave them the money and the wine," Ross continued



Irina's thought, "and once they were dead, she took the money back."

The coin they had found had probably been handed around in celebration, and Mel was not the kind of person to dig through the mud for a meager gold coin.

"She knew where you were, then. She just." Irina's voice broke. She cleared her throat, but her words stayed shaky. "She left you to die."

Ross squeezed Irina's hand. She was trembling.

"She left you, too," he said quietly.

Whether Mel had stopped her visits the moment she had received the ransom note or after she had seen the bandits at the prison didn't matter. She had been willing to let them both die—a slow, terrible death.

Irina pressed herself against him. She clung to his hand, as if she could still lose him to Mel's schemes if she let go. When she raised her gaze, tears shimmered in her eyes, but her expression had hardened, her lips pressed together into a thin line.

"I want to kill her."

The fire crackled as silence stretched between them, only broken by Irina's sniffles and the sound of his own heart pounding in his head. Ross sat motionless, the words echoing in his mind.

*Kill her.*

As if he hadn't thought about it. Not in concrete plans, in anything more than helpless anger. But he had thought about it. Every time he had seen glimpses of Irina's emaciated body under the borrowed clothes that were much too large for her. Every time she had crawled over the floor with her feet close together as if they were still connected by that too-short chain. Every time nightmares had pulled her from slumber and left her trembling in a corner of the lodge, as if that were the only safe space she could imagine.

"You can't do that," he said, because it was the right thing to say.

"What if she finds out you're alive?"

Ross avoided Irina's gaze, focusing on the pot instead, the contents of which should probably be stirred lest they began to burn. If he suddenly came back from the dead? Threatening the inheritance she had already been willing to kill for?

"I think she would..." The words died on his tongue. He couldn't picture it; couldn't imagine his sister pulling a weapon on him or putting poison into his food. They had never been particularly close, but murder? "... kill me," he whispered, because his mind had accepted what his heart still refused to believe.

Irina huffed. "I wouldn't let her." The low volume of her voice didn't take away the venom of her tone.

"You? What would y—"

The clanking of wood against metal made him flinch so hard, he bit his tongue mid-word. In the corner of his eye, the wooden spoon began to stir the pot all on its own. It moved a bit too roughly, clattering against the pot with each turn. Ross watched it while he wriggled his tongue around in his mouth, trying to figure out if he was bleeding.

Magic. Irina didn't even look at the pot, yet he knew this was her doing. He could have sworn he saw her smile, the slightest lifting of the corner of her mouth before she let go of the spoon and looked up at him.

"Would you stop me?"

Would he? Ross listened inside. He imagined his sister's lifeless eyes, her body cold, her blood on Irina's hands. He felt nothing.

"No."

\* \* \*

Irina picked up two bowls and filled them with stew, using her hands this time. Controlling multiple objects at the same time wasn't easy, and she didn't want to risk spilling hot stew all over the mattress. Besides, it gave her something to do while her thoughts were racing.

Without a body to give his parents closure, he would still be considered missing. People would be looking for him. They wouldn't even need a good description to recognize the bright-eyed guy walking with a heavy limp.

She had figured he would leave once she was better because he was clearly miserable. Without his pills, she didn't think he had gotten a single full night's sleep since their arrival at the lodge, and he had none of his other braces that were more comfortable to wear inside, just that bulky thing of a boot. He was sleeping on the floor, wearing basically rags, and she knew what kind of delicacies were served in his family; so far from eating the same sludge made from oats and fish each day.

Said sludge steamed in their bowls, and she handed one to Ross before she pushed her own stew around with her spoon to help it cool faster. The nettle leaves gave it a nice color for a change, but it tasted the same as always, and that wasn't exactly good. She wanted Ross to have his warm bed, and his fruit cake, and his books, but she also didn't want him to leave.

What had before seemed like the only two options now were joined by a third one. Sure, she couldn't bring his bed to him, but she *could* grab his crutches, his braces, his books and medicine and clothes.

"In the beginning, I often imagined how it would be to get out and kill her." She didn't look up; watched her spoon instead, going in circles and circles and circles. "In my head, I could have done anything. Gone anywhere. But I didn't know anything else, so I always came back. Climbing up the tree

and through the window. Sneaking through the hallways at night. Sometimes I even made it to her room instead of the kitchen or —

How often had her dream ended in his room? Long after the details had faded from her memory, when the smell of candied fruits and the warmth of his woolen blankets had been nothing but a vague concept. She had imagined herself waiting for him, finding him, holding him, listening to him — at least until those dreams had hurt more than the loneliness of her cell. Then she had tried not to think of him at all.

“If I kill her.” The scratching of her spoon inside her bowl. The smell of fish and fire. The warmth of his thigh against hers. She focused on that warmth and pushed back the thought of how much she would miss him as she whispered, “You can go home.”

“Ivy...” The spoon in his hand trembled. “I don’t want to go home.”

“But you’d be safe. Your family —”

“*You* are the only family I care about,” he snapped. A pained expression flitted over his face, and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Sorry. I’m sorry. Just. Yes, I would be the heir. That’s not — In the past year. I had it all. For the first time, they looked at me, but no one ever *saw* me. I hated it. I fucking hated it. I can never be what they expect, I can never be good enough, and I don’t want to be. I want —”

His voice wavered, syllables melting together until even Irina couldn’t understand him anymore. Ross’ bowl slipped off his lap and clattered to the ground, but luckily, it stayed upright and the contents didn’t spill. She quickly shoved her own bowl back in front of the fireplace before it could fall from her trembling hands as well.

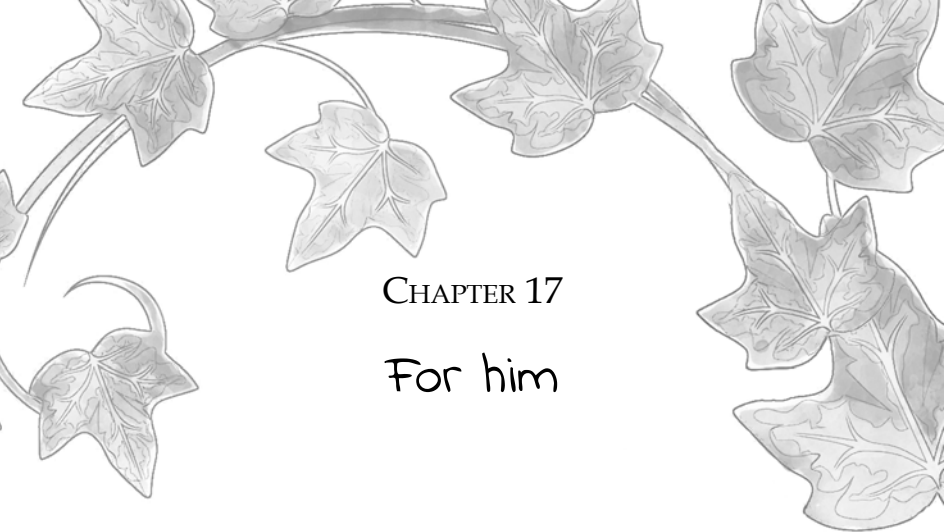
“I made it through school because I dreamed of coming back when I was done. Of being allowed to take over a part of the family business. Of leaving home. Of taking you with

me. But you were gone, and I thought I could never..." His voice, close to breaking, was full of pain. "I don't know what to do without you. Not your help. Just you."

When he reached out for her with his right hand, Irina clutched it without hesitation. She needed him, too. She wanted to tell him as much, but while her mouth opened, no words made it out. With a choked sob, she put her trembling arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder.

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything." He sounded tired. His fingers drew circles on her shoulder. "Just. Please try to believe me. I love you, Ivy."

Irina's tears soaked the fabric of his shirt, but she didn't pull away. Instead, she held tighter onto him and tried to believe.



## CHAPTER 17

### For him

A few days passed in which Irina didn't bring up her considerations of revenge; days she spent making mental lists and putting mental objects into mental backpacks she had to carry though a mental forest. Her only way into the house was through Ross' window, so she climbed up trees to pluck the first blood-plums of the year, even if she exhausted much quicker than before her captivity and had to use more magic to support herself when her trembling limbs failed her.

There were a lot of pains she had learned to ignore: the aching bones in her arm, and the pull of her scars across her torso, and the burning pain that still persisted every time she had to relieve herself. What she couldn't ignore was Ross' discomfort when his spasms woke him up in the middle of the night, or how he struggled with his stick. If he was going to stay with her, she wanted him to be comfortable. She looked out over the lake, trying to keep her voice casual, as if she hadn't thought about it every single day for the past week.

"If you could go back to your room, what would you take with you?" she asked.

Stretched out on the blanket next to her, Ross cracked his right eye open.

"Irina..." His tone left no doubt that her subtle attempt hadn't been subtle enough. "Are you still thinking about that?"

"Mhm."

"I don't want you to put yourself into danger. Nothing you could bring me would be worth risking your life for."

He had it all wrong. He was the one thing in this world worth risking her life for. Assuming that this reasonable explanation wouldn't do much to calm him, she tried another angle.

"But we already are in danger." It was part excuse and part truth. "No matter where we go, we always will be. If she's dead, what's the worst that can happen if someone recognizes you? They'll ask you why you didn't go home, and you tell them it's because your family didn't deem you important enough to pay your ransom."

Her watertight argument didn't seem to convince him, either, but his expression softened, like he was actually considering her words. Irina gave him time to think about it and resumed staring out onto the lake. They hadn't caught a fish yet today, but Irina hoped their luck would change before sunset.

Ross propped his head up on his arm. Watching her. "How would you do it?" he asked.

"I'd climb in how I always did. Up the tree and through your window. I'd gather everything you need. I'd make sure she's asleep. I'd cut her throat, grab my bags, and run."

A few simple words for a much less simple plan. At least Mel's room was on the same floor as Ross', while the bedrooms of his parents and the servants' chambers were on another. Even so, it would be risky. She knew very well that the house was never really asleep. Someone always tended to the fire in the hearth or tried to catch up with one chore or another.

"Is there nothing I can do to stop you?"

Irina inclined her head. "You could tell me how much you love her, and that it would break your heart if I kill her."

Ross snorted. He closed his eyes and let his head drop back onto the blanket. "I should, you know? Say it. Mean it. She's my sister."

"But you won't," Irina said.

"No." He paused, taking a deep breath that almost qualified as a sigh. "But it *would* break my heart if anything happened to you, so please, please promise me you won't rush it. Your plan is reckless enough as it is. We need to make sure nothing can go wrong."

Irina swallowed. "We?"

"We have to find out if there's clothing that's less loose. Nothing you can get caught on or grabbed at." He gestured vaguely at the shirt she was wearing, which was indeed much too large for her. "The knife we found is good for gutting fish, but not much more, and I will show you the way to the main road, and we'll walk it until you remember it in your sleep."

Noticing her shocked expression, he reached out for her. Irina took his hand, and he interlaced his fingers with hers.

"She's *my* sister. You're killing her for *me*. I'm not letting you do this alone."

True to his word, Ross didn't let Irina leave for almost a month; not until she altered a few clothes to fit her tightly, until she memorized the path, until she could climb to the highest branches of the blood-plum without getting out of breath. They soaked the clothes in charcoal-blackened water, sharpened one of the old hunting knives until it could split a thread, and combed through their shared memories of his room until they decided which things Irina should try to fetch.

The dark clothes allowed her to become one with the night as she sat in the old oak tree in front of his room's window,



the knife in its sheath at her side. The moons were barely slivers in the vastness of the starry abyss, the shadows as deep as they were going to get. Inside the house, everything was quiet and had been for a while.

It was time. Irina tore her gaze away from the sky and focused on the room. The hook securing the window unlatched. As always when she drew on her magic, it was accompanied by a short flash of panic, expecting the bite of the morlit shackles as they pulled the energy straight from her soul. But the shackles were gone, and soon, the one who had put her in them would be gone, too.

She crawled along the branch as far as it would carry her weight. In front of her, the window swung open without a sound. Moments passed in breathless silence, but no one raised an alarm. She jumped, landing softly on the windowsill.

After all those years, she knew his room like the back of her hand. Even without light, her feet carried her quickly to the closet, and her hands found the stack of fabric and leather she was looking for. Ross owned many bags. Between the crutch and his uncooperative left arm, he had little other ability to carry things.

Irina selected a shoulder bag and two backpacks, stuffing one of them into the other. The most important things first. She made her way to his desk and felt along the surface until she found the glowing crystal, giving it the slightest push with her mind to emit a faint glow.

Opening one drawer after another, she took out anything that might be of use to him. The wooden box with his reading glasses. Gold-covered fountain pens that might have cost more than she had ever earned in her life. His graduation certificates. His leather-bound notebook; not because it would be overly useful to him, but because she didn't want his family to read his private thoughts.

Soon, the small shoulder bag was full. She put it aside and got to work filling the backpack. The glass bottle of pills from his nightstand, and all the other medications from a box on his shelf. She took some of his favorite books and even found a half filled tin box containing fruit cake. The box was too unwieldy, but she wrapped the cake into a handkerchief and stuffed it into the backpack.

Even though their agreed upon objects had all been gathered, there was still room in the backpack, so she went to his closet again and took out some of his clothes. She picked those shirts and pants he had asked her to lay out for him often, and while she couldn't fit his winter coat, she took a warm sweater and a pair of gloves.

It would be suspicious if someone checked his room and noticed some of his things were gone, so she scattered the clothes she didn't take, even taking the knife and cutting some of them apart. Careful to make no sound, she placed a dozen books on the floor in various poses of disarray, and while she didn't dare to break anything out of fear the noise might wake someone up, she did spill his bottle of ink across the desk.

Once she was happy with the mess, she fetched his favorite pair of crutches, tying them together into a bundle with the help of a couple of scarves, belts, and two blankets. To be prepared for a hasty retreat, she put the bags and bundles in front of the window, straightening up with a deep breath.

For a moment, with the familiar smell of his room in her nose and her fingers buried in the depths of his wardrobe, she had almost forgotten why she had come here. Almost. Dodging the scattered piles of fabric and books, she made her way to the door. The crystal's light died in her hand as she pressed her ear against the wood.

Everything was quiet, so she pulled the door open and peered through the crack. Only darkness greeted her. She

knew where each creaking floorboard was, but even so, what little noises she couldn't avoid seemed overly loud in her ears: The almost inaudible scraping as she pulled the door closed behind her. The soft soles of her shoes on the floor. The cadence of her own, too-fast breaths.

Halfway to Mel's room, she froze. It would be suspicious if only two of the rooms were destroyed, so she shuffled a few steps back and rested her hand on the door to Brad's room. This one held no fond memories. The few times Brad had taken her with him, she would rather forget.

With none of the care she had taken with Ross' belongings, she opened Brad's wardrobe, tossing out clothes left and right. She crumpled his blankets, moved his chairs, and opened every one of his desk's drawers, scattering the papers that were inside. The only thing she took with her as she left was a small purse filled with coins.

Mel's room next. Almost there. One foot in front of the other. Opening the door. Listening. Creeping inside. The curtains weren't drawn, allowing Irina to make out silhouettes, but nothing more.

Irina wiped her sweaty hand on her pants before she drew the knife, grasping the hilt tightly. She had to be quick, she knew she had to be, but her legs felt like she was dragging them through mud. Breathing. She had to keep breathing. Airy curtains surrounded Mel's bed, feeling like spiderwebs on Irina's skin as she pushed past them.

The woman was fast asleep, lying on her back with her blanket kicked down to her hips. How convenient. Irina stared at her pale skin, picturing the pulsing of fragile blood vessels in the rhythm of Mel's heartbeat.

Every second she hesitated was one in which Mel might wake up, and if Mel woke up and overpowered her, then Ross would never be safe. The thought of revenge had kept her going, but it was for him, she raised the knife. For him, she

struck. For him, she buried the blade deep in his sister's neck.

Irina didn't aim to merely cut the throat; she aimed to cut through it, as if she wanted to separate Mel's head from her neck. Skin, flesh, and muscle parted under the pressure as she dragged the knife from one ear to the other.

In her daydreams, she had imagined the terror in Mel's eyes, how the light would slowly fade while the realization set in that she had brought this upon herself. As a fountain of blood spewed out from the gaping wound in Mel's neck, there was no time to look for her eyes. Irina pressed her hand on Mel's mouth, suffocating a gargling scream as she pushed down on her head. Mel tried to rear up, but Irina threw her weight on the dying woman's chest, ignoring the flailing arms punching her weakly in the ribs.

As quickly as the struggle had begun, it was over. Mel still twitched, but the movements weren't coordinated; the last convulsions of a body that had yet to accept that it was dead. Slowly, Irina loosened her grip. Warm and sticky, the blood covered her hands, her arms, her chest. It was everywhere. It painted Mel's skin crimson and soaked the bed sheets and dripped from the no longer so airy curtains. The smell hung in the air, heavy and metallic. Irina's hands were shaking so hard, she barely managed to cram the bloody knife back into the sheath.

Everything in her screamed to run, but she had to... keep it... had to... Quick steps carried her to the window where she wiped her arms and face on the curtains before opening it. The cool night air drove back the rising nausea, allowing her a few deep breaths, despite the taste of Mel's blood on her lips. She left some bloody streaks on the windowsill, hoping people might think this had been the intruder's way out, then she turned around. The crystal she fished out of her pocket didn't want to react to her touch at first, not before she wiped more blood off her hands.

With even less care than in Brad's room, she made as much of a mess as she could in the shortest amount of time. As she tore apart the desk, she considered looking for the ransom notes the bandits had sent, but there wasn't enough time for that. And anyway, if anyone found it, the shadow it would cast would fall on Mel, not Ross. If they were lucky, people would think the bandits had killed him.

She found no money, but a wooden lockbox—with the key inside the lock—filled with jewelry. To make the break-in more believable, she took it with her as she snatched a handkerchief off the floor on her way to the door.

With the handkerchief around the handle, she pulled the door open—and froze. Light tinted the walls. Footsteps approached from the stairs. Not daring to pull the door back into the lock, she held it closed and listened breathlessly. Stumbling footsteps came closer. Orange glow danced in the hallway. Irina pressed her eye against the opening, curiosity stronger than her fear.

The light was emitted by an oil lantern, used by those who were not deemed worthy of one of the expensive crystal lamps. A young woman carried it; one she had never seen before, wearing the simple clothes of the servants, her dark hair tousled, her face splotchy with tears. Without looking left or right, she hurried down the stairs, taking the glow of the lantern with her.

Irina pressed her forehead against the wall, trying to keep her breaths calm. The woman had come from the second floor. There was nothing up there but the bedrooms of Ross' parents, which meant there was no reason for *her* to be up there. Not at night when there were no chores to tend to. When everyone was asleep. Except Irina knew who wasn't, who must have called for the woman—and for what—and she felt sick again, and this time, it wasn't because of all the blood.

The moment the footsteps faded, Irina hurried as quickly

as she dared towards Ross' room. Afraid what little light fell through the window might be enough to be visible in the hallway, she squeezed herself through the smallest possible opening of the door and pulled it closed behind her as softly as her trembling hands allowed it. She had to get out. Two hurried steps across the room, then she stumbled over a pile of fabric and paper and fell to her hands and knees.

For seemingly endless seconds, she listened, but everything remained quiet save for the drumming of her pulse in her head. No one seemed to have heard her. Gods; she had to keep it together. She couldn't mess it up now.

She struggled back to her feet and, in the dimmest glow the crystal could emit, tiptoed around the piles of stuff on the floor. In yet another attempt to keep the noise she made down and the traces she left to a minimum, she threw a blanket over the windowsill. One by one, she threw the bags and bundles out of the window, slowing their fall with her magic. The movements were mechanical, her hands tingling and almost numb.

She wasn't sure whether her trembling legs would make the jump, but even falling out of the first floor window would be preferable to getting caught. Casting one last look into the room she would never see again, she climbed onto the windowsill and jumped.

Her arms and legs wrapped around the branch as the impact drove the air from her lungs. Bark scratched her cheek and palms, got stuck under her fingernails. She didn't have the strength to pull herself up, so she lowered herself instead, hanging from her arms for a moment before she let go. The fall wasn't far, but she softened it with her magic anyway.

Leaning against the tree with a trembling arm, she pulled the blanket off the windowsill and down to her before closing the window. Putting the latch back in place without seeing it was an exercise that left her shaking; she had never been

good at manipulating what she couldn't see, too unsettling was the sensation of her magical sense reaching out to something no other sense was aware of.

The house was as dark and quiet as it had been before she had entered it. By the time people noticed what she had done, she had to be far away. She put the bag over her shoulder and slipped on the straps of the backpack, wrapping the spare blanket around the bundle of crutches so she could pin it under her arm without smearing blood all over it.

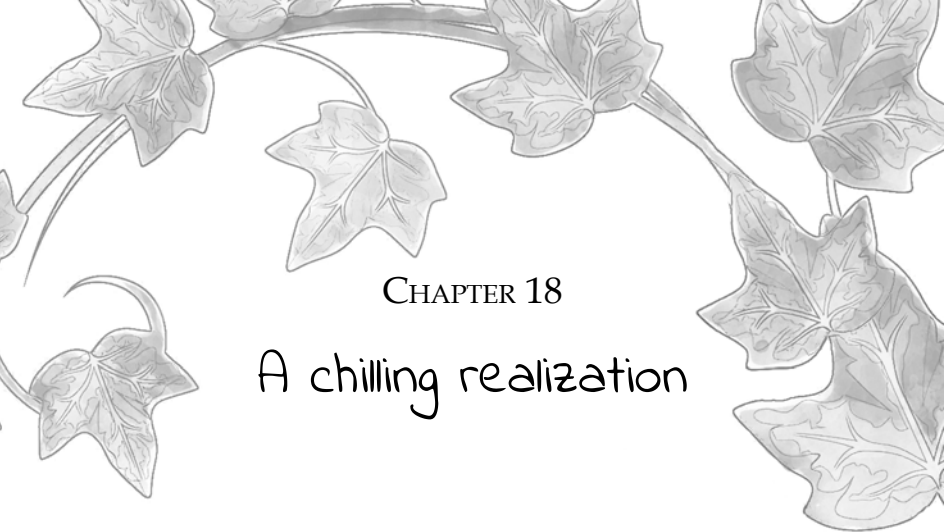
She kept to the deepest shadows, giving the few houses sporting illuminated windows even at this hour a wide berth. With each step, coldness crept deeper into her limbs, until she had to clutch the bundle tighter, willing her numb fingers not to drop it.

Everything had gone according to plan. Mel was dead, and Irina had fetched everything she had come for and more. Above all, Ross would be safe. So why did she feel so empty? Empty and sick.

Perhaps it was the stench of blood she couldn't escape, the half-dried stickiness on her skin. Perhaps it was the exhaustion, kicking in quickly now that the adrenaline was wearing off. Or perhaps it was the regret that she hadn't sunk the knife into another throat instead.







## CHAPTER 18

# A chilling realization

Ross stared at the closed door, willing—begging—it to open. Night had come and gone, the first rays of light already creeping over the horizon, and Irina hadn't come back yet.

It was all right, he tried to tell himself as he polished a spoon for the fifth time. It had taken more time than anticipated, was all. She couldn't have entered the house before midnight, and the way back was far, and it was hard to walk in the darkness, and if she had gotten lost, she would have to wait for sunrise to continue.

The spoon in his hand trembled. How much of her desire to kill Mel had been revenge for her sake, and how much had been concern for his safety? He should have stopped her. Instead, he had encouraged her, putting his own grudge and worry above any common sense. If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

He dropped the spoon into the box and fished out another piece of cutlery, resuming the polishing motions on an old fork with bent prongs. Gods; they could have found a way to stay out of his sister's reach. They could have left the continent for all he cared, looking for a ship willing to take two broke passengers onboard.

Something crashed against the door. Ross flinched, throwing the fork, which skidded over the table and fell off the edge to land on the floor with a clank. His heart thudded in his chest as he watched the door creak open.

Between the embers in the fireplace and a low burning oil lamp on the table, the light in the lodge was barely bright enough for him to recognize Irina. She gave the door one last shove and stepped inside, clutching an unwieldy bundle to her chest. Her feet dragged over the floor, her shoulders shook. Under smears of dried blood, she was pale as moonlight.

The thought hadn't fully settled in his mind when he pushed himself up already. With no regard for the stupid stick, he hobbled across the lodge, arm outstretched as soon as he was almost in reach.

"Are you hu—"

"Don't touch me." She slapped his hand aside before a quick step backwards brought her out of his reach. "Don't. Just." She dumped the bundle in front of his feet, blocking him from coming closer. "Here."

The backpack followed, and a bag. If Ross had had two functioning legs, he would have kicked it all aside. As if he cared about whatever crap she had brought when she was covered in *blood*.

"Ivy..." he tried, but she didn't even seem to listen.

"I need to." Absentmindedly, she rubbed her arm. "The well. You can." She gestured at the pile of stuff and turned around, moving stiffly as she shuffled away. "Your stuff," she mumbled, and then she was gone.

Ross stared through the open door, his blurry gaze getting lost between trees bathed in the first rays of sunlight. If she didn't want him to touch her, chances were she also wouldn't want him to watch her undress and wash herself. If only he knew whether she was hurt; whether it was *her* blood.

He had to keep it together. She would clean herself up, calm down, and come back inside to tell him what had happened. Dismayed, he poked at the pile on the floor. The blood on the blanket seemed to be dried already, which was probably good. He dragged everything over to the desk so he could investigate while sitting down.

The bag first, because it was the easiest one to open. He pulled out his notebook, an assortment of papers, and several wooden boxes. One contained his reading glasses, the left side darkened, so he didn't have to strain himself to keep his double vision in check.

With the glasses on his nose, he put the boxes aside and flipped through the papers. Now that Irina was back—alive and at least unharmed enough to walk around and snap at him—he could admit that having the certificates would make everything easier. He couldn't very well just find a position as a farmhand somewhere, but in one of the bigger cities, he might be able to make a living as an accountant. As little faith as his parents had put in him, the school they had sent him to was one of the best, and the degree was worth something.

After carefully tucking the papers back into the bag, he turned his attention towards the large bundle, peeling back several layers of fabric. Even before he saw what was underneath, he recognized the shape, and by the time he pulled the last blanket away, his hand was trembling. His crutches. His thumb traced the polished wood of the handle, the strap's soft leather, the faint pattern burned into the shaft beneath the v-shaped upper part.

Knowing she would have to carry them for hours, he hadn't asked her for them, and she had brought them anyway, all on her own. And not just any crutches; he kept more than half a dozen different ones in his room, yet she had taken the ones he liked most, because of course she knew.

Ross wiped at his eyes. Outside, everything was still quiet, so he grabbed the backpack and pried open the clasps. A pile of fabric greeted him, various pieces of clothing filling the space between boxes, bottles, and books. As he sorted through the things, he realized that Irina had brought so much more than the pills that helped his muscles relax. The clothes that were most comfortable, the books he had read most often, his favorite blankets, even the worn stuffed bunny that had been a gift from his late grandmother. Irina had brought him his life; everything worth holding onto. Everything he would have taken with him when moving out.

His tears spilled over as he buried his face in the autumn-colored wool of the blanket that was as old as he was. He wondered whether she knew how much it meant to him, whether she—

The realization that she had *nothing* settled heavily on his heart. What little had belonged to her, his parents had disposed of as quickly as they had disposed of her. No keepsake of her own childhood, no memory of her mother, not even clothes she could call her own. Once they reached a town, he would insist that she pick out some things. He couldn't make up for what she had lost, but he could try his best to give her everything she deserved.

Ross hung the blanket over the backrest of a free chair and dried his tears with his sleeve. Irina had gone through the trouble of bringing him all that, the least he could do was take care of her now instead of crying uselessly. She was taking a long time outside, and the water of the well was freezing. His arm slipped into the leather strap all on its own, his fingers closing around the grip of the crutch as he stood up, finding himself more steady than he had been in weeks.

He put fresh logs onto the embers and filled the kettle with water. Near the lake, wild mint grew in abundance, and warm mint tea with honey-flavored cakes baked on a stick

had become their favorite meal. He had no cakes left, so he put the honey into the tea, leaving two cups to steep next to the fireplace.

Still, no trace of Irina. His worry won over the resolution of giving her time, and anyway, she was going to need clean clothes, so he might as well bring her some. He grabbed the long, plain shirt she usually wore in place of a shift and threw it over his left arm as he left the lodge.

Morning dew glistened on the grass. Irina sat with her back against the well, arms wrapped around her knees. The blackened clothes lay in a pile next to her, leaving her naked and shivering.

"Ivy?"

At the sound of his voice, her head shot up. Her eyes were red, the wetness on her cheeks surely more than remnants of the water dripping out of her hair. When she spotted him, she pressed her knees more closely against her chest. Ross didn't want to stare, but he had to know whether she was hurt.

"Please tell me it was her blood."

When Irina nodded, a small weight lifted off his heart. Knowing that she was unharmed was the most important part—everything else, they would be able to figure out. He lowered his gaze, staring at the grass somewhere between his feet and her.

"Good." He shook his left arm and caught the shirt with his right as it began to slide off. "Here. You're freezing." Still not looking up, he threw the shirt in her direction, only noticing from the corner of his eye that she snatched it out of the air. "Please come inside."

He went back into the lodge to give her the space she needed, but waiting for her to follow him tugged on his nerves. Filled with restless anticipation, he stoked the fire before he sat at the table and rolled his crutch back and forth between his legs. When she finally shuffled through the doorway, he

jumped up — only to freeze helplessly as he remembered that she hadn't wanted him to touch her.

"Come sit by the fire," he mumbled.

While she trudged over to their shared mattress, he went to the sideboard, only to stand uselessly around in another part of the room. His gaze fell onto a bowl with leftover pieces of dried fish.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Do you need anything?"

She shook her head. Ross sighed.

"Do you mind if I sit?" he asked with a vague gesture in the direction of the mattress.

She shook her head one more time while she gathered her pants off the floor and wriggled her legs into them. Ross leaned the crutch against the wall and took his spot at the furthest end of the mattress, leaving enough room in between them for all those complicated feelings.

"What happened?" he asked, only to regret it instantly.

What a ridiculous question. She had killed a person. That had happened. No matter how dire the wish for revenge, an action like that must take a toll on someone. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

"Please talk to me," he begged.

"No one noticed me." She didn't look at him, tugging the hem of her pants this way and that. "I made a mess of your room, so I don't think anyone will be able to tell what's missing."

"As if they would be able to tell even if you left little notes around listing what you took," he stated bluntly. His family didn't know him at all; she must know this as well as he did.

"He replaced me." Her voice was barely audible. "I saw her."

Ross struggled to keep up with her train of thought. Replaced? After a moment, he recalled the maid his father had hired to take over Irina's position, a young woman he hadn't seen much of, having spent most of the last couple of months cooped up in his room.

"Of course he did. You've been gone for months, and —"

As hard as it often was for him to get the words out, this time, they left his lips all too easily. He swallowed the last part of his sentence as those terrible puzzle pieces clicked into place a moment too late.

"Fuck," he whispered. Images of the bandits and his father blurred together, as a thousand questions flooded his mind, choking him and making him feel like he was about to throw up. "Why... why..."

Irina sat stock-still, staring at the floor in front of her.

"Why didn't I know?" he blurted out.

"You were never home."

It was an observation, not an accusation. It stung all the same.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged. Ross swallowed his frustration, and the rising nausea with it. He couldn't blame her for any of this. It wasn't her fault. He should have paid more attention while home for the holidays. He should have noticed something. He should have *protected* her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, as if words could fix this. As if anything could. "I'm so sorry."

She shrugged again. Her arms were wrapped around her knees and her chin tucked low as if she wanted to curl up until she vanished.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I want to sleep."

She leaned forward and grabbed her cup for a drink before she pulled the blanket over her legs and arranged it around her tucked-in feet. Her movements were slow, pointed, deliberate — leaving no room to question the fact that she was very much going to sleep right now and had no time for anything else.

Ross could take a hint. To make sure she wouldn't be cold, he put some more wood into the fire, watching the glowing sparks rise and die. With his pills kicking in and promising a night with fewer spasms that would wake him up, there was nothing he wanted more than to sleep himself. He had a few more blankets now. He would be comfortable enough, and tomorrow, he would have to find a way to make this right.

Mel was dead. It hadn't truly sunk in yet; neither the sorrow he should be feeling in some corner of his cold heart, nor the relief about being safe from her treacherous schemes. But she *was* dead, which meant they could leave it all behind. He could take Irina away from here and make sure she finally got the life she deserved. No matter how hard it was going to be, compared to what she had been through, it would be easy.

He pulled himself up on the mantelpiece, surveying the room for a spot on the floor where he could lie down. If he moved one of the chairs out of the way, he would have space against the wall next to the door. There was little use in bringing his crutch for that, so he focused on the movements of his left foot as he limped across the room.

"Do you hate me now?"

Ross froze, clutching the wall to keep himself steady as he turned around. Irina didn't look at him. Curled up on the mattress with the blanket pulled up to her ears, she had turned her back on him.

"What?"

When she didn't reply, he returned to her side. It didn't matter how tired he was, he couldn't let her go to sleep like



this. In front of the mattress, he sat on the ground.

"I don't — What makes you —" No. No questions. No words that might be taken as blame. "I don't hate you, Ivy," he said as softly as possible. "I could never hate you."

Her hand pushed out from under the blankets. Ross reached for it. Through the trembling of her fingers, she clung to him, and, without letting go of his hand, she shuffled backwards. Making room for him.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

When she nodded, he pushed himself onto the mattress and stretched out next to her. As always, he pinned his left arm and leg down with his body, but this time, he forced his good arm to lay flat at his side as well. She was crying; still, again. He barely dared to breathe as she settled herself closer, snaking her arm around his waist and pressing her head against his chest. No matter how tired he was, he made sure she fell asleep first, only closing his eyes when her tears dried up and her breaths calmed down.

\* \* \*

It was late when Irina woke up. In the last light of a day that had passed unnoticed, she watched Ross sleep. She couldn't remember the last time he had gone this long without being woken up by a spasm, if he hadn't been unable to fall asleep because of the pain in the first place.

Those last few weeks hadn't been kind to him. He had stretched himself too thin, done too much. It had clearly taken a toll on him. The dark circles never left their spot under his eyes, he had lost a lot of weight, and she could tell he was in pain, even if he tried not to let it show. His medication would hopefully improve his condition, but she had to step up as well; take care of more things so he could rest.

Not that she hadn't tried before. He sure wasn't making it

easy. Often, he was already done chopping firewood and preparing food by the time she awoke. She could check the nets and traps alone, but he never let her, which was as endearing as it was infuriating. There was no reason to treat her like one of his father's fragile crystal glasses.

She was fine. It didn't matter that the light of the sun was still too bright, and that she was always tired, and that sometimes, the world was just too much. When she looked down on herself—which she usually avoided—she couldn't count her ribs that easily anymore, and she had gained much of her strength back. Her bones and joints still ached, and she dreaded each trip to the outhouse, but she would get used to it. It was better to be alive and in pain than to have died down there.

"Ivy?"

Ross' voice, slurred with sleepiness, pulled her out of her thoughts. She watched him open his eyes, putting a smile onto her lips to combat the frown on his.

"Good evening." She raised her hand and traced his temple, pushing a strand of his hair aside. "You've slept better." It was less of a question, more of an observation.

He blinked, brows furrowed. After waking up, it always took him a while to regain at least some control over his left eye, but his frown didn't seem due to his vision alone.

"I dreamed. Something. I don't—" He shook his head and closed his eye so he could aim better as he reached for her hand. "And you? Do you feel better?"

"Mhm." She clung to his hand; a hand that had reached out for her in concern, only to be slapped aside. "I'm sorry."

"What... What for?"

"Hurting you. I was. It was. Too much, too— I'm sorry."

"You didn't hurt me." He squeezed her hand. "And I understand." The sadness in his eyes as he looked at her almost made her believe it. "Are you all right? After what..."

Trailing off, he swallowed before he tried again. "After what you did?"

"Killing your sister?"

When he winced, she almost regretted her words, but she needed to know that he truly understood. That he didn't hide behind the distance and the fact that he was never going to see his family again to gloss over the reality of what she had done. His family's blood was on her hands – twice now.

Ross' gaze hardened. "I don't think she deserves that title," he said. "But yes. Killing my sister. Do you regret it?"

"No. I thought I would be happy. Or satisfied. But. I'm... I'm not sure what I feel." She dropped her head onto her hand and watched him as she asked, "Do you?"

"Know what you feel?" he teased.

Despite the dark topic, she couldn't help but grin, slapping him lightly on the arm.

"I should, shouldn't I? I should at least feel *something*. But all I can think of is that we're safe. That she won't try to kill me." He reached out and brushed her collarbone with his fingertips. "That she'll never hurt you again."

"Mm." Irina watched his hand, noticing scrapes and calluses that had never been there before. If only she could get that maid's tear-stained face out of her mind. "We should eat," she said, so she wouldn't say something else.

Ross eyed the burnt-down fire. "Let me get –"

"No." She nudged his shoulder, which stopped his attempt of pushing himself up. "I'll get the wood. I need to hang up my clothes anyway."

If they were still there, that was. She had just left them lying in the grass. Not that she would need them again, because she wasn't going back. She couldn't. They would have discovered the body hours ago, and after the bloodbath she had left behind, the house would be in an uproar.

Mourning the comfortable warmth, she peeled herself out of the blanket and scrambled to her feet. Her first path led her to the table, where she picked up one of Ross' pills.

"One?" she asked as she brought it over.

"Yeah." He took it. "Thank you."

So that hadn't changed since the last time she had helped him with things like that. Despite his insistence that she didn't have to, she wanted to do all those little tasks for him. But perhaps he didn't need her help anymore. Perhaps he didn't *want* it. During his years at school, he would have had to do a lot of things on his own.

She took the empty pitcher with her as she went outside. Diligently, she filled it with water, and washed her face, and hung up the clothes, anything to delay the inevitable moment when she had to go to the outhouse. She had considered drinking less, but that only seemed to make the pain worse, not to mention that she always felt like she had to go, no matter if there was anything to come out.

When she dragged herself back inside, her arm was pounding from where she had slammed it against the wall of the outhouse, and her face was wet from the cold water she had sprinkled into it to drive away the flush of her cheeks and the redness of her eyes. Luckily, the sun had already set, and the last of the day's light was fading fast. She didn't want him to worry.

She put her armful of wood next to the fireplace and stoked the fire to warm the kettle of water. The second cup Ross had prepared this morning stood still untouched. She took it and sipped the long-cold tea, too bitter and too sweet at the same time. He was going to need a fresh cup.

"What are we gonna eat?" Ross asked. "Oats, oats, or —"

"Oh!"

Irina jumped up and hurried to the table. He had unpacked the bags but didn't seem to have discovered the wrapped

bundle between the clothes. The fruit cake inside was half stale and crumbly, clinging to the fabric it had left big, round stains of fat on. Like a treasure, she carried it carefully over to the mattress, putting it down on the floor in front of the fireplace without spilling a single crumb.

"Ivy..."

"That's better than oats, isn't it?" She grinned broadly.

Why was he looking at her like that? It was just a bit of cake. She shuffled towards the fireplace and busied herself with stoking the fire and putting fresh mint into their cups. Behind her, Ross untangled his limbs and sat on the mattress. Irina grinned when his hand snatched a few crumbs, followed by a content hum.

A few minutes later they sat side by side, two steaming cups on the floor in front of them, filling the air with the fresh scent of mint.

"Do you still remember that first day?" Ross asked as he offered her a piece of the cake.

Even though she had brought it for him alone, she accepted the piece, for old time's sake. Watching his face, she tried to remember the little boy he had once been. If she was honest, her memories were fuzzy. No wonder; she had only been five years old.

"I remember thinking that you were mean, and that the house was creepy. I still think it is."

"And me?" Ross teased.

"You're all right," she said, bumping against his shoulder.

The mean little boy had become her best friend, and the creepy big house her new home. By the time her mother had come to pick her up, they had fallen asleep side by side, exhausted from hiding under the bed and exploring the make-believe depths in search of colorless, eyeless cave salamanders—of which Ross had shown her various pictures in one of his books.

Somewhere deep inside, he was still that little boy to her. He still saved her from being hungry and cold. He still smiled at her when she was thoughtless and rude. He still left her in awe with all the things he knew.

Irina chewed on her mouthful of cake while she eyed the piece in her hand. Colorful bits of fruits and nuts were embedded in the dark golden dough; red and orange and yellow and white. What those were, she had no idea, just like she wouldn't be able to name a single spice giving the cake its familiar taste. If only she knew how to bake, but the kitchen hadn't been her place to work at, unless it was in preparation for one of the bigger feasts, and even then she had been relegated to peeling vegetables and scrubbing pots.

While she hugged her cup to soak up its warmth, Ross finished most of the cake, leaving a piece for him to enjoy the next day before he'd have to say goodbye to his favorite treat. As he folded the piece of cloth around the cake, he caught her staring.

"Don't look at me like that. We'll find a better one. We'll go to one of the big cities. We could even go to Caldeia." He gestured wildly with his arm. "There must be dozens of bakers there. I'm sure one of them will make a cake that's even better."

"But it won't be the same."

"Then perhaps it's time for something new." With the wrapped bundle tucked away safely, he stretched out on the mattress. "A new start. A new life."

Irina thought of shelves full of books, of down pillows and fine linen clothes, of wines and syrups and three-course-meals. How could he leave all that behind? Everything he owned, everything he had ever known, everything that would have been his in the future. To stay with *her*. To live like *this*. Sooner or later he would get tired of it, and he would blame her, and —

"Ivy..." He tugged on her sleeve, bringing her spiraling thoughts to a screeching halt. "I don't know what you're thinking right now, but I'm sure you are wrong."

She tried to laugh, but it sounded rather hollow. "I was just thinking I should clean up a little."

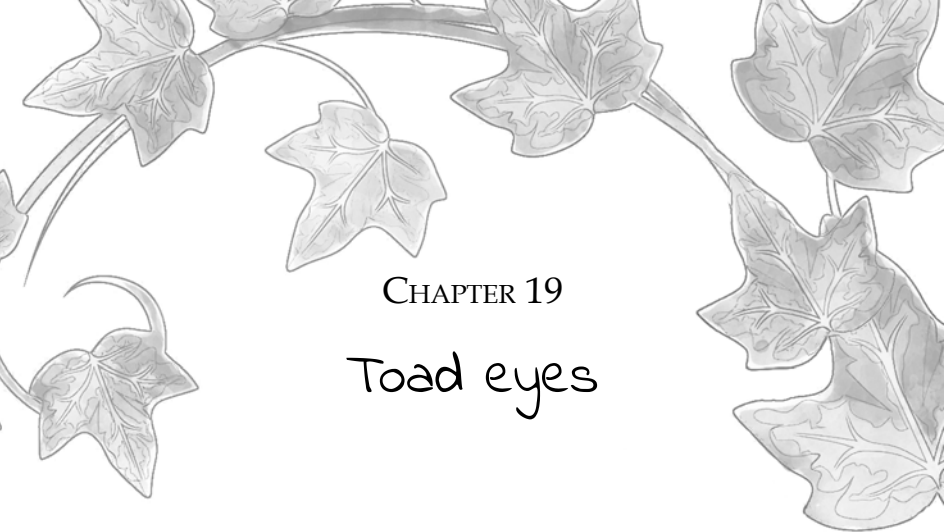
"Sure you were." He tugged again. "But even if you were, you are wrong. Come here."

"But—"

She looked around. The hut was spotless, with the exception of the things she had brought. Ross had left them in piles on the table. That was hardly an excuse he would accept, and she had no idea where else to put them anyway. Their cups were still half full, they hadn't used any other dishes, and it was too dark to find something to do outside.

"Okay," she whispered.

She pulled the blanket with her as she lay down, making sure Ross was fully covered. Restlessness buzzed in her nerves, but the moment his arm wrapped around her, she relaxed. He was so warm, and she was so cold, as if the chill of the night had settled deep in her bones and refused to leave. She closed her eyes and nuzzled her head against his chest. Perhaps a few more hours of sleep would fix it.



## CHAPTER 19

# Toad eyes

"Ivy? Hey. Ivy. What's wrong?"

Ross' words rattled in her head, too loud, yet strangely muffled at the same time. The urgency in his voice was what made her open her eyes, only to squeeze them shut again instantly. Gods; it was too bright. With a weak whine, she pulled her arm over her face.

"Can you hear me?"

She managed a weak groan. Now that he had woken her up, all the little aches and pains trickled back into her awareness. Her feet were sore, her legs full of scratches. Where she had slammed into the branch, her chest was bruised, but she didn't think her ribs were broken. Worst of all was the burning pressure in her lower abdomen. She should have gotten used to it by now, but every time she thought it had gotten better, the pain returned with new fury.

Her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton. With another groan, she rolled onto her stomach and got her arms under her. She had pushed through more than one illness to keep working, she would manage to drag herself to the outhouse.

"Have to." Her thoughts scattered faster than she could form the words. "I'll be. Right."



Ross watched her with blatant concern as she dragged herself to her feet, clinging to the mantelpiece and the wall on her way to the door. The morning light stabbed at her eyeballs like the ground at her bare soles. With her eyes mostly closed, she stumbled across the grass until the outhouse darkened the brightness of the sky and her hands slammed against the wood.

She didn't have the energy to fight the pain. With her eyes pressed against her forearm, she sobbed until she was done, and then it took her a few minutes to find the strength to scramble back to her feet. Perhaps she had overdone it. After all those weeks of nervous anticipation, it was finally over. Perhaps her body merely demanded more rest than she had granted it so far. She would crawl back into bed, sleep for a few more hours, and wake up feeling better. She had to. She couldn't leave everything to Ross; not again.

On her way back to the lodge, her skin was already covered in a thin sheet of sweat. She cast the well a longing glance, but it was too far away, and she didn't think her trembling arms would cooperate in pulling the bucket up. Perhaps later. Out of breath, she stumbled through the door, shuffled across the room, and flopped bonelessly onto the mattress.

"What's wrong?" Ross sat on the floor next to the mattress.

"I'm tired."

*Tired* wasn't nearly enough to describe the bone-deep weariness, the wish to sink into the mattress until she became one with it. Even with her eyes closed, the world kept tilting at the edges, and now that she wasn't moving anymore, she was trembling from the chill of her clammy skin.

Fingers brushed over her forehead.

"You're on fire."

"Mhm."

She leaned into his touch. His fingers weren't cold exactly, but they were much cooler than her forehead.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

Did she? She tried to take stock of her body, to find an ache that wasn't connected to overly strained muscles or miniscule scratches.

"Donthinso."

"Let me check."

The fingers vanished from her forehead. Irina mourned the loss but used the chance to sink deeper into the pillow. The rustle of fabric. A touch on her foot. Feeling for the scars. Running along her calf. Moving her leg.

With a noise that was half whimper and half plea, she jerked away, her heart hammering in her chest as her hand slid off the mattress. It slammed against the ground, slipping off as she tried to find purchase to crawl away. She pulled her legs against her chest instead and curled up with her back towards Ross.

"Fuck." He scrambled away from her. "I'm sorry."

Her head jerked back at the sound of his voice, trying to assess where he was, how close he was. It shouldn't matter. It was him. It was *him*. He would never hurt her. She knew it. She *knew* it. He only wanted to help, but it wasn't *his* touch she was feeling. Her eyes burned with shame about how little control she had over her reaction.

"Ivy?" he whispered. "Can you look at me?"

She turned her head and blinked away the tears. His bright hair was wild and unkempt, and his bright eyes shimmered treacherously.

"I won't. I won't touch you. But something—" He broke off and took a deep breath. It didn't seem to do much to calm him down, but his voice was clearer as he said, "Something is wrong. I think you're sick. Can you tell me what happened? Everything?"

Irina closed her eyes. That would take so long, and she was so tired. But he sounded so worried, and she didn't want him

to worry, so she fought against the sleepiness and begged her tongue to cooperate.

"I waited in the tree. Until everything was dark. And longer." She could do this. In short snippets, she told him how she had entered the house, how she had torn apart the rooms, how she had killed Mel. She told him about all the blood, and her way back to his room, and the maid. The jump. The tree. The escape. She could see that he wanted to interject, probably asking to take a look at her chest, but he didn't say it out loud, and she couldn't bring herself to offer.

"At the edge of the village. I hid the jewels and. I walked into the. River. Like you. Like."

Her efforts to speak finally failed as her words ended in a cough. Slowly and without breaking eye contact, Ross brought a cup of water to her lips, tilting it ever so slightly to let her drink without spilling anything or risking another coughing fit.

To make sure no dog would be able to follow her trail, he had said. She would never have risked leading anyone to him, so she had followed the river for over an hour, until her clothes had been soaked, and her legs had been frozen to the core, and she hadn't been able to feel her feet anymore.

She might very well have hurt herself then without noticing it, but she hadn't seen any blood when washing herself, so even if she had, it couldn't be that bad. Certainly no reason to feel as weak and feverish as she did.

The cool water felt wonderful on her lips. She drank it all before she continued, not that there was much left to tell him. Nothing had happened during her way back, other than that a few noises had startled her, and that at some point, she had been so tired, she had kept dropping the bundle.

"Okay," he said when she was done with her tale. "Did you eat or drink anything?" When she made a denying noise, he probed further. "At the house? In the forest?"

"No," she forced herself to whisper.

"Then it can't..." He trailed off, casting a glance at the bundle on the floor. "We ate the same things, and I don't feel unwell. Does anything hurt?"

"Ev..." She whimpered. "Everything. Hurts."

His frown deepened. "Where does it hurt the most?"

Irina attempted to take stock again, discarding bruises and scrapes and the old, badly healed break. It was pointless. The worst pain by far was deep inside her, as if she were still bruised and torn open. She couldn't tell him, much less *show* him.

"I... I can't."

"Okay." His hand trembled as he held the empty cup in a white-knuckled grip, but his voice remained calm. "Get some rest. I think I've seen some herbs that help against fever around here. I'll see if I can find them. Do you need anything now?"

A single tear rolled down her cheek. She needed *him*. She wanted to be held in his arms and feel his warmth, but how could she tell him that when she couldn't stand his touch? Damn her body for betraying her like this.

"C... cold," she whispered.

Ross grabbed the edge of the blanket and lifted it for her to see. "May I?"

He waited for her answer, not moving, even as she took her time to decide, as her breaths came quicker and her fingers dug into the mattress. When she finally choked out "okay," he pulled the blanket over her without touching her. She snatched it and pulled it around her shoulders herself, still trembling.

\* \* \*

Ross watched Irina shiver under her blanket, taking in the deep creases on her forehead and dried tears on her cheeks. He cursed the bandits, and he cursed his sister, and as a new arrival on the list of people he wished would forever get lost in the aether, he cursed his father.

Cursing wasn't getting him anywhere, though, so as soon as Irina's body relaxed, he took his crutch and struggled to his feet. He needed more firewood if he wanted to keep the fire going all day, and the herbs he remembered were growing between the lodge and the lake. If he was lucky, he would find another fish in one of his nets. While he doubted Irina would be able to stomach their usual slimy fish stew, he could eat the fish himself and leave more of their dwindling supplies for her.

No matter what was the cause for her condition, she needed to eat, drink, and sleep. If they were lucky, she would feel better soon. Ross tried to ignore the lump in his stomach as he bent down and let the crutch dangle from its leather straps so he could pluck a few herbs.

It could be anything. Some kind of illness, randomly acquired and taking advantage of her cold and exhausted state to break out. A scratch that got infected, the pain so minor in comparison to everything else that Irina wasn't even aware of it. Something completely different, which he probably still wouldn't be able to figure out even if she let him touch her. He was no healer. All his knowledge came from books, and from watching those his parents had paid unsuccessfully to fix him.

The nets and traps were empty, so he returned with only the herbs and set out to fetch more firewood. The stacked, dried logs were rapidly dwindling as well, since the lodge had never been meant to be used for such a long time. Chopping wood with one arm was hard enough; he wasn't looking forward to having to take down whole trees.

He kept a small fire going, enough to bring the water to a boil so he could steep the herbs, and to keep the temperature inside the lodge so warm, it was almost uncomfortable.

Irina awoke in the early afternoon. Ross coaxed her to drink some water and the herbal mixture, but she refused all food he offered. He ended up eating the watery porridge himself, not feeling very hungry, either.

Come evening, she allowed him to take her hand and check her temperature, but she still wasn't comfortable with letting him look for injuries. As he watched her stumble back in tears after a trip to the outhouse, he got the sinking feeling that doing so would be of little use, anyway. She showed no sign of favoring a leg or arm, and if the cause of her fever was internal, there was nothing he could do to help.

A restless night followed a restless day. Ross built a pile of blankets and pillows next to the mattress, making sure he would be right there should she need him. He startled awake at the slightest whimper, tending to the fire so it wouldn't go out, and helping her drink when she was lucid enough to do so.

By morning, she didn't feel any better. If anything, her condition worsened. Ross didn't want to leave her out of his sight, so he accompanied her when she went to the outhouse, witnessing how much pain she was in and how weak she had become. The lack of food surely didn't do her strength any favors, but she still refused to eat, and the one time he insisted she at least try, she threw it all up again.

One day turned into two turned into three. Ross forgot about the traps and nets, never leaving her side and eating only the scraps she refused. He found an old bedpan and scrubbed it clean, so Irina didn't have to get up anymore. He wasn't sure she could have managed to.

Despite all the fluids and herbs, her condition didn't improve, and her fever only rose. It became increasingly obvious

that Irina needed more help than he could offer, but where should he find a healer? Even if the nearest city were close enough for him to walk there, requesting aid in a temple of Thyrviss would only swap one death sentence for another. There was no way people wouldn't recognize him, and the moment word got to his family, her life was forfeit.

In the long hours with nothing but her labored breaths for company, he tried to find a way out. There was one name he always came back to. They were no healer, but they were the only one he had a reasonable chance of reaching, as well as the only one he trusted enough to believe they wouldn't betray him. Whether they would be able to help was another question, but if he did nothing, Irina was going to die.

On the fourth morning since she had come back, he wrestled his leg into the brace and snapped the clasps closed. Putting on the matching shoe was much easier.

"Hold on. Please." He brushed a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead, but she didn't stir. "I'll get help."

If only she wouldn't think he had abandoned her, but there was no helping it. He couldn't wait for her to wake up so he could tell her where he was going, and chances were she was too out of it to understand him anyway. He threw the bag over his shoulder, taking the waterskin, a knife, and the gold coin with him. Hopefully it would be enough for them to agree to help him without asking questions.

At the door, he turned around one last time, watching her seemingly tiny frame buried under layers and layers of blankets. Even from this distance, he could see her shivering. His heart felt like it was breaking in half as he pulled the door closed behind him, not knowing whether she would still be alive when he came back.

The sun rose higher while Ross followed the half overgrown path to the next village. The herbalist—not a healer, as they insisted—he was looking for lived rather deep in the

forest, but while his sense of direction was good, it was not good enough he would trust himself with walking straight through the woods with no landmarks to tell him whether he was on the right path.

As the village came into view, he kept to the trees, not wanting to be seen. In the distance, people milled about, and when the wind turned, he could hear scraps of voices and laughter. How easy it would be if he could go there; ask for help, purchase food and medicine. Talk to people. He had never been the most sociable one, but after weeks with only Irina for company, even he was longing for the casual small talk of a random acquaintance. As soon as the thought had come, he pushed it back, stabbing his crutch extra hard into the ground with the next step. How pathetic of him. Irina had been completely alone for *months*, so what right did he have to complain?

He followed the edge of the village until he reached another, just as overgrown path. More than a decade had passed since the last time he had walked this way, but most of the landmarks remained: the bubbling stream, the twin trees with their stems entwined, the broken in half boulder. If not for the constant worry at the back of his mind, he would have enjoyed the memories the landscape brought.

If the position of the sun was anything to go by, it was just past noon when he reached the hut. Dark, weathered logs and a low, lopsided roof overgrown with moss loomed over a wild looking garden that mixed herbs, flowers, and vegetables in what looked like untamed chaos.

In front of the hut, he took a deep breath, focusing on his feet standing firmly as he lifted arm and crutch to knock. Once, barely audible. Twice, a bit stronger. Just when he wanted to knock a third time, the door was ripped open with so much vigor, it slammed against the wall and a few fibers of dried moss fluttered down from the roof.



Ross flinched, clutching the crutch to keep himself upright as his left leg spasmed. A figure filled the doorway, a head and a half taller than him, with thin, pale green hair and wrinkly, sun-tanned skin. They wore a robe of indeterminate shape and color, like dirt and grass and rotting leaves made clothing. A strand of ivy wrapped around their neck and dangled down their front, and they waved a mummified toad on a stick around as they called out in a booming voice.

"Toad eyes and wasp wings and worm— Ross? Is that you?"

The toad-on-a-stick was lowered.

"Hello, Lichen."

"What brings you here, my boy?" They looked him up and down. "It's been a while. Don't tell me your parents still have the notion that there's a way to fix you."

The snide way in which they said it filled his aching heart with a spark of warmth. No, they surely would not tell his parents about his visit, the reason of which pulled the corners of his mouth from the hint of a smile back into a frown.

"I need help."

"Come in."

Ivy and toad were carelessly dropped onto a chest, while the robe was put onto a nail behind the door. Underneath, Lichen wore a plain sweater and a sturdy, long skirt that swayed with each step. They smoothed their hair and gestured behind them, vaguely in the direction of the two chairs at the cluttered table.

"Take a seat. Can I offer you anything? Water? Tea?" Their eyes glimmered with mischief. "Toad eyes?"

Ross shook his head and trudged to the table. Sitting down felt wrong, but his body needed a moment of rest, and it wasn't like he could drag Lichen out of their hut without any kind of explanation. When he looked up, he found himself

facing a cup of water and a questioning gaze of piercing brown eyes.

"Tell me what's wrong?"

He rubbed his eyes. During the past few hours, he had had plenty of time to come up with a story that was close enough to the truth so he wouldn't have to remember a ton of made-up details.

"A friend of mine. She's very sick. Her fever is getting worse, and I tried everything I could think of, and it's not helping, and—" He gasped for breath, forcing himself to slow down so Lichen would be able to understand him. "I think she's dying, and I don't know what to do."

"I'm not a healer."

"I know." Ross' stared at the table, unwilling to meet their gaze. "I know. I just. I didn't know where else to go. I can pay!" He tugged at the bag, trying to get it onto the table so he could open it. "I can—"

They stopped him with a disgruntled noise and a shake of their head. "Is the fever her only symptom?" Their tone promised that they were at least thinking about helping him. "And when did it start?"

"It started three days— four days ago now. It didn't seem high enough to warrant an attempt to lower it, but..." He broke off with a choked laugh that sounded too much like a sob. "I'm no healer, either. I tried, but." He shook his head. "She can't keep anything but water down. She's in pain, but she can't tell me where it hurts. I think." He gestured to the lower half of his own torso. "I think it's inside. There's blood, but I don't know where it's coming from."

"I need to know what happened, Ross. The whole story."

Memories surfaced unbidden, images he'd rather forget. He took a deep breath. He could do this. Push his feelings aside for one moment and focus on the facts. For Irina.

"I found her..." No. He had to go back further. "I was

kidnapped by bandits. She was in the same dungeon they put me in. The gods alone know what happened to her before I was captured, but even during those few days. They beat her, Lichen. They beat her, and they starved her, and they raped her and... I don't know how she was still alive." His voice broke with the memories, and it took him a moment to regain his composure so he could say, "She saved me. I don't know how she found the strength. But she did. We made it. Somehow. We made it out."

"If she was in such a bad condition, why didn't you get a healer for her?" they asked the question he had dreaded.

"It's... complicated." That was the understatement of the century, but he feared even Lichen's dislike for his family would draw a line at murder. "My parents must think I'm dead. I need to keep it that way. If they find me. If they make me go back. Then she'd be all alone, and I can't leave her alone."

"But she's dying," they said bluntly. "You don't think that might be worse than being alone?"

"Yes. No! Not like — That was weeks ago. She was better. She *was* better." The tears he had held back so far spilled over as all his helplessness crashed down on him. "She was healing, and she was getting stronger, and... I don't know what happened. One day she was fine, and the next she barely made it out of bed."

"Mhm." Lichen rose, pacing up and down in front of a shelf laden with jars of various shapes and sizes. In the wake of their steps swayed various bushels of dried herbs. "How long ago exactly?"

"The fever or..."

When Lichen made an impatient gesture, Ross swallowed and decided to start at the beginning.

"They kidnapped me... I'm not sure. I think it was three months ago?" Ross stared at the door as if it could answer

the question in his stead. "I don't even know today's date," he muttered. How could he when all days were the same? "I was down there with her for a few days, but she must have been there much longer. Months, probably. She had a high fever when we made it out, so I picked some healing herbs, and I made sure her wounds were clean, even though some were clearly infected, but those were at her ankles, and she was bleeding, but it stopped after a few days, and..."

Under Lichen's darkening gaze, he withered and fell silent. Gods, he could talk for an hour and still remember some kind of injury he hadn't mentioned before, but he had to focus on what was relevant.

"When we reached a safe place, I made sure she got plenty of rest," he said. That was probably important. "I noticed she was moving strangely, and she described to me what hurt, and I thought..." Faced with someone who actually knew this kind of stuff, his bumbling diagnosis felt inadequate. "I thought she might have a fracture on her pelvis somewhere," he muttered. "I don't know. She was in a lot of pain, and I figured even if I am wrong, rest wouldn't do any harm, so for a couple of weeks —"

"What the *fuck* did they do to her?" Lichen growled. "Did they hurt you, too?"

Ross raised his left hand, his arm trembling with the effort it took him to hold it still as he pointed the missing finger at Lichen. "Not much."

Ross had never seen an expression so dark and murderous as the one that flitted over their face. It was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving him with lingering unease and the question of whether the blackness in their eyes had been nothing more than a play of shadows and light.

"All right. I'll come with you. No promises, though!" they added quickly as if the relieved grin on Ross' face were a personal insult. "No promises. Don't come blaming me if..."

Their muttered words trailed off as they rummaged around at the counter. "Here." They put a handful of dried nuts and berries down in front of Ross. "Finish your water and eat something before you collapse on the way back. I need to gather my stuff."

Ross pushed the bits and pieces around, forcing himself to eat them one by one, washing each bite down with a sip of water. The nuts felt like stones in his throat, the berries like acid on his tongue. When Lichen cleared their throat, a huge bag casually thrown over their shoulder, he quickly swallowed the rest without chewing properly. Tears burned in his eyes as he tried to wash down the lump without choking on it.

"I didn't— You're okay?"

Ross nodded, accompanied by a cough and a gasp for air. His throat burned, but he could breathe, and that was all he needed to grab his crutch and pull himself to his feet. Lichen sighed, staying close to him as they herded him to the door and out of the hut.

They walked in silence, following the way back to the village and staying out of sight like Ross had done earlier. He stared at the ground in front of him, watching his left foot as it tried its best not to get stuck on the uneven terrain. Dead leaves, scattered debris, and ground-covering plants swam before his eyes. He was too tired to focus, and keeping his left eye closed limited his field of vision too much, allowing low hanging branches to sneak up on him and slap him in the face.

In his panic over Irina's condition, he had forgotten to take his own medicine with him. It was long past the time he should have taken another dose, and his uncooperative left side was stiff and painful. Not used to the exercise of walking for hours, his right side was hurting as well, muscles tight and aching in a completely different way.

To distract himself from the pain, Ross watched Lichen whenever he had a moment of attention to spare. They looked very much like he remembered; perhaps sporting a few more wrinkles, a few more gray hairs in between the pale green, though he assumed the latter was very much intentional, as the color couldn't be natural in the first place. They wore a plain, dark brown travel cloak made of thick wool that swayed around their legs with each step. Their macabre appearance, toad and all, was nothing but a show to keep unwanted visitors at bay. Whoever looked past moth wings and snake eggs often had a good enough reason to seek help, they had told him once.

How his stuck-up parents had brought themselves to send their son to the eccentric hermit was a mystery to Ross. Lichen had taken one look at him, called his parents a bunch of unflattering names for believing there was something to be fixed, and seven-year-old Ross had spent a summer catching toads and learning how to skin rabbits and memorizing half a dozen herbs and mushrooms that could kill a man.

While Ross dwelled on memories of days long past, the sky darkened. Lichen peered up at the canopy. They pulled their bag off their shoulder, double-checking the leather cover. Using the smallest of opportunities to rest for even a moment, Ross leaned against a tree and flexed his right foot.

"Are you all right?" Lichen asked. "Do you need a break?"

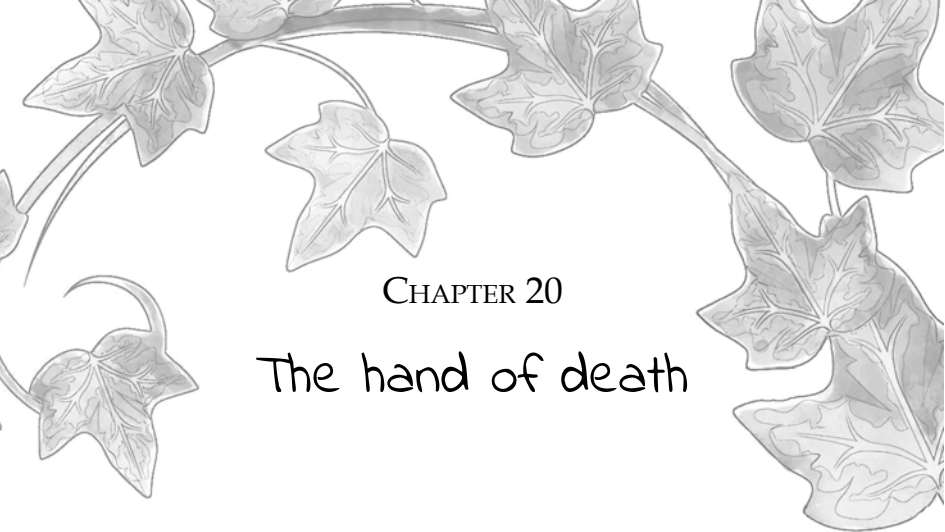
"No," he replied briskly. They couldn't afford a break. As long as his legs would carry him, he would go on. "No break," he clarified just in case, unable to keep the despair out of his voice.

Lichen nodded. Apparently content with the state of their bag, they threw it back over their shoulder as the first raindrops began to fall.

"Please tell me you got some kind of shelter wherever we're going."

“My father’s hunting lodge.” Ross tightened his grip around the crutch and eased his weight back onto his feet. “He only uses it for two weeks every year, so we’ve been hiding there. It’s not great, but it’s got food, water. A fireplace.”

“Good.” Their brows furrowed as the first thunder rolled in the distance. “Let’s hurry.”



## CHAPTER 20

# The hand of death

When the lodge finally came into view, they were soaked to the bone. Lightning filled the spaces between the trees with ghostly streaks of white, but the delayed thunder told Ross that the storm was too far away to be of any concern.

He mobilized the last of his strength and overtook Lichen on the final steps, arriving at the door first. His hand shook as he reached for the door, making it hard to pull it open. After all those hours, the fire had gone out, and the light of the darkened sky falling in through the windows was barely enough to see a few steps ahead.

"Ivy?" He hobbled inside, leaving wet splotches on the floor. "I'm back. I brought help."

There was no reply. Ross shuffled forwards, begging his eyes to adjust to the darkness quicker. In front of the mattress, he dropped his crutch and sank to his knees. She lay just as he had left her; on her back, all but buried under layers of blankets, her eyes closed. Her skin that had been flushed with fever in the morning looked almost gray now.

"Ivy."

Her name broke on his lips as invisible hands closed around his throat. His fingers brushed over her too-cold cheek.



When Ross pulled her into his arms, her limbs moved without resistance and her head lolled to the side. He wept as he pressed her against his chest, as if that could fill the gaping hole where his heart had been. If only he had recognized sooner how dire her condition was, had gone to fetch help quicker.

Heavy footsteps approached and stopped next to him. Lichen must have followed him inside, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. They spoke to him. He didn't bother to listen. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. Every possible future shattered like his heart, leaving broken pieces that didn't make sense without her.

"Ross!"

His name, yelled at full volume, broke through his despair and made him flinch. He clutched Irina to his chest, desperate to protect her even in death. In front of him, Lichen's hands hovered over the mattress without touching anything.

"I need your help. Do you understand?"

He nodded mechanically, even if he didn't. What good was his help when they had come too late, how should he ever —

"Ross!" Not quite as loud this time, but just as urgent. "Listen to me. She's not dead. Do you hear me? She's alive. But I need. Your help."

Slowly, his gaze wandered from Lichen to Irina, resting on her face. She was too still, way too still, and yet. Fresh tears welled in his eyes when her lips fluttered, pulling in a weak, ragged breath. His heart beat out of rhythm, and he held his own breath as he waited and watched, endless, tormenting seconds, until her chest rose again.

Lichen put their hand on his. "You're with me?"

He swallowed and gasped and nodded again, staring at Lichen so he wouldn't stare at Irina's too-gray face. Their mouth moved. He forced himself to take in their words.

"Get a fire going. It's too cold in here, and I need light. Much more light. Do you have lamps?" They didn't wait for

him to reply before they pointed at the door. "And I need water. Preferably warm, but that will take too long, so bring me some cold water as well to get started."

Ross acknowledged the instructions with yet another numb nod, but his body was frozen, his arms—even his left arm—wrapped around Irina. To do what Lichen wanted, he had to let go of her. For once, he had to instruct his right arm what to do, forcing each muscle to relax, to let her down gently. She didn't stir, but another breath rattled in her chest, telling him that she was still alive. For now. Alive, but too cold.

He whirled around and scooted closer to the fireplace. A few glowing embers were left under the layer of ash, allowing him to rekindle the flames without another fight with flint and steel. It seemed to take the fresh logs forever to catch fire, so he added a handful of tinder to hurry it along.

The flickering light wouldn't be enough. Luckily, Irina had brought his glowing crystal back. He reached for where they kept it next to the mattress and brought it to life, dropping it in front of Lichen before he pulled himself to his feet and fetched the oil lamps. Just in case the light of the crystal wasn't enough, he ignited them and placed them on the floor, as close as possible to the mattress while keeping them out of Lichen's way.

He took his crutch and limped to the door, each step a struggle of forcing his mind to focus on his left leg. He fetched the first bucket of water and divided it between kettle, pot, and a bowl. When he returned with the second one, Lichen had pulled back the blankets and was running their hands over Irina's body.

Protectiveness spiked in Ross' chest, but he bit down the urge to stop them. They were the only one who could save her now, and they couldn't do so without figuring out what was wrong. He shuffled closer and put down the bucket of water. Irina was still unconscious. Even in the warm

firelight, her skin had that grayish hue.

"How can I help?"

"Keep an eye on the water. Get a cup or two ready." They looked up and around, nodding to the spot on the floor next to Irina's head. "And stay close in case she wakes up."

Ross did as he was told. He settled on the side of the mattress that faced the fire, hoping the warmth would dry his soaked clothes. When his gaze fell on his pill bottle, he popped two of the pills into his mouth and swallowed it without water. This day's schedule was fucked already, but perhaps it would get him through the evening.

"What's wrong?" he asked when Lichen pulled their hands back, the wrinkles on their forehead deepened by their frown.

They looked up. "Infection," they said. "It has spread to multiple organs and reached her bloodstream."

No matter how basic his knowledge about medicine, he knew that was bad. Over the rushing of blood in his head, Ross asked, "Will she —"

"I'll see what I can do. A cup of warm water, please?"

While Ross fetched the water with a trembling hand, they rummaged around in their bag, pulling out and inspecting various bottles and pouches. Some of the herbs ended up in the cup, while others went back into the bag or were arranged in meticulous order next to it.

He could only watch helplessly while Lichen propped up Irina's torso, leaning her head against their chest so they could trickle the concoction into her mouth. Irina didn't wake up, but Lichen's hand on her throat made her swallow.

"I tried to keep her wounds clean," he muttered. "I thought they looked good. I thought — How could I fuck this up."

Lichen put her back down, casting a glance at the thick scars around her ankles and brushing a thumb over the one on her thigh.

"It doesn't come from those wounds," they said. "They healed as well as could be expected. The infection spread from inside." Seeing the dawning horror on Ross' face, they added in a much kinder tone, "There is nothing you could have done. This isn't your fault."

He pulled his leg to his chest and reached out to take Irina's hand, her fingers too lifeless and cold in his. Wasn't it? What if he had spoken more quietly? What if he hadn't called out to her that day? What if he had tried harder, had found a way to keep the bandits off her, no matter the cost?

All the what-ifs weren't going to save her now. Ross took a shuddering breath and looked up, only to freeze as his gaze fell on Lichen. Their eyes were solid black, featureless like polished obsidian. A chill that had nothing to do with his damp clothes ran down Ross' spine. That was not healing magic.

His gaze wandered from Lichen's hands to Irina's face, showing no sign of discomfort. What were they *doing* with death magic? Ross swallowed the urge to ask. He trusted them. More than anyone. They were trying to help, and distracting them would do him no good.

Their hands felt along Irina's side, pausing over some spots, exerting slight pressure over others. She whimpered and squirmed on the mattress, but her eyes remained closed. Ross shuffled closer and put her hand on his lap so he could reach for her temple, stroking her hair and whispering words that got scrambled by a tongue unwilling to cooperate.

When Lichen leaned back, their expression was grim. Ross didn't dare to ask. He stared at Irina, telling himself that her skin was a bit less gray than before, that her breaths came a bit easier. As long as she held on to life, he would hold on to hope.

"We have two options," they said. "Option one is to wait and hope for the best. I tried to clear the infection, but..." They rubbed their eyes. "It's just too much. Her insides are all

but rotting away. Even if you were willing to get a real healer, I don't think she'd have enough time for that. The next one worth his money is more than a day's walk away."

Ross swallowed. Perhaps if he had known how dire it was going to be, he would have risked it. It was futile to think about that now.

"And the other option?"

"The other option is that I take it all out."

He waited for them to elaborate. When they didn't, he asked, "It all?"

"Her reproductive organs." They gestured vaguely over Irina's body. "Uterus. Ovaries. If those are gone, the infection can't keep spreading from there. Her kidneys don't look too great, either, but she needs those, you know."

"Is that. How. I mean. Have you done that—" Memories trickled back, of visitors and talks he hadn't understood as a child. "You have."

Lichen nodded. "It's one of the things I'm known for, if you know who to ask." They offered a forced smile that didn't reach their eyes. "Gods know what made your parents come to me for whatever they thought I could do for you."

Whatever that had been, Ross was grateful for it.

"So if you take it all out." He carefully avoided thinking about the how. "Will that improve her chances to live?"

"Yes."

"But you hesitate."

They tapped their fingers against their crossed legs. "It's not something I do lightly. And never without talking about the consequences, without making sure my patient understands it. The lasting effects on the body."

"She never wanted children," Ross mumbled. "I don't think that has changed."

He never wanted to marry, and she never wanted to bear children, and in hushed conversations hidden under covers

at night, they had promised each other to stay together and be their own family, then. Too much time had passed since those days. It was possible that she had since changed her mind, but Ross found it unlikely—more so after everything that had happened, everything that had come to light. It was certainly not a possibility he was willing to risk her life over.

“So you think that is what she would want?”

“She wants to live,” he said without hesitation. “She could have given up a thousand times in those last months. But she didn’t.” He thought of how she had fought for each drop of water, for each crumb of food. How she had dragged herself forward, broken and bleeding. How her eyes had lit up at the sight of grass and sky. “I know she wants to live. More than anything. Please. Do whatever you need to do to save her.”

And she deserved to live. She deserved so much more than what her life had been so far. He refused to give up on her when they were so close—so, so close—to getting out of here and starting over.

“You need to understand that she might still die. This procedure is risky even when the patient is healthy and strong, and she is neither.”

Ross forced himself to nod. “I understand. Whatever the outcome. I won’t blame you.”

No. He would blame himself, that much was certain.

“All right. I need to prepare a few things.” They unfurled their legs and stood up, looking around. Their gaze fell on a stack of tin bowls. “May I?”

When Ross nodded, they picked up two bowls and moved on to the stack of fabric, rummaging through clothes and blankets. Ross replied to every single question with a quiet nod. Who cared about all that stuff? He would have burned the lodge to the ground if that would mean saving her.

They held up a shirt. “You should change out of those wet clothes.”

"I'm fine," he said. Pulling damp and sticky fabric off cold and stiff limbs would be a struggle, and he wasn't willing to let go of Irina for how long that would take. Not if those might be the last moments he got with her.

Lichen accepted his decision and continued gathering things. They laid out various tools, the details of which Ross refused to acknowledge. They filled one of the bowls with warm water and poured a few sips of cold water into a cup. When they grabbed a dark vial, uncorked it, and counted the drops falling into the cup, Ross counted along in his mind.

"Can you pull her up a bit?"

He pushed his knee under Irina's back until she rested on his thigh with her head against his stomach, allowing Lichen to put the cup to her lips.

"Starburst extract," they explained. "The strongest stuff I dare give her. It won't knock her out fully, so I need you to stay at her side. If she comes to, she might panic. I need you to keep her calm. Understood?"

When Ross nodded, Lichen took a deep breath. They carefully removed the blanket Irina was wrapped in and pulled up her shirt, revealing the scars those terrible men had left on her chest.

"Let's do this."

Lichen bent over Irina, and Ross lowered his gaze. Even though her fingers in his hand were too cold, too lifeless, the touch grounded him. He watched the rise and fall of her chest, the movements of Lichen's hands on her lower body mere shadows at the edge of his vision.

They were fully focused on their work, blackness filling their eyes once more. As they channeled their magic into Irina's body, her breathing slowly became strained. Creases formed over still-closed eyes. Ross rubbed the back of her hand, helplessly wondering how painful the use of death magic was.

Had he made the right decision? Was this really what she would have wanted? What if it wasn't enough? What if she went through all this pain, through the terror of being touched by a stranger, only to die anyway?

When her eyes flew open, Ross pushed all his doubts aside. For her, he clung to the dying spark of hope in his chest, to the conviction that had made him beg Lichen to do it. She wanted to live, and he couldn't bear to lose her — not again.

"Ivy." His voice was a mere croak. It was enough to grab her attention. "It's okay. You're okay. I'm here."

She couldn't have understood his botched attempt at speaking, but her eyes — half-lidded and slowly filling with tears — were fixed on his face. The trust in her gaze broke his heart.

"You're okay. You —"

Lichen moved their hand, and Irina's head snapped up. A noise, half yelp and half whimper, left her lips, her eyes widening in fear. She struggled to get away but had no room to move, her free hand slipping off the mattress while Lichen held down her legs.

"Ivy. Ivy! Look at me." Ross pinned her hand down between his left arm and his leg so he could reach for her cheek. "They're a healer." The details of Lichen's profession could wait for later. "You're sick. They're trying to help."

With a shudder, Irina sank back onto the mattress. Another whimper turned into a broken sob as she writhed in place. The hand that wasn't trapped by Ross pounded on the floor, but there was no strength behind the movement.

"I know. I know. I'm sorry."

Ross offered her his left hand, letting her squeeze stiff fingers so he had his good hand free to cup her cheek. Under his touch, the muscles of her jaw were so tight, it had to be painful. He stroked her cheek, whispering pointless apologies and encouragements. Every so often, a shiver ran through



her, but she did not try to move away, and her sobs sounded like she was trying to hold them back.

Her efforts didn't last long. Lichen shifted, and a moment later, Irina screamed. Her fingernails dug into the palm of his hand. Ross didn't know how to comfort her when there was nothing he could do to ease her pain.

"Hold on," he whispered. The tears dripping off his cheeks caught in her hair. "Please, hold on."

Sweat beaded on Irina's forehead, but Ross had no hand free to wipe it away. She stopped screaming. She barely made any sound at all. Only her strained breaths told him how much pain she was in.

"Getting close."

Ross looked up in time to see Lichen pick up a metal tool, but he averted his gaze before he could make out any details. He leaned forward, so his body shielded Irina from being able to see them, and with all his focus on her, he couldn't see what they were doing, either. He could read it in Irina's face, though. Pain. Confusion. Fear.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that this must be bringing back her worst memories, and she was too out of it to explain what was happening. Gods. How much longer could this take?

"It will be over soon," he whispered, choosing a lie over the endless despair in his chest. "Hold on a little longer."

As Lichen continued their work, Irina's breathing picked up pace. Too shallow, too quick. Half suppressed whimpers were the only noises that made it past her lips. Her eyes were dark with pain and shimmering with tears. Through the haze of the drugs, she looked at him, so much sadness in her gaze, he could have cried in her stead.

*Ross.*

He recognized his name on her lips.

"I'm here."

Her hand tried and failed to grab his sleeve, so he took it and pressed it against his chest, feeling the intensity of her shivers deep in his bones.

"Co... cold." Her eyelids fluttered. For a moment, it looked like she had passed out, but her lips were still moving. "I... don't. I'm. Sorry."

"Ivy?"

Her eyes remained closed. Her breath rattled in her chest, and where before she had been shivering, she was now shaking violently.

"Ivy?" Ross pressed her hand, getting no reaction. "Wake up. Please. Please wake up." He could barely keep himself from shaking her, Lichen's instruction to hold still sticking to the last bit of his quickly fading composure.

Had her skin been this cold before? Had her heart beaten this quickly?

"Lichen. Lichen!" Panic crept into his voice, numbing his tongue. "So. Some. Something is wrong!"

He forced his body to pull back so he didn't block their view. They looked up, their grim expression turning grimmer.

"Shit."

Their hands, the sheets, and Irina's thighs were covered in blood, the smell of which only hit Ross once he saw it. So much blood. Too much. He had asked them to do this. It was his fault. The blood might as well have been on his hands.

"Ross!"

He forced his gaze up, but everything was blurry, his eyes unfocused and filled with tears.

"Here."

A small object flew through the air. He flinched and failed to catch it, so it bounced off his chest instead.

"Open it. Dip your finger into the powder and put it on her gums. Be careful that she doesn't bite your finger off, and try not to swallow any yourself." A moment of silence. Then,

more urgently, "Ross! Do you understand? I can't—" They raised their blood-covered hands. "I can't do it myself."

Slowly, the words trickled into his mind. Yes. He could... he could do that. He pressed Irina against his chest as he felt around the folds of his damp clothes to find the container. It was sealed tightly with a flat piece of cork that resisted his attempts of pulling it out with his teeth for endless, tormenting seconds.

The moment the lid gave in, he spit it out and licked his thumb so the powder would stick to it. He pushed his thumb past her lips and rubbed it along her gums. At first, it didn't seem to help as every second stretched into an eternity filled with panic and sorrow. Then her breath stuttered, turning into a whimper on the exhale.

As she returned to consciousness, she threw her head from side to side. Her hand resumed hitting the floor, so Ross reached for her shoulder.

"Don't. You'll. You'll hurt yourself." As if she wasn't hurting enough already. He pushed his left arm in her direction, "Take my hand."

She tried to, but she had neither the strength nor the coordination she needed. When her wrist bounced off his forearm, Ross caught it awkwardly and pinned it between his arm and her chest.

"Keep talking to her. Keep her awake."

The urgency in Lichen's voice echoed in his ears in the rhythm of his frenzied heartbeat. He cupped Irina's cheek with his right palm.

"Ivy. Look at me. Look at me. You're gonna be okay," he said, and it didn't matter that his voice broke or that his tongue swallowed half of the syllables. She didn't look like she was lucid enough to understand him anyway. "You're gonna be okay. And when you feel better. We'll leave. We'll find a new place to live. I'll use that stupid degree. I'll earn money and.

We'll buy a home. I'll buy you anything you want."

She listened to the sound of his voice, watching him with no hint of understanding on her face. As long as her eyes were open, as long as her heart kept beating, that was enough for him.

"Perhaps we'll go to Caldeia. One of the students in my class was from Caldeia. He told us about it. About the palace. And the portal. And the districts. There are streets with nothing but merchants, and some sell only a single thing. Can you imagine? A whole store selling nothing but clocks or glasses or... hey." He squeezed her hand, not daring to shake her even as her eyelids drooped. "Look at me. Look at me."

Slowly, she pried her eyes open once more. Her gaze darted around, unable to grasp anything.

"Just a moment longer," Lichen said.

They sounded calmer than before. Ross hoped it was a good sign. He took a trembling breath, determined to talk past the fatigue of his tongue and jaw until Lichen told him to stop.

"He said you can walk down a street, and there will be nothing but stores. There must be dozens, hundreds of bakers in that city. We'll find the best fruit cake. One that's even better than the one at home. And we'll have it every day, and — Ivy! No. Wake up. Wake up, please."

This time, her eyes remained closed. Tears burned in Ross' eyes as helpless despair crushed his chest.

"It's okay." Lichen leaned to the side, leaving a bloody fingerprint on Irina's neck as they felt for her pulse. "The bleeding has stopped. As long as she's stable, she can sleep. The Seven know she needs it."

How could it be okay when she was so still, so pale, so lifeless.

"I need to clean her up, but first, I need to wash my hands and..." They peered down their front. Blood splatters adorned their sweater, and even though they had rolled up

their sleeves, they were soaked with blood. "The rest of me. I'll grab one of those shirts for myself, if that's all right. Can you watch over her for a moment longer? Call for me if anything changes, okay? I'll be quick."

Ross nodded along, even though the words breezed past him, leaving him with a strange distant feeling, like his head had been stuffed with cotton.

*Watch over her.* He stared at Irina; at her pale face, the dried traces of tears on her cheeks, and the too-bright splatter of blood on her neck. His gaze wandered lower, blurry vision drifting apart as he focused on her chest to see whether she was still breathing.

He put his hand on her chest, hoping that if he couldn't trust his eyes, he could at least trust his touch. If only his hand would hold still for a moment. If only his own fingers weren't so cold and numb. If only the air inside the lodge weren't so stale. His frantic breaths turned into little gasps, but it wasn't enough to stop the darkness from creeping into his vision.

"Okay, let's— shit."

Ross' heart jumped in his chest. Something was wrong. He had failed her again. Was she still breathing? He blinked frantically, but the darkness didn't want to recede.

Arms wrapped around him from behind. His body crumpled against his will, sinking into Lichen's embrace.

"Ivy," he croaked.

"She's fine. She's fine." They rubbed his shoulder. "Right now, it's you I'm worried about."

It didn't make sense. He wasn't the one who was hurt.

"Ross?" Their hand moved from his shoulder to his forehead. "You're freezing. You need to get out of those wet clothes."

They pushed him until he sat upright before they let go of his arms. Ross didn't move. He didn't know how. Not only

his left side refused to obey him, his right arm and leg felt like they were filled with lead as well.

After a moment, Lichen sighed. Slowly, they reached for his arm. When he didn't react, they tugged on his shirt, pulling cold, damp fabric away from equally cold, damp skin. The shirt got stuck at every possible joint, his limbs jerking this way and that as Lichen struggled to get it off.

The onslaught of warm air on his bare skin was like a weight dragging him down. He blinked slowly, watching Lichen return with a fresh shirt. He let them pull it over his head, tug it around his torso, and push his dead weight of a left arm through the sleeve.

Only when he stopped trembling did he realize how cold he had been. He wrapped his arm around himself and stared at nothing in particular. His mind, too, was filled with lead.

"Pants?" Lichen asked, though it was less of a question and more of a command.

With a weak nod that didn't nearly encompass even half of his gratefulness, Ross tried to untangle his legs. They refused to budge. After a moment, he gave up and let himself drop backwards, leaving it to Lichen to straighten his legs and take off his remaining clothes.

They slipped the shoe off his right foot, but struggled with the clasps on his brace. Perhaps on any other day, he would have been embarrassed. He was long past the age where he had needed help getting dressed. As it was, he was too tired to feel anything but relief as Lichen finally pulled up a dry pair of pants.

"That's better. Now let's— You know what." They rose. "I'll clean her up. You can stay there for now."

So he stayed there. Flat on his back, he stared at the ceiling while Lichen moved around. Water splashed, and fabric shifted, and fire crackled, and next to him, Irina was still

breathing. He pushed his hand up onto the mattress and then didn't dare to touch her after all.

Life returned to his legs, dozens of little pinpricks stabbing his calves. He stretched the one leg that would obey him and shook his foot, but it only made the pain worse. Next to him, Lichen pulled a blanket over Irina and rose to tend to the fire. Rising flames painted dancing shadows on orange-tinted wooden beams until they got blocked out by Lichen's shadow. When they grabbed his hand, he instinctively held on, allowing them to pull him up.

"Where do you sleep?"

Ross looked around. Nothing remained of his stack of blankets but a lumpy pillow near Irina's head. That was good enough. He wouldn't leave her alone. It wasn't like he could climb the ladder to find a better place, anyway.

"You two seem to be close." Lichen watched him, but for what, Ross couldn't guess. He nodded anyway. "Do you think you could share the mattress? The infection has weakened her, and she lost a lot of blood. It would be better if another body could keep her warm."

How was he supposed to keep her warm when he was so terribly cold himself? None of the fire's heat seemed to make it past his skin. Under a superficial layer of warmth he was frozen to the bone.

"I take that as a yes. Get up there."

They nudged him towards the mattress, and Ross let it happen. Healer or not, they knew what they were doing, while he could barely remember his own name. With Lichen's help, he slid under the blanket, huddling as close as possible to Irina while they piled blanket after blanket on top of them.

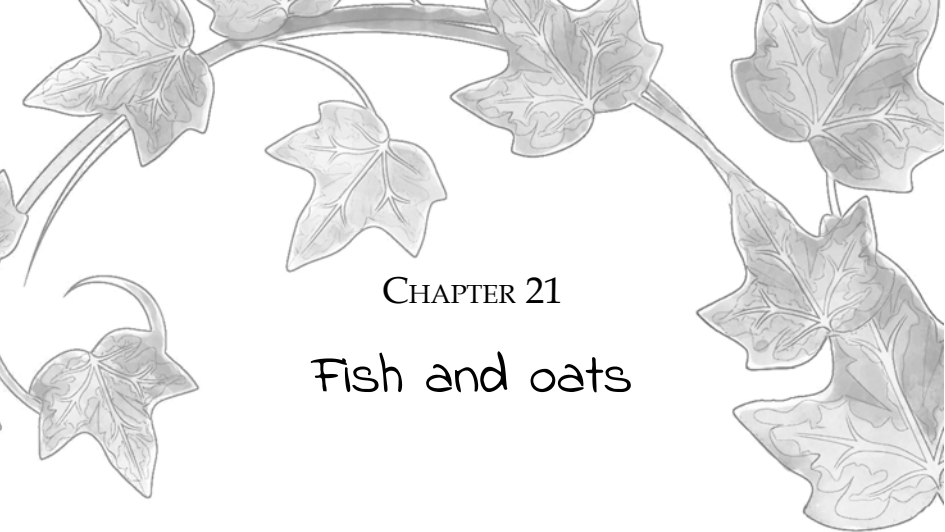
"Get some sleep," they said, their own exhaustion clear in their voice. "We can do nothing but wait now."

Wait to see whether she would live or die. Ross squeezed his eyes shut against the tears burning in them. Carefully, as

if she would break apart at the slightest pressure, he put his arm around her.

*Please don't leave me.*





## CHAPTER 21

# Fish and oats

Irina drifted through darkness, half asleep and half wishing she was still asleep. Her surroundings seemed to be peaceful, at odds with the lingering terror clinging to the furthest corner of her mind. It was quiet. It smelled of cold ashes and sunshine. The warm, solid mass she was snuggled up against moved in the rhythm of deep, calm breaths.

Ross. He was back. Of course he was back. Memories tried to surface, but she pushed them away, tucking her cold nose against his warm shoulder and pointedly keeping her eyes closed.

Her throat was parched, and the need to visit the outhouse was hard to ignore, but perhaps she could sleep a bit longer. Ignore the pain a bit longer. It was the kind of pain that lingered in the background, waiting for a too-rash movement to flare up, and she wasn't keen on finding out how bad it was going to be.

She must have fallen asleep again, because the next thing she knew, Ross' shoulder was gone, and she hadn't noticed him stir. He was near though, hovering close enough she could feel his warmth and hear his breaths. Just as she debated whether it was worth opening her eyes, he began to speak.

"Ivy." His fingertips brushed her temple, a featherlight touch, as if he was torn between wanting to wake her up and letting her rest. "My little Ivy."

The tenderness and sorrow in his voice was like a stab straight to her heart. She should have opened her eyes, should have told him that she was awake, but the moment passed, and he kept talking.

"You can survive this. I know you can. You've made it through so much, don't let a stupid infection get the better of you. Please." His head pressed on the mattress next to hers, and his arm wrapped around her and pulled her close. "Those months. It felt like a piece of my heart was missing. I can't lose you again." His arm trembled like his voice. "Please don't give up."

Irina's fingers grasped weakly at his shirt. While she struggled to pry her eyes open, the door opened, and her heart leaped into her throat. If Ross was here with her, then that was someone else, and she couldn't think of a single person who wouldn't want to do them harm.

As footsteps approached, she whimpered and pressed herself against him. A voice she didn't know asked a question, the words drowned out by sudden panic. Weight on her legs and hands on her chest and pain and blood and cold metal inside her as she was dying, torn open and bleeding out. The arms wrapped around her belonged to Ross, but they still trapped her, holding her so they could... could...

"Ivy." His voice was the lighthouse in the storm of her memories. "It's okay. It's okay." Over and over the same words, until she stopped struggling and merely trembled in his arms. Then he asked, "Can you hear me?"

The faintest of nods against his chest was answered with a relieved sigh.

"You're safe. We're safe." His fingers drew circles between her shoulder blades. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

Irina opened her mouth, but no word made it out. Her throat was dry and raw, as if she had been— She swallowed dryly, trying to push away the faint memory of her own screams. Another nod would have to do, then.

"You were very sick. I went to get help. Their name is Lichen. They're a— well, some kind of healer. And they're—" Another short pause, the ghost of a movement. "They're a friend," Ross finished.

Irina pushed all the questions and all the doubts aside, sinking into the calmness of Ross' voice. If he trusted that stranger, she could trust them as well. Not that she had the strength left to do anything else. Even opening her eyes and turning her head cost almost all of her energy.

Next to the door stood a mountain of a person, with broad shoulders and strong arms. Their dark clothes that made them blend in with the interior of the lodge were a stark contrast to their pale green hair. With a neutral expression that at least wasn't unkind they watched Irina struggle to focus her gaze.

"Hello. I'm Lichen. I'm." The corners of their mouth rose ever so slightly. "Some kind of healer. You are... Ivy?"

Hearing this name from someone else felt wrong. It was Ross' name for her, and only his. Would they be angry if she corrected them?

"How do you feel?"

The question reminded her that she had a body, and all her thoughts about her name disappeared. Everything she felt was too much, from the overwhelming weakness and the lingering pain in all of her muscles to the thirst and the feeling like someone had poured a jar of honey into her brain.

"I don't know," she croaked.

"You must be thirsty." Lichen fetched a cup of water, but instead of offering it to her, they gave it to Ross. "You lost quite a lot of blood there. We have to make sure you'll drink a lot and take it slow."

Ross propped up her head on his thigh and brought the cup to her lips, helping her drink like he had done it during those last days when fever and dizziness had made it impossible for her to even sit up. She still felt too warm and slightly dizzy, but no longer completely out of it.

"What happened?" she asked when the cup was empty.

Lichen settled on the floor, crossing their legs under the wide folds of their skirt.

"Do you remember anything?" they asked.

Irina shook her head, not because it was the truth, but because she tried not to remember. She hoped a more neutral narration of what had happened would allow her to push some of her memories into the realm of nightmares.

"When I arrived here, you were in bad shape. You were unconscious and running a high fever. Your body was fighting an infection that had taken over your reproductive organs. People keep calling me a healer, but I'm not. I do not have life magic."

Was it her imagination, or did they put a strange focus on the word life? Irina was too tired to dwell on the question.

"I'm mostly a herbalist, and no herbs could have fixed that. So I had to... I took them out."

Silence settled between them. Irina waited for an explanation, for anything that would make it make sense. Taken something out? How was that possible? She pushed her hand under her shirt, feeling over her stomach. It hurt, just like everything hurt, but it didn't feel like anything was missing. Shouldn't she notice it if a part of her was missing?

"I don't... understand."

Lichen's voice turned into a buzz as they explained what they had done, mentioning the names of organs Irina might have heard once or twice, when Ross' latest obsession had been of medical nature, but she didn't remember what it all meant. Some parts of her were gone. If Lichen's expression

was anything to go by, that was a huge fucking deal, but if Irina was honest, she could barely grasp the whole thing.

"I'm sorry if that's not —"

"I asked them to do it," Ross interrupted Lichen. His voice was strained, the familiar tone of him trying to speak clearly when he was in too much turmoil to control his muscles well. "You were... you were dying, and they said. It would give you the best chances. To live. I need you to live."

The despair in his words didn't make sense.

"But if I. I was dying. And now I'm not." Her fingers slid over Ross' shirt, and he instantly grasped her hand. "Isn't that. Isn't that good?"

"It is." Through tears, he kissed her forehead. "It is."

"Then why..." Slowly, she turned her head, looking from Ross to Lichen. The frown on their face wasn't exactly reassuring. "Why are you..." Their expression was hard to read, and the words escaped her, so she settled on an unsatisfactory, "Sad?"

"I'm not," Ross whispered, almost exactly at the same time as Lichen said:

"You will never be able to bear children."

"Okay," Irina muttered, confused. "Okay. I'm. I'm tired."

Ross lowered her head back onto the pillow and stroked her forehead. She leaned into his touch, desperate to soak up every bit of warmth. Waking up, scared and in pain and he was *gone*, was another memory she'd gladly push into the nightmare realm.

"Then sleep," he said. "We can talk later. You need rest."

It was so tempting to close her eyes and not open them again, but while her thirst was quenched, the other issue was more pressing than ever.

She craned her head to look at the door, wondering if she'd get her limbs to cooperate for long enough so she'd make it outside. "I need to... go."

"It's okay." Ross' hand moved to her shoulder, not exerting any pressure, merely signaling her to stay down. "Don't try to get up. Let me help."

Lichen cleared their throat. "Ross? I'll wait outside. Please come to me when you're done, we need to go over the medication she should take. She'll need your help with that."

"Can't we talk about that here inst –"

"Outside," Lichen said in a tone so stern, it made Irina wince. "If you please."

Irina watched in nervous silence as they left. "Are we in trouble?" she whispered as soon as the door had closed behind them.

"No. Well, you're not." Ross grabbed the bedpan from its spot near the fire. "I might be. They haven't used that tone with me since I was a kid and about to fall headfirst into their fireplace."

"Are you sure?" Irina swallowed. How could he take this so lightly? "Do you really trust them that much?"

"Yes. Yes." He dropped the pan in favor of holding her hand. "They might give me the dressing down I deserve for almost getting you help too late, but they won't betray us. I trust them. Really."

The next couple of hours passed in a blur of restless sleep, broken up by unsettling dreams that left her wide awake until exhaustion dragged her under again. Ross gave her medicine to help with the pain, as well as some other concoctions the benefit of which she didn't bother to remember. He made her drink much more than she would have asked for, and he helped her so she didn't have to get up to use the outhouse.

If Lichen had given him the dressing down, as he had put it, he didn't let it show. He stayed at her side, barely straying more than a few steps from the bed, always there in a

heartbeat to take her hand and whisper her name whenever she stirred.

The light outside the windows was already beginning to dim when the smell of woodfire and roasting fish wafted inside. Irina blinked and snuggled up against Ross with a content sigh. The smell was much more pleasant than the thought of having to eat something was, even if her stomach was rumbling.

"You're awake?" he whispered.

"Mhm." Calling it awake felt like a stretch, but at least she was no longer asleep. "Smells good."

"Yeah. I told them about the lake, so they got some fish, but I think they dug up a bunch of other things as well. Saw a big pot over the fire." He laughed. It didn't sound truly cheerful, but it was so much better to hear him laugh than cry. "If someone will find what's edible in this forest, it's Lichen."

"What, no oats?" Her attempt to sound scandalized fell flat. If anything, she sounded tired. "What a shame."

"I can ask them to add some, if you want to."

"Hey." She bumped her forehead against his chest. "Don't you dare."

A knock gave them a moment's warning before the door opened a slit.

"Food's ready. May I come in?"

"Of course. We were just talking about — ow." Ross flinched away from where her finger dug between his ribs. "Rude."

If Lichen noticed their little squabble, they decided to ignore it. They stepped inside, bringing with them a much stronger smell of smoke.

"You're awake. That's good." In front of the mattress, they paused. "How do you feel?"

Irina's attempt at shrugging her shoulders turned out rather pitiful, so she added, "I don't know." If she said she felt terrible, she would only make Ross worry about her, and if she

said she was fine, no one would believe her, but perhaps...  
"Better," she mumbled.

That was at least not a complete lie, even if the bar was pretty low.

"That's good." Lichen nodded at the door. "We can eat in a moment, but I would like to make sure the infection is receding. May I?"

Irina forced herself to nod. The last thing she wanted was getting sicker again. But they had said the infection had been inside, and the thought of what that might mean squeezed her chest like an iron vice.

As Lichen settled on the floor in front of her, she found it harder and harder to breathe. "What—" she started, only to break off with a gasp.

Lichen put their hands in their lap. "I don't have life magic, but I have... some kind of magic. I only need to touch you. It won't hurt, and you can tell me any time if you need me to stop, okay?"

"Okay," Irina squeaked. She could do this. Just not lying on her back, helpless, unable to move, to get away. "Let me. Sit."

She grasped at Ross' shirt in a desperate attempt to pull herself up. Lichen waited patiently while he helped her as much as he could, allowing her to lean against him and wrap his left arm around her chest.

"Okay," she mumbled and closed her eyes.

Hands on her hips. Lifting her shirt. Moving over bare skin. Searching. Pushing. Irina barely managed to suppress a whimper, but her breath stuttered in her throat.

"Forget about the fruit cake," Ross whispered close to her ear. "We'll find a baker who can make us oats fish pie."

"Ross!"

Torn between the urge to laugh and the urge to cry, Irina made an unflattering snorting noise. Her attempt to threaten



his life — or at least his physical integrity — was foiled by a hiccup, so she resorted to nudging his shoulder with the back of her head.

He nudged her back. “Grilled fish stuffed with oats. Fish soup with oat dumplings. Oat —”

“Well.” Lichen straightened up. Their hands were already gone, and Irina hadn’t even noticed what they had done. “Your kidneys are still looking pretty rough, and there is some minor bleeding, but considering your weakened state, it’s a small miracle how quickly you’re recovering. Perhaps we can try and have you walk a few steps tomorrow.” They cast both of them an equally warning glance. “But you need a lot of rest, warmth, and water. Don’t overdo it. I’ll stay a couple of days. If anything feels weird or wrong or hurts — anything — you’ll tell me, okay?”

“Okay,” Irina whispered.

“Great.” Lichen pushed themselves off the floor. “Who wants some fish?”

Under their expectant gazes, Lichen brought in two plates and set them down on the floor in front of the mattress. Each plate contained half a fish, carefully deboned, as well as a pile of steaming vegetables and no trace of oats.

While Lichen got their own serving, Irina and Ross settled into a more comfortable position, still close to each other, but allowing both of them to eat. Hesitating at first, Irina quickly realized just how hungry she was — hungry, and delighted to have a meal that wasn’t lumpy stew in which everything tasted like fish. Cooking definitely wasn’t Ross’ strong suit.

“Is that garlic?” she asked when Lichen took a seat at the table.

“Garlic mustard.” They pointed their fork at the window. “Grows everywhere over there. Found sunroots and a bunch of wild carrots as well.” Vague gestures in multiple directions accentuated their words as they added, “Nettles, blueberries,

walnuts, and that only with an hour or two of looking. It's a good forest."

"You know a lot about that." Perhaps getting to know them better would make it easier for Irina to trust them. They certainly seemed nice enough—not to mention that they had saved her life. "Do you live in the forest?"

"I do. Little hut in the middle of nowhere. You're lucky Ross remembered the way after all those years."

"It's not *that* far from the village," Ross pointed out. "And the landmarks were still there. Most of them will probably outlive us all."

"Still. You were like, what. Seven?" Lichen shrugged. "I wouldn't remember a path I took when I was seven."

"Yes, but you're old."

Lichen snorted, and Irina almost choked on her spoonful of vegetables, desperately trying to hold back her laughter. The familiarity between Ross and Lichen allowed her to relax.

"Does that mean you live only from what the forest provides?" she asked.

"Ha, no. Don't get me wrong, I like roots and berries just fine, but nothing beats a nice slab of cheese or some freshly baked bread." They eyed their bowl as if mourning the lack of such things to give the meal the finishing touch. "I visit the village once per week. Barter a bit. Deliver medicine, help with certain issues, and return with eggs, milk, and cheese."

"So you're a healer... but you're not?"

"I prefer herbalist. Healer," they enunciated clearly, "leads to expectations I cannot fulfill."

"I see," Irina said, even though she really didn't.

"They're a death mage, not life," Ross said between bites.

"Oh."

Lichen's gaze darkened, but they said nothing. Entirely focused on their food, they didn't look at Irina as she tried to come to terms with this new bit of information.

What did that mean for her treatment? What exactly had they done? And did it matter? She was alive. Who cared what kind of magic she had to thank for it.

"So earlier. Did you just." It was hard to find the right words for a question that sounded so silly in her mind. "Did you use your magic to check how much I'm.... dying?"

They gave her a calculating look. "Kind of. Yeah. I believe the way life and death mages sense energy is very similar, if not identical. But where a life mage can nurture this energy and push it to heal, all I can do is take it." Slowly, the wariness faded from their features. "As you can imagine, that's not exactly helpful."

"So what exactly did you do when you saved me?"

Lichen inclined their head. "Are you sure that's a conversation you want to have over food?"

Irina lowered her gaze and fiddled a piece of fish onto her spoon. It might have been merely a distraction, but she wasn't going to risk it. She didn't want to ruin the best meal she had had in months.

The silence settling between them was companionable, only broken by the scraping of cutlery against dishes. Irina savored every bite, even if her eyelids began to droop before her plate was half empty. When she flinched awake after almost nodding off, Ross scooted closer, already done with his meal, and offered her his shoulder to lean on.

"I'm sorry." Pushing a little bit of fish around on her plate, Irina couldn't bring herself to take another bite. "I'm full."

"Hey. That's all right." Lichen rose and took Irina's plate before it had a chance to slip out of her hands. "When I said take it slow, I mean it. Eat as much as you need. Sleep as much as you need." They grabbed Ross' plate as well. "Speaking of sleeping. Do you mind if I sleep in here?" They pointed at the loft. "There's some perfectly fine beds up there you don't seem to be using."

"Of course. Where did you sleep last night?" Ross asked.

"I didn't." A wink accompanied their words as they said, "The two of you needed rest, and someone had to watch over you." They yawned theatrically. "The worst is over, so tonight, I'm grabbing some sleep as well. But first, I'll clean the dishes and make sure the fire's out."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Irina let her head drop onto Ross' shoulder.

"They're nice. How —" A hearty yawn interrupted her, and she kept her eyes closed as she asked, "How did. You."

"How do I know them?" Ross guessed.

Irina nodded.

"Remember that summer when I was seven? When my parents sent me away for a couple of weeks?"

"Mhm." Irina yawned again. "Was a boring summer."

Between her mother working and having been forbidden from touching anything, six year old Irina had been bored out of her mind.

"I was with Lichen during that time." He nudged her shoulder to get her to lie down. "Well. I have no clue what made my parents send me to them. They had given up on regular healers and hoped Lichen could fix me, I guess."

The bitterness in his voice pained her, but her attempt to grasp his hand fell short when he turned away to reach for the blanket.

"As they said, they're not a healer. They pretty much let me run around all summer, only making sure I didn't kill myself. It was a good time, even if they couldn't help me."

"But they did."

Ross pulled the blanket up to her shoulders and tucked it in. "Hm?"

"They did help you. When you came back. You were happier." Irina snuggled into the blanket with a content sigh. "Braver. You did... more."

She was too sleepy to put into words all the subtle changes she barely remembered. How he had talked more, less embarrassed about how his words sounded. How he had dressed himself alone, except for his brace. How he had begged his parents for books about plants and animals, and then spent hours upon hours showing her all the different creepy-crawlies on the pages.

If it was Lichen she had to thank for that, she owed them much more than merely her own life.

"Get some sleep." Ross' fingers brushed through her hair. "I'll be outside helping Lichen. Call for me if you need anything."



## CHAPTER 22

# one of the good ones

After taking one of his pills—and a generous dose of one of his painkillers—Ross went outside. He found Lichen at the back of the lodge where they sat on the ground, leaning against the pile of firewood. When they spotted him, they exhaled a cloud of white smoke into the air.

“Everything all right?” they asked.

“Mhm.”

Ross shuffled closer and dropped onto an upright log, stretching out leg and crutch in front of him. There wasn’t a muscle in his body that didn’t hurt. He had come outside to help Lichen clean the dishes, but they did not look like they were about to do that anytime soon. That was only fair. They deserved a break more than anything, and the dishes weren’t going anywhere. He wasn’t keen on wrestling with the bucket, either, so he decided to strike up a conversation instead.

“What’s that?”

“Starburst.” They inhaled deeply before offering the smoking cylinder of rolled up leaves to Ross. “Want some?”

Ross eyed the thing with suspicion. “I don’t know how to use... smoke? That.”

Lichen's laugh was loud and boisterous, so unlike their usual reserved demeanor. They took their offering back, taking another deep inhale.

"Fair. Keep it that way, my boy." Watching him through half-lidded eyes, they added, "Best not to make a habit out of it."

"Isn't that the stuff used in pain medicine?" Ross asked. "The one you gave her last night?"

"It is. Though for that, you'll want the oil from the seeds. Much more potent. Much harder to get." Even completely exhausted, they still dropped all their knowledge on him at the slightest hint of curiosity. "Starburst only blooms once per year, but you can get the leaves all year round. Some people use them because they can't afford anything better, others are looking for the effect it has on the mind."

"And you?"

"Ah. A little bit of both, I admit." They watched a puff of smoke dissolve against the slowly darkening sky. "Those old bones aren't what they used to be, but I would be lying if I said I don't appreciate the peace it brings as well."

"Like after late night emergency surgeries," Ross offered.

"Mhm."

"I... Thank you. For saving her." Had he said it before? It didn't matter. He could say it a hundred times and it wouldn't be enough. "She means everything to me."

"Yeah. About that." Their gaze zoned in on him, sharp where before it had been unfocused. "Who the fuck is she?"

"I told you —"

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" As loud as their voice was, there was no anger on their face. Their tone, as well as their exaggerated gestures, were most likely due to the Starburst and not because they were truly upset. "She trusts you blindly. After everything she's been through. There's no way you met her only a few weeks ago."

Ross dug the tip of his crutch into the soggy ground, keeping his hand busy while his mind was racing. Once he told Lichen who Irina was, the rest of the story was sure to come out; for all he knew, they had heard about Brad's death already. Did he trust them enough? And did he have any other choice?

"She's... she's..." Calling her his *maid* was plain wrong, and calling her his sister was technically a lie, and calling her a friend was not enough, and he really had no words for how much she meant to him. "Do you remember. That I told. Told." His throat was too tight, turning his words into a garbled, choked mess. "Told you about the maid's daughter?"

"Hey. Hey. It's okay." They sighed and shifted to the side, muttering something under their breath that suspiciously sounded like *shit*. "Come here." They patted the ground next to them. "I didn't want to upset you."

Was he upset? If the lump in his throat and the trembling of his hand was anything to go by, he was. He pushed himself up, only to stumble forward when his left leg refused to follow the motions. After slamming into the house wall with his shoulder, he slid to the ground, leaning against Lichen, who put an arm around him.

"You're not in trouble, kid," they mumbled, rubbing his back as if he was seven years old again and had just broken one of their dishes.

If only he were. If only it were a dish he worried about instead of multiple murders.

"So she's the girl your parents got to help you?" When he nodded, Lichen made a disgruntled noise. "Pretty shitty thing, to put that on a child."

Guilt sat heavily in Ross' stomach. As if it had been his choice. As if anyone had ever asked him about it. He knew it was wrong, he knew it, but at the same time, his parents' decision was the best thing they had ever done for him. Not



because he needed her help, but because everyone in his whole fucking family hated him; each one in their own way and for their own reasons, but they did. To think that he would have spent his whole life without his only friend.

"So. It's her." Lichen looked at the roll of leaves, which was mostly ash at this point, and chucked it away. "Then what *happened* to her?"

Silence descended as the question brought back images Ross tried so hard to forget. He probably never would, just like she would have to live with the memories for the rest of her life. It was only fair if he shared the burden.

"Everything I said. It wasn't— It happened."

"I don't understand."

He had to tell the whole story. Had to risk it.

"While I was finishing school. She— At home. She. She killed Brad." In the end, he had never asked her about the reason, but with everything that had come to light since then, it wasn't hard to imagine why. "I came back, and she was gone, and he was dead, and no one wanted to tell me anything."

As if the story sucked all the warmth out of him, he began to shiver. Lichen's body was warm and solid, smelling of herbs mixed with the faint, lingering scent of smoke. Ross pressed himself against them, truly feeling like a child again.

"For six months. I thought they had arrested her. Arrested and." He swallowed, but his voice remained rough. "Executed," he whispered. "I thought I would never see her again. Then those bandits took me." He clutched his left hand, protecting the spot where his missing finger had been. "They brought me to that abandoned prison and she was there. She had been there all that time."

"How did she end up there?" Lichen asked when he fell silent.

"My sister. She brought her there. I don't know. Why." And now he would never get an answer. Mel wasn't the kind

of person to do something like this for cruelty's sake alone. "When the bandits sent the ransom note. My family didn't pay, and my sister didn't come back and—" The memory of pain and thirst and the overwhelming despair of knowing that this was how it would end made his tongue heavy as he whispered, "They left us both to die."

Lichen sighed. "I'm sorry to say, kid. But your family sucks."

A sob rose in Ross' chest, choking the laugh on his lips. "I know. I know." That didn't even begin to describe it. Lichen didn't know about the scars on her back, or what his father had done. "I'm sorry." He should have noticed. He should have protected her. "I'm. I'm sorry."

"Hey. Not you." They pulled him into their arms, only making him sob harder. Holding him tight, the sleeves of their sweater like a blanket around him, they muttered, "You're one of the good ones, kid. You're one of the good ones."

Night had already fallen when Ross finally calmed down, and neither of them was in the mood to take care of the dishes. Lichen helped him up and supported him on the way back to the lodge, keeping him steady when his trembling arm wanted to drop the crutch.

Next to the mattress and a peacefully sleeping Irina, he sat on the ground. Hunched over with his left arm pressed against his chest, he could feel his muscles twitch, even if outwardly, everything was still.

"Lichen? Could you give me..." He looked around, closing his left eye so he could focus better on the blurry brown spot that was his pill bottle. "My medicine?"

Lichen grabbed it off the sideboard and eyed the label. "Interesting." They cast him a taxing glance and decided to open the bottle while they walked over to him. "Does it help?"

"Mhm," he muttered while he plopped a single pill into

his lap. "It makes me relax. Which hurts less. And I can sleep better." With careful, slow motions, he put the bottle aside and took the pill, swallowing it without water. "But it doesn't help me function any better." His left side was useless, with or without pills. "They let me have it because it makes me less weird."

A sharp inhale made him look up, but his view was too blurry to read Lichen's expression. They had never treated him like he was weird. They had never shown anything but patience with him, not even when he was seven and they couldn't have been able to make out half of what his squealing child voice had tried to tell them. Irina was right—they had helped him, more than he had ever realized. Perhaps more than they realized.

"Here." They took the bottle back and offered him a wet rag instead. "Do you have any shoes that aren't that... thing?"

Ross shook his head, scrubbing first at his face, which felt hot and sticky, then at his soles so he wouldn't dirty the blankets. The only pair they had found in the lodge belonged to Irina now. They would have been a pain for him to put on, anyway; not quite as annoying as the brace, but annoying enough he might have ended up going barefoot when it was only a few steps.

"Figures. Can't imagine the bandits were nice enough to capture you with your whole wardrobe," Lichen said.

"Irina—" Ross snapped his mouth shut before his treacherous tongue could give away too much. "... has less than me," he tried to save it. "Not even her own clothes."

If Lichen hadn't yet noticed that a few of the objects had no place in a hunting lodge, he wasn't going to point it out. Best to keep at least some of the murderous details to himself for the time being.

They hummed as they filled a cup with water and crouched down next to Ross. "But she has you. Here. You need some

water." They nudged the cup into his hand, not letting go until he had safely grabbed it. "Don't think I'm keeping my eye only on her."

Ross drank slowly, at the same time savoring the feeling of the cold water running down his throat and making sure he wouldn't choke on it. "Thank you," he mumbled when the cup was empty, his fingers almost as cold as the tin they were holding.

"Not for that. Get some sleep, kid."

They turned towards the fire, saving him from having to find something to reply. He decided to bring up his gratitude another time; when he wasn't so tired he was seeing double.

Irina was lying at the edge of the mattress, keeping enough space for him to lie on his preferred side and hold her at the same time. He trembled from cold and exhaustion as he maneuvered his body next to her and pulled up the blanket.

She was so small and frail. Afraid to disturb her sleep, he kept his cold hand close to his chest and a bit of distance between them. Only his forehead touched the back of her head, her hair tickling his nose when his breaths stirred them.

Behind him, Lichen climbed the ladder to the loft. They hummed under their breath as they inspected whatever Irina had left of the beds, rummaging around for a while before they settled on what was hopefully an adequate sleeping place.

Ross was half asleep himself when Irina began to stir. Her head bumped against his, and she froze, wriggling this way and that to test the boundaries of where her body ended and his began. There should have been more than enough space for her, but she pushed into the middle of the mattress and against him.

Instantly, Ross was wide awake. Was she afraid and unable to tell him that she needed space? He tried to pull back, but he was thoroughly trapped in the blanket.

"Ivy," he whispered.

Undeterred, she pushed against him until her figure matched the curve of his body. Her feet tangled with his, so warm while his were so cold. That couldn't be pleasant, but she didn't draw back, instead pressing more and more of her skin against his.

"Ivy?"

While he tried his best not to touch her, she reached back and felt upwards from his hip, snatching his hand and pulling his arm straight across her chest. In her grip, his frozen fingers slowly thawed. He wasn't fully convinced she was awake enough to know what she was doing, but a struggle seemed pointless, so he gave in as she took control over his limb and made him hold her.

\* \* \*

Irina awoke to sunrays and birdsong, Ross' arm still draped over her. Judging by the calmness of his breaths, he was asleep, and judging by the tangled state of their blanket, he hadn't gotten up, either. It was good to have him sleep through the night again. Perhaps, if her body could stop sabotaging her for a while, she would soon see the dark circles under his eyes fade.

Through half-lidded eyes, she watched the last embers under a layer of white ashes, the cracks in the weathered, wooden floor, and the dust particles dancing in the light of a single sunbeam. Her thoughts kept scattering, mixing worries and questions and memories that might as well have been fever dreams.

A hole in her stomach where a part of her had been cut out. Ross' voice, begging her to stay awake. The maid's tear-stained face. Lichen's careful touch, despite their arms looking like they could snap her in half without breaking a sweat.

Rhythmic pounding from outside the lodge answered the question of whether they were awake already. She let the sound carry her—until the pounding stopped, and the door opened. Pulled from her blissful state of being half asleep, Irina flinched almost as hard as Ross sometimes did.

“Sorry. Didn’t wanna wake you.” Lichen spoke quietly. “I just need some salt.”

Did they have salt? Irina craned her neck, careful not to wake Ross up. At the other side of the room, far away from the supplies they had pulled out of the storage cellar, Lichen opened the lid of a big wooden barrel. They scooped some salt out with a tin cup before replacing the lid and tiptoeing back.

Halfway to the door, they stopped. “I think it was meant for curing meat.” They winked. “But salt is salt.”

No explanation what they needed it for. Irina closed her eyes, snuggled against Ross, and hoped it was going to be some kind of breakfast that didn’t contain oats.

The next time she awoke, the fire had been rekindled, and the spot next to her was empty. She stretched, searching Ross’ side of the mattress for any remaining warmth and coming up empty. Unfair. Blinking lazily, she finally turned her head to find him sitting at the foot of the mattress, watching her.

“Hey.” A smile lit up his face. “How do you feel?”

Since for once the most honest answer wouldn’t be *terrible*, she allowed herself to listen to her body. The fever seemed to be gone. Weakness still dragged her down, and all her joints ached as if she hadn’t spent the last few days in bed, but her mind was clear. The most unsettling part was the feeling in her lower abdomen; muscles she had never felt before were sore. Compared to before, she was barely willing to call it pain, but it was hard to ignore.

"I think I'm fine." None of it mattered, because there was nothing she could do about it. She could, however, do something about her parched throat. "But I'm thirsty."

While she struggled out from under the blanket, Ross filled a cup with water. Sitting worked well; as did drinking. Once the cup was empty, there was only one other urgent need to take care of.

"I'd really like to try going to the outhouse."

"We should ask —"

"They said it's okay. Yesterday." Irina knew how whiney her voice sounded, and she didn't care. She was grateful for his help, so, so grateful, but she also was pretty sick of using the bedpan. "Please?"

"All right all right. Let me get my crutch."

He was barefoot, which made it harder for him to hobble the few steps to the spot where his crutch was leaning against the wall. No wonder; she knew he hated putting on the brace, no matter how much easier it made things once he was actually wearing it. Now that she was better, she could help him. After all, that was what she was there —

No. It wasn't. Not any more. He would insist that she didn't have to do anything, even if in the end, it didn't matter. She would do it anyway. Not because she was his maid, but because she was his friend, and she would do anything to make life easier for him. Wasn't he doing the same?

He helped her to her feet, and he pushed open the door for her, and he offered her his left shoulder and let her lean on him on the way to the outhouse. As always during those past few months, every muscle in her body tensed as she sat down. Her fingernails dug into the wooden beam at her side, expecting pain, but the burning sensation remained absent. She laughed when she stepped outside, earning herself a confused look, but she wasn't going to explain *that* to him.

Side by side, they walked over to Lichen, who sat next to a campfire of considerable size. They balanced a woven basket on their crossed legs and plucked leaves off small branches, throwing the remaining twigs into the flames. They cast Irina a long glance that spelled out *don't overdo it* as clearly as if they had used words.

"You're just in time," they said. "Breakfast is ready. Do you want to eat outside?"

"Yes, please." She had been cooped up in that lodge for too long.

Lichen nodded at the ground next to them. "Take a seat, then. I'll go grab some things." They took the basket as they got up, calling back, "And don't touch the pot yet, it's hot."

Sitting in front of a crackling fire, with Ross' arm around her and the sunlight flickering through the canopy, all the horrors of the past days felt far away. She leaned her head against his shoulder, eyeing the heavy earthen pot with curiosity. Whatever was in there, the rumbling of her stomach made her hope it would be good.

Lichen returned with a basket full of dishes and a blanket draped over their arm. The blanket went around Irina's legs, who pulled it to the side to cover Ross with it as well.

"Here." Lichen held out a cup for her. "These herbs will help your body fight the remnants of the infection."

Irina took the cup and downed the contents that smelled and tasted like freshly cut grass. Not exactly tasty, but well worth it if it would help her not to fall sick again.

"And these will help against the pain," Lichen said as they refilled the cup with water and sprinkled dried herbs from a leather pouch into it.

"I'm fine."

"You can't be fine. Not after one day." They wiggled the cup, and Irina slowly reached for it. "Don't worry, it's not the strong stuff. You might feel a bit tired, but that's about it."



If she was honest, she wouldn't mind dulling the pain a bit. Sitting, it was even harder to ignore than lying down, and she didn't want to constantly think about what had happened. The mixture was bitter and gone with a single gulp.

"Good. Now for breakfast."

After carefully testing the temperature of the pot, they lifted the lid off, revealing a crusty, brown-golden lump.

"Is that bread?" Irina asked.

"It is. Not particularly good bread, mind you, but it'll do for today."

They lifted the loaf out of the pot and placed it on a wooden cutting board. Steam rose as they cut into the bread, filling the air with the irresistible smell of baked goods. Irina let out a delighted little squeal that made Ross laugh and bump his head against hers.

Under Irina's hungry gaze, Lichen plated cut bread, thin slices of some kind of thoroughly roasted meat, and a glob of dark red mush, pushing two of the plates in front of Ross and Irina.

"I would kill for some butter," they said as they picked up their own plate, "but we gotta make do with what we have."

And what they had was certainly delicious. Irina alternated taking bites of plain bread, dipping it into the berry mush, and placing one of the meat slices on top of it, and she couldn't decide what was better.

"Do I want to know what animal that was?" Ross asked.

"No."

Lichen sounded suspiciously cheerful, but Irina decided that she didn't care about the answer. Whatever it was, at least it was cooked. Ross seemed to come to a similar conclusion, for he didn't ask again and kept eating.

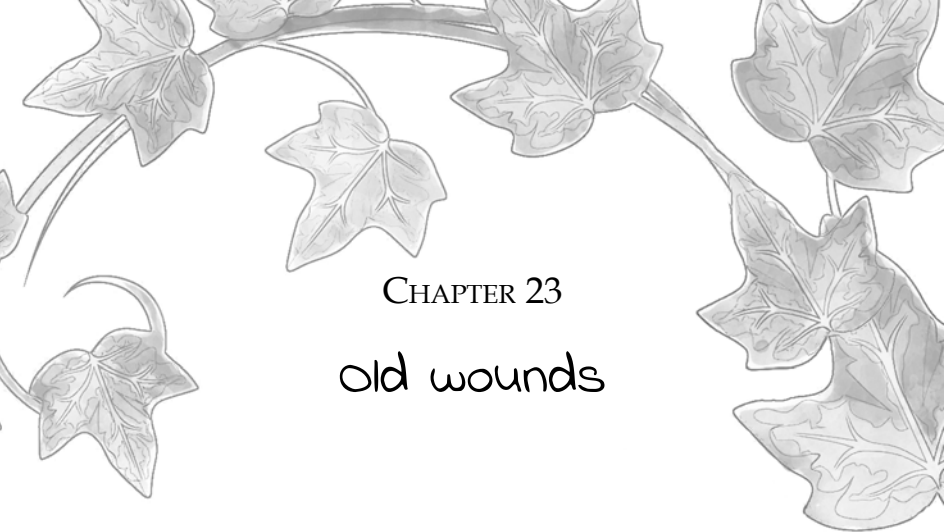
"When we're done," Lichen said after a while of unanimous chewing, "I'd like to look at you again before I leave. I need to go home to fetch some medicine and check on my garden. It's

already quite late, and I'll try to grab some supplies before I come back, so it might take a day or two."

"You want to come back?" Ross asked.

"Come back and stay. At least for a while, until I am sure she won't relapse. Gives me time to teach you how to bake bread." They winked. "Did you know that you can use oats for that?"





## CHAPTER 23

### old wounds

The day-and-a-half until Lichen returned, Irina spent mostly in bed, with Ross barely ever more than two steps away from her. He was with her when she had to leave the lodge, he made sure she took the medicine as Lichen had instructed, and he kept her entertained during the long hours when she had nothing to do but stare at the ceiling.

With her head pressed against his thigh, she lay on the mattress, listening to Ross read to her from one of his books. She was sleepy but not in pain, they had eaten the last of the delicious bread for breakfast, and the familiar tales brought back the best of her childhood memories.

While he had taught her to read, she wasn't good at it, and she much preferred to listen to his voice. How often had she lain side by side with him, by the open window in summer and huddled under a blanket in winter. From bedtime stories and fairytales, he had eventually taken her along as his interests changed. Ancient wars and foreign cultures, agriculture and medicine, elemental magic and crystallomancy — she had listened to it all and remembered little.

"How do you feel?" The story had come to an end, and his fingers stroked the hair at her temple. "Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine."

"Mhm." He did not sound convinced. "Did you drink enough?"

"I'm *fine*." She craned her neck, following his hand as he tried to pull back. "I don't want to get up."

"I can grab it for you."

"I don't want *you* to get up."

To give her words more weight, Irina grasped at his sleeve. With a quiet laugh, he resumed stroking her hair, and she closed her eyes. It was almost embarrassing how clingy she had become. How every moment they were apart, there was this unsettling feeling in her chest—not quite fear and not quite loneliness, but close enough to both that she was desperate to keep it away.

Her only consolation was that he didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, he seemed equally unwilling to leave her out of his sight. He always settled close to her, kept up all those little touches, and sometimes, when he thought she wasn't looking, she caught him with that sad expression on his face.

She was scared of being alone, but perhaps he was, too.

"All right. One more story. But then I'll have to check the nets before it gets dark."

"Mhm. Fine. Can you read the one of the little—"

A knock on the door interrupted her. Irina sank into the mattress, staring up at Ross in an attempt to read his upside-down expression. It was Lichen; right? It had to be them.

Ross was the first to find his voice.

"Come," he croaked. After clearing his throat, he tried again. "Come in."

The door opened. Of course, it was Lichen, because no one else knew they were here, and no one else would have bothered to knock. Their green hair was barely visible over the huge bag they carried, but their broad figure was unmistakable.

By the time they set their bundle down on the table, Irina had scrambled into a sitting position. A backpack joined the bundle, by the looks of it filled to the brim.

"Did you carry that all the way?" Ross asked what she was thinking.

"Well." Lichen straightened up and rolled their shoulders. "Didn't carry itself."

"But what is it?"

"Mostly food. If you want to get better," they said, turning to face Irina, "you need to eat better. Both of you do."

"But that's..." Irina looked at Ross and saw the same astounded expression on his face she must be wearing. "That must have cost so much."

Lichen made a dismissing gesture and opened the first bag. "Certain services pay well enough," they muttered, "and it isn't like I have many expenses." They turned around and held up a glass bottle, not unlike the one that held Ross' pills. "Main reason I left was to get this. It's for you."

Instead of throwing it for her to catch, they aimed for the wadded up blanket on the mattress. Irina picked up the bottle and tried to read the name written on the label. Way too many letters, and none of it made sense. A careful shake produced a rattle, as if the bottle were filled with tiny glass beads. The pills must be even smaller than the ones Ross took.

A waving gesture pulled her attention away from the bottle. Lichen held a cabbage in one hand and a wrapped bundle in the other.

"How about I start making dinner?" They gestured at the bottle. "And while it cooks, I'll explain everything to you."

\* \* \*

While Irina went to the outhouse—alone, as she insisted—Ross offered Lichen his help. They allowed him to fetch an

onion from the pack as well as fresh water, but he was shooed away when he reached for the wooden cutting board. He was marginally more skilled at using a knife than he was at using the fire steel, but he wasn't exactly sad they didn't give him a chance to cut off another finger.

Instead, he busied himself with folding blankets and putting pillows away, always keeping an eye on what Lichen was doing. Onions first, sliced into thin pieces and thrown into an empty pot. No; it couldn't be empty. They began sizzling, so there was some kind of fat inside. Butter? Oil?

He was tempted to take notes, but how? What made them decide it was the right moment to pour the water in? How did they decide which part of the cabbage to keep and which to discard? What kind of herbs were kept in the pouches they had arranged next to them?

Lichen looked up while their hands kept chopping a dark green bushel of long, thin herbs into pieces. How *they* didn't chop off their fingers was a mystery to him.

"Let me guess: Your parents didn't teach you how to cook?"

"No. That's what the servants are for." He sighed. How nice it would be to know the recipe for his fruit cake; or for any of the other meals he was going to miss, for that matter. "I'm not even sure they know how an onion looks."

Behind him, the door of the lodge opened.

"You know, I'm surprised you made it this long out here." The teasing tone of Lichen's voice became clearer as they added, "Feed me oats for several weeks, and I'd walk into the forest and start chewing on random things."

"At least I didn't make rat roast," Ross retorted. It was a mere guess, but looking at Lichen's half amused, half guilty expression, he was right.

"So that's what it was?" Irina plopped down on the mattress next to him. "It sure tastes better when it's cooked."

The steady rhythm of Lichen's chopping came to a halt as they cast Irina a taxing glance. She didn't seem to notice, busy with arranging her legs under her. No matter how often she claimed that she was fine, Ross could see that she was in pain. Lichen must have noticed it, too. Their eyebrows furrowed, but they didn't comment on it.

"I'll be done in a moment," they said instead, all serious again. "Make yourself comfortable." They unwrapped the cheese and began cutting it into little cubes. "And before I forget. What would you like me to call you?"

"Irina?" she offered hesitatingly, as if she was worried that it was the wrong answer. "I mean. That's my name. Irina."

Lichen acknowledged it with a nod and pushed the cut cheese into the pot while Ross clung to all good manners that had ever been instilled in him and refrained from snatching one of the cubes. He wouldn't have thought it possible to miss something as simple as cheese so much.

"So. Irina." With cutting board and knife put aside, Lichen's attention was fully on her. "Now that you feel better, we should talk again about what I had to do, and the consequences for your health. Is that all right?"

Irina nodded. Her leg shifted ever so slightly closer to Ross, and he put his hand on her knee, squeezing it.

"Do you know how the human body works? The female body in particular."

A shy shaking of the head, eyes downcast. She was clearly ashamed about her lack of knowledge, as if that was her fault. As if anyone in this house had valued the education of the servants.

"Okay. So about here—" Lichen pointed at Irina's stomach without touching her before forming an oval with their fingers. "Here sits... Here sat a small organ in which a baby will grow if you become pregnant. And once a month, if you're not, it will start to bleed. This organ was heavily infected. The



infection had already started spreading to your bloodstream, which would have killed you, so I had to act quickly." As they folded their hands in their lap, their expression became solemn. "That part is gone now. It means you will no longer bleed, and you no longer can get pregnant."

They paused as if waiting for something—a question perhaps—but Irina merely nodded. Lichen took a deep breath and raised their hands again.

"Attached to it are two smaller organs. They. Hm. They control a lot of things in your body. Like when it is ready to become pregnant, but also many other things. Those pills." They pointed at the bottle, sitting all but forgotten next to Irina. "Those pills will control much of the same, so if you're lucky, you won't notice much of it."

"What happens... if I don't take them?" Irina looked at the bottle with a gaze that seemed to be torn between fear and respect. "Will I... die?"

"Gods, no." Lichen reached for her, stopping themselves at the last moment, hand awkwardly hovering above the mattress. "You would feel unwell. You might have trouble regulating your temperature or your emotions, and your body would start going through changes that otherwise wouldn't happen for another couple of decades, but you wouldn't die." They smiled what had to be an attempt at an encouraging smile; it looked fake, at least in Ross' eyes. "But don't worry. It is a very common medicine. You can ask a herbalist in any town that's bigger than... well, wouldn't call where you two come from a town in the first place."

"Okay," Irina whispered.

"Did you understand everything I just said?"

She nodded.

"Do you have any questions?"

She shook her head.

"How do you feel?"

"I don't... know," she whispered. "It doesn't feel real. I can't believe there's a part just. Missing." She looked up, hand pressed against her stomach. "I really can't get pregnant anymore?"

"No." Lichen's voice was pressed. "I'm sorry."

"No. That's not." As she looked down at her lap, her leg pulled away from Ross. Movement barely noticeable, but he noticed. "He made me. Made me take those herbs. So I wouldn't get pregnant. But sometimes. I was late, and then I was so scared I felt sick, and that made it worse, and... I think. I think he would have killed me. He or—" A tear ran down her cheek, angrily wiped away. "She hated me already. Just like she hated my mother. For stealing her husband. As if she had wanted it. As if I had wanted it. I never —"

As her voice broke and she wrapped her arms around herself, the words trickled into Ross' brain, constricting his chest like a vice. He *knew* what his father had done, but he hadn't realized how calculating, how absolutely ruthless he had been about it. He wanted to throw up just thinking about it.

"Even in that cell," she whispered. "When I stopped bleeding. I knew I couldn't— It had been months. And he thought— They thought I was dead. But I was still scared." She looked up, cheeks wet from tears and eyes darkened with sadness. "I don't think I could ever not be scared."

"Irina." Lichen's voice was softer than he had ever heard it. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

She looked from them to Ross and back to her lap, rapidly shaking her head. Her fingers dug into the fabric of her pants, pulling and twisting.

It was a lie. He *knew* her. It was the same way she shook her head when he asked her whether she was hungry, even if she couldn't keep her eyes off his food. The same way she shook her head when he asked her whether she was tired, even

though he knew she had been working all day. She wanted to, but something kept her from doing so.

"Do you want Ross to wait outside?" Lichen asked.

Silence stretched on; one second, three, ten. Slowly and without looking at him, Irina nodded. Sorrow and relief warred in Ross. It was good that she wanted to talk; it didn't matter that she didn't want to talk to *him*. Perhaps it was even better. He was already losing his composure, and she needed someone who could be strong for her.

He collected his limbs and his crutch and walked towards the door.

"I'm sorry."

Her whispered words made him freeze with his elbow hovering above the handle. Shoulder against the wood to keep himself steady, he turned around.

"Don't. Please. I understand." He couldn't, not even close, but accepting it was easy. "Call for me if you need me."

Ross stepped outside, pulled the door closed behind him, and looked around. Night was already falling, so there was no point in going too far unless he had a desire to break his limbs in the dark. After a moment's consideration, he decided on the well, far enough so he didn't risk eavesdropping, yet close enough so he could keep his eyes on the lodge—or he would have been able to, if the tears hadn't blurred his vision, making it impossible to see anything at all.

Halfway across the distance, he stumbled upon a dent in the ground and lost his footing. For once, he was unable to catch himself. His outstretched arm caught some of the fall, but his right knee still hit the ground hard. Biting down a pained groan, he shook off the crutch, the strap of which had twisted around his forearm.

With shaking fingers, he took stock of his body. His toes hurt, his knee was scraped, and he had pulled muscles that would be terribly sore in a bit, but at least his crutch was

intact. He didn't bother getting to his feet again, crawling the last bit of the way instead. When he reached the well, he leaned against it, clutched his burning knee, and started to cry.

It was dark when the door to the lodge opened, and the cool night air had long dried the tears on his face. His knee still throbbed, but he paid it no attention, because the shape appearing in the lit doorway was short and slender, the details of her face lost to the shadows.

The moment Irina spotted him, she straightened up and set out across the meadow, wearing nothing but the oversized shirt she had woken up in. Her movements were carefully measured, speaking more than anything of the pain she was still in, whether she wanted to admit it or not. She sat down next to him, keeping a hand's width between them.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"No."

Ross nodded, because what else could he do? Of course she wasn't. Under his worried gaze, she sighed and slumped against the well, watching the stars in the sky above as he watched her. Slowly, her hand crept over the ground, until her smallest finger touched his arm. And even more slowly, he turned his hand—without reaching for her, leaving every bit of contact up to her.

"I want to kill him."

If not for the despair sitting heavily on his chest, Ross could have laughed. As if that would be possible. There was no way his father wouldn't take every precaution to keep himself safe after the bloodbath she had left behind. Breaking into the house again would be suicide.

But she didn't ask about the logistics, didn't need a lecture about her chances. What she needed was someone on her side.

"Yeah," was all he said.

Her fingers closed around his hand, and she leaned against his shoulder.

\* \* \*

Irina tried to push down the feeling of unease about having a living, breathing body so close to her when all her wounds had been torn open again, all her feelings were still raw. This was Ross. She trusted him more than anything. She *needed* him more than anything. His presence calmed her as much as it unsettled her, and she focused on that calmness as she forced her body to relax.

It was over. She never had to see that monster again. Never had to face that fear and disgust again. If only she could forget the maid's tear-stained face, she could have tried to move on. Knowing that he was doing to that poor girl what he had done to her made her blood boil, but no matter how much she wanted to kill him, she wasn't going to get a chance.

But what if...

"Should we go inside?" Ross' voice pulled her out of her thoughts. "It's getting cold."

Irina hummed. It wasn't cold, not really. Not compared to endless nights freezing in a dark cell. But to her surprise, she found herself hungry, and the soup had to be ready by now. The thought of cheese – real, creamy cheese – made her mouth water despite the turmoil inside her.

"Okay."

She offered him her hand while she picked up his crutch, and she clung to his left arm on their way to the door, and her heart only beat a tiny bit quicker than usual, and nothing had to change just because he finally knew exactly what a piece of shit his father was.

The warm smell of cabbage and cheese filled the hut,

prompting her stomach to grumble so loudly, she was sure Lichen could hear it. Ross definitely could; the hint of a grin in the corner of her eye made her poke his side.

He lowered himself onto the mattress and let her put his crutch up against the wall. His movements were slower and even more careful than usual.

"I brought some bread, but I will also show you how to bake it yourself." Lichen gestured with the knife they used to cut said bread into slices. "Got a bag of flour and everything. In fact, I thought... if you want to, I mean... that I could teach you some basics about cooking that goes beyond throwing everything into a pot and hoping for the best. Since, you know, I take it neither of you is going back."

Ross laughed humorlessly, and Irina's heart grew even heavier. No. He wasn't going back. For her, he was giving up a life of comfort. The least she could do was learn how to cook, learn how to replace all the servants he didn't have anymore.

"I would appreciate that," Ross said in her stead. "I know I'm pretty useless." His tone was lighthearted, and he didn't notice the angry glare she shot at his back. "Got a business degree, but can't even make oatmeal right—if you want to call the slimy sludge that."

"Ah. Yes." Lichen finished cutting the bread and put a slice on the edge of each of the three bowls in front of them. "That happens when you actually boil it. Okay. Tomorrow, we'll start with the lessons."

"I should— Ivy?" He gave her his most innocent look with the biggest of eyes. "Could you get me my notebook, please?"

She could do that. In fact, she preferred it to standing around uselessly. It took her a moment to find it, since he had repacked all the bags, and then a moment longer to dig out one of the charcoal pencils.

"Thank you."

She peeked over his shoulder as he opened the notebook and flipped to the next free page. *Cooking Lessons With Lichen* he scribbled at the top, eliciting a giggle from Irina and a questioning look from their future teacher.

"I appreciate the enthusiasm," they said as they handed him his bowl, "but dinner is ready."

And just like that, the notebook was put aside and forgotten. Neither Ross nor Irina bothered to grab a spoon, each picking up their bowl and sipping the creamy goodness as if they were holding cups. With a shrug, Lichen followed their example, leaning against the wall next to the fireplace.

"This is so good," Ross said, while Irina hummed her agreement. "How did you get the onions... like *that*?"

"So eager to start learning?" Lichen asked, giving him an amused look. "Well, if you insist."

Irina struggled to listen to the explanations and drink her soup at the same time, and the soup won. Ross' questions and Lichen's answers became mere background noise to the best meal she had ever had, and with every moment that passed while they talked about nothing but vegetables, Irina relaxed a bit more.

Against all odds, she was still alive. Against all odds, she was getting better. Perhaps, for a moment, she could dare to dream of a future in which she could spend every day like this, warm and comfortable and safe.

"Ivy. Hey."

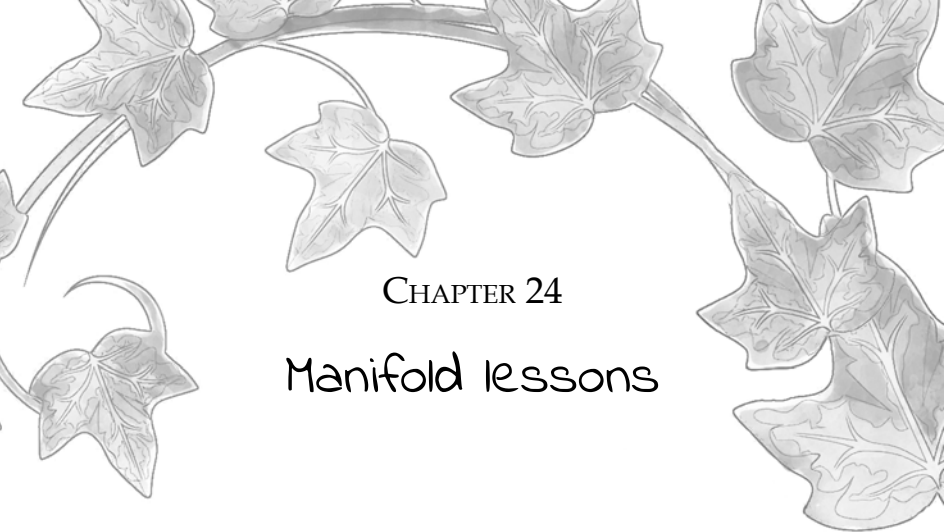
She jerked awake, her hand grasping at the empty air. The bowl was gone, luckily without having spilled the remaining contents all over her lap. Ross put it down and gave her a soft look.

"Why don't you lie down?"

As much as she would have liked to finish her meal, the sleepiness was stronger. She curled up on the mattress, all

but vanishing inside the blanket he pulled up to her shoulders. Only her hand found its way to the edge, fingers curling around the folds of Ross' pants as she drifted off to sleep.





## CHAPTER 24

# Manifold lessons

True to their word, Lichen attempted to teach them the basics of cooking. Over the course of the next few weeks, more and more instructions filled the pages of Ross' little book: how to prepare raw ingredients; which parts should go into the pot first; how to determine whether food was spoiled; when to roast and when to boil and when to bake; and how to use what seasonings they had to bring the best out of their meals.

While Ross took notes, Irina tried not to despair in the face of such an overwhelming wealth of information. She had never been particularly good at remembering things, but lately, it felt like her thoughts were scattering faster than ever. Sometimes, she had already forgotten the beginning of an explanation by the time it came to an end, and she was too embarrassed to ask Lichen to repeat their instructions over and over again.

Without Ross, she would have given up, but together, they made a decent team. When Lichen asked them to take over the next meal, dumping a pile of meat and vegetables in front of them, Ross read from his notes while Irina took care of the tasks that were better done with two hands. The resulting stew was perhaps a bit watery, but it was way better than the

tasteless fish soup already. Ross grinned from ear to ear as he took the first spoonful.

Other than the huge bag of flour, the supplies Lichen had brought with them weren't going to last long, so they also took them into the surrounding woods and showed them how to forage for food. They added little sketches to the notes Ross took, pointing out how to identify edible plants by sight and smell. Berries, roots, herbs—even some trees that did not yet bear fruits, and probably would only do so long after they had moved on.

"I would stay clear of mushrooms. Many are edible, but it can be hard to tell them apart from the dangerous ones," they said, pointing the charcoal pencil at a few innocent looking, white puffs on the ground. "If you eat those, your liver will turn to goo."

Their cheerful tone stood in stark contrast to the grim facts, and neither seemed to deter Ross from bombarding them with questions. Irina tuned both of them out. Already determined to avoid every single mushroom she came across, she really didn't care which kinds tasted like chicken and which kinds would cause one to bleed out of every orifice.

Her thoughts wandered back to the dead bandits all on their own. Poison was a cowardly way to go about things, but she couldn't deny its effectiveness. Mel would never have stood a chance against the five men, not even after getting them drunk—a feeling Irina knew all too well. If only it were as easy as dropping a basket with poisoned wine in front of the mansion.

"Okay. I think that's enough for today." Lichen's booming voice pulled her back into the present. "Who wants to help me with dinner?" They handed the pencil back to Ross. "We need to bake a fresh loaf of bread."

She should volunteer. Baking bread was such a basic task, and yet she had already forgotten how much water and how

much flour to add to the ever growing dough starter. How long would Lichen's patience last? And, much more importantly, how much longer would Ross' patience last?

So far, his supply seemed to be endless. After a short moment of silence, he raised his hand, crutch dangling off his forearm.

"Here. Me." He grinned. "Let's see if I'll manage without my notes today."

With her arms wrapped around her knees, Irina sat in front of the fireplace and watched Ross, who did, in fact, manage without his notes. Under Lichen's watchful gaze, he separated a part of the starter and added flour, water, and salt to it.

There was a certain glow to his eyes every time he did something that had tangible results. It made it dangerously easy to believe that he could be happy like this. That this was how life could be. He could help her remember, and she could help him with the tasks he struggled with, and together, they could build a new life, far away from what was left of his family. She should talk to him about his plans for the future, and yet...

"Ross?"

He looked up, dough sticking to his fingers.

"Do you think your father will still hold the harvest festival banquet?"

"Probably." He shook his hand, but the dough didn't let go. "I mean, he did last year, even though it was only days after— you know." Giving up his attempts at freeing himself, he resumed kneading. "Made us all sit through it, even though none of us wanted to be there. Why?"

She shook her head and sprinkled a bit more flour over his hand. It was a terrible idea. Only a few weeks of summer left, and they hadn't yet made plans where to go once she felt better. They had to leave. Sooner or later, someone would

remember that the lodge existed, and they could not afford to be found. Risking everything for her revenge was reckless and irresponsible.

If only it had been merely a matter of revenge. Every time she decided that no, she wasn't going to do this, she thought of the new maid who had to suffer just like she had. Irina knew she would never get anywhere near that man again, but what if she didn't have to? During the celebrations, the house would be full of people, yes—but everyone would be busy, maybe drunk. If only she could sneak into his study unseen, she knew exactly where she would place the poison.

If there was one person who deserved to have his liver turned to goo, it was that piece of shit.

"Are you all right?"

The clump of dough rested in the bowl, ready to be covered and put aside, and Ross eyed her with that worried frown on his face. Irina forced herself to smile.

"Yeah. Just tired." It was a lie, and it wasn't. She was always tired these days.

"Do you want to take a nap?"

"No." She needed to think, and she needed to do so alone. "I think I'll wash some of our clothes. Keep my hands busy."

"Do you need—"

"I need a moment."

She dodged his attempt to reach for her, and she hated herself for the hurt flicking across his face. He didn't say anything; he never did. Not when she pulled back, not when she pushed him away, not when she lashed out. And every time, she vowed it wouldn't happen again, and every time, it did happen again.

"Sorry," she mumbled as she scrambled to her feet.

She blindly grabbed the pile of dirty clothes next to the door and hoped that the soap was still somewhere outside, because she wasn't going to find it with her vision blurred like this.

In front of the well, she dumped her load, welcoming the burning of her muscles as she pulled up a bucket of water. She wished she could have burned it all away, all the anger and fear and restlessness, but it was trapped too deep inside her. All she could do was keep herself busy, distract herself until the next time something brought her emotions to a boil.

Now where had she put the soap last time? She circled the well, finding nothing. Already, the restlessness threatened to take over, like an itch she couldn't reach. She kicked at every little rock on her way to the lodge, scanning the area for any trace of the blasted soap. Not on the stool. Not in the bucket. Not by the firewood.

The laundry had merely been an excuse, but now she couldn't *not* do it, and she didn't want to go back inside and ask if anyone had seen the soap, and why couldn't anything just go right for once?

Her arm slammed against the wood pile, pain radiating up to her elbow and tingling in her fingers, instantly followed by regret. She shouldn't risk ruining her clothes. Lichen had been kind enough to gift her a shift and turn one of the biggest shirts into a garment resembling a tunic, and it wouldn't do to ruin that just because she didn't have her temper under control.

She peeled the sleeve back before she slammed her arm against the wood a second time, and a third, and a fourth. As her arm pulsed in the rhythm of her quickened heartbeat, some of the irritating tension bled out of her. For a moment, no matter how short, she could think.

Her skin was reddened but not broken. She flexed her fingers, feeling the strain in each aching muscle. As she pressed her thumb into what would surely become a bruise in the coming days, she thought that Ross would hate to see her like this, but he wasn't here, and he didn't have to know.

She took a deep breath. She could soak the clothes already,

let the cold water cool down her mood as well, and then resume her search. That was definitely a better plan than breaking her own arm. Her feet carried her back to the well where she picked up the upside-down washing tub, flipping it over and revealing the missing soap.

Hours later, Irina stood in the shadow of the trees, watching the almost dry laundry—if one could call a shirt, five rags, and a couple of socks that—sway in the wind. The soap was back under the upside-down tub, and the time alone had helped her calm down.

The nervous restlessness was gone, but the uncertainty about her ridiculous plan remained. Three times, she had followed her memories back to the spot where the mushrooms grew. Three times, she had stared at the innocent looking white puffs. Three times, she had let her doubts carry her back to the lodge, only to linger at the edge of the clearing.

Would it be dangerous to handle them? Would they still have the same effect once they were dried? Would one be enough to kill a man? She had so many questions, but she couldn't exactly ask Lichen. Telling them how she had killed Brad in self-defense was one thing—cold blooded murder another.

As she went to the well to take a sip of water, a faint orange glow next to the lodge drew her attention. In the shadows deepened by the setting sun sat Lichen, back against the wooden wall and legs stretched out. They looked straight at her, ruining her chances of ducking back between the trees unnoticed.

Ignoring them would feel awkward, but so did the idea of disturbing them when they might have come out here to find some peace. Halfway across the distance, Irina froze, unsure of how to proceed.

"I will have to return to my hut soon," they began unprompted, gaze lost in the direction of the darkening forest. "I need to prepare for winter, and the most important weeks of the year are coming up. Lots of things to harvest in fall."

Encouraged by their willingness to start a conversation, Irina crossed the remaining distance and sat down on a split in half log next to them.

"How much longer will you stay?"

"A week or so. I need to finish those cooking lessons. If there's anything you need, I could do another run for supplies, but I'd like to avoid it. The villagers will get suspicious if I buy that much twice in the same month."

"Do you like it?" she asked. "Living all alone like that, I mean."

"Yeah." They exhaled slowly and watched the smoke drift away. "I know it's not for everyone, but it is for me. The peace. The solitude. I admit, I get along with plants better than with people. Take this flower, for example." The orange glow pointed at a sad little herb, yellow blossom already closed for the night and leaves drooping low. "It grows pretty much everywhere. Especially in the cities, people try to get rid of it, saying it ruins their gardens. But it grows quickly and easily, and every part of it can be used. Flowers, leaves, roots. You can turn them into tea, salad, or stews."

The glow moved, pointing at the edge of the forest, where it was too dark for Irina to make out any details.

"Meanwhile that one there, the plant with the pink, bell-shaped blossoms? It's incredibly toxic. A few flowers and even fewer of the seeds are all it takes to kill a person. Makes your heart beat slower and slower until it stops." They snapped their fingers. "Just like that. Yet people grow it in their gardens because of its pretty blossoms. Granted, incidents are few, because the plant is pretty bitter, but they do happen."

Irina's gaze was glued to the spot, trying to memorize it so

she could inspect those plants by daylight. "I guess there is some kind of lesson behind this," she muttered.

"Yeah." Lichen laughed once, dryly, and took another deep breath. "Some kind of."

The lesson Irina was taking away from their words was probably not the intended one. How fitting it would be for his cold heart to stop like that.

Silence settled between them while Lichen finished their smoke. Irina stared up at the glimmering stars, wishing she knew more about them. Could one discern the date by looking at the stars? Probably not without some kind of tools, or at least a proper clock. She would have to figure out what day it was, and how much longer until the harvest festival. And she would have to talk to Ross about it – a real talk, not angry words spoken through tears.

"How about we go back inside?" Lichen's gaze rested on her; how long had they been watching her? "The bread's done, and Ross made an excellent rabbit stew." They winked.

As if on command, Irina's stomach began to rumble. She offered Lichen a hand to help them up and trailed behind them. Wandering back and forth between the lodge and the mushrooms, she hadn't noticed how hungry she was, but as she stepped into the mouth-watering smell of freshly baked bread and hearty stew, it became impossible to ignore.

Ross had probably not done all of the work alone, but seeing him beam with pride dispelled the lingering unease about wasting her time outside instead of helping him. And the meal was something to be proud of – the bread warm and crispy, the stew perfectly seasoned, the meat so soft it was falling apart.

"I told Irina that I won't stay much longer," Lichen said once their bowls were half empty, "but what about you? You mentioned moving on before fall, and fall is approaching quickly."



Ross cast Irina a careful glance. She did her best to ignore it.

"We haven't really talked about it yet, but I was thinking about Caldeia," he finally said. "Not only because of the streets full of bakeries." His tone was joking, his words stirring a memory she couldn't quite grasp. "I heard the palace has a wonderful library, and there are various places where I might put my degree to use. And if it doesn't work out, we can take a portal to anywhere in the world. What do you think?"

"I don't..." Irina stared into her bowl, feeling so very inadequate. "I don't know that place," she mumbled. "Nor any others. I'll go wherever you want to go."

Anywhere would be all right with her as long as he allowed her to stay with him.

With a smile that was both sad and soft, Ross pushed his leg against hers. "Probably Caldeia, then. It seems to have the most options, and it's far, far away. As far as I know, my family has no ties anywhere near there."

"That's quite the journey," Lichen remarked. "Do you have enough money to stay in inns along the way?"

Thinking of the coins she had taken out of Ross' room, Irina opened her mouth—and closed it again when she realized that she didn't even know how much the night in an inn cost.

"We should be fine." Unlike Irina, Ross didn't seem to worry too much. "If we're lucky, we can even hitch a ride once we hit one of the main roads."

"All right." Lichen sighed as they cleaned their bowl with the last piece of their bread. "You know. I'm gonna miss you, kid. Both of you. Let me know when you've settled somewhere so I can stop worrying."

"And address the letter to where?" Ross' teasing tone was an obvious attempt to cover up his emotions. "To the weird

witch in the woods, two hours walk away from nowhere?"

"Well you could do that. Or." They made a theatrical pause. "You could use my name. Galleta is holding my letters for me until the next time I come into the village."

Irina almost choked on her spoonful of stew. Lichen did not look like the kind of person who often received letters – but then, they also didn't look like the kind of person who would go out of their way to teach some forlorn kids how to cook.

While she was outwardly busy with her meal, Irina's thoughts were racing. Fall was indeed approaching quickly, which meant that she was running out of time. She had to figure out when the day of the harvest festival would be. That was all she needed. She could kill that monster and be on her way before his body was fully cold.

\* \* \*

With pots and bowls empty and cleaned, the laundry folded and put away, and the stack of wood next to the fireplace big enough to keep the fire going through the night, there was nothing left for Ross to do other than to review the day's notes.

Irina was already asleep, which was a shame. He would have liked to talk with her about the future and make concrete plans about their upcoming departure. Instead, he opened his notebook on a blank page and scraped together every bit of geography he had ever learned to attempt some calculations about the expected travel time.

His hopes of leaving during the summer had been shattered by Irina's sickness, and then he had hesitated to bring it up because he had wanted to spend more time with Lichen. With everything they had shown him, they had never assumed that he couldn't do something, always looking for

a way that would work for him. In a way, it felt like he had learned more about life in these past weeks than in all the years before.

The downside was that now they were running short on time. During summer, they might have gotten away with sleeping outside as long as the weather was dry, but with fall came colder temperatures and a higher chance of rain. He could only hope that the money Irina had taken from his desk would be enough and they wouldn't have to touch the other coin. Sheltered upbringing or not, he was well aware that paying with gold would not only get them a room, but also a slew of awkward questions—if they were lucky and no one killed them in their sleep for their suspected riches.

No matter how much the journey worried him, the prospect of seeing the capital made up for it. He had only heard the tales; of busy streets filled with arts and crafts, parks for relaxation and squares for entertainment, magnificent temples for all of the gods, the palace library, and the glass roof garden with the portal.

As he settled down next to Irina and wrangled his limbs into the right positions, he dared to imagine a future in which they had already arrived. A small house for just the two of them. Enough money so she would never have to be hungry, never have to be cold. Calm, peaceful days in the sun and evenings in front of the fireplaces. Evenings much like this. He closed his eyes.

When morning came, Ross' blissful hope for the future still lingered. With every part of their morning routine, he dared to imagine it in a place other than the old lodge. Waking up in a real bed. Having breakfast in a real kitchen. Finding himself on a soft carpet instead of the hard floor as she helped him with his stretching exercises.

"Can we... talk?"

Ross craned his neck to look past his leg, which she held at an angle.

"Well." He couldn't wriggle the toes of his left foot, which was a shame. A slight gesture of his right hand would have to suffice. "I'm not gonna run away." The grin that accompanied his words faded quickly when she didn't return his light mood. "What is it?"

As Irina avoided his gaze, a hundred possibilities flashed through his mind. She was getting worse again. She regretted losing the parts Lichen had taken and hated him for telling them to do it. She didn't want to come to Caldeia. She didn't want to stay with him.

"What if..." Her words trailed off, and he waited with held breath for her to continue. "What if I thought..." She trailed off again and focused on his leg, as if she hadn't memorized all the movements a decade ago. Why couldn't she say it already before the thrumming in his ears would drown out her voice? "Of a way. A way to kill him."

Ross barely managed not to laugh as relief washed over him. Neither laughing nor relief seemed to be an appropriate reaction to hearing her plot his father's murder. Blurting out 'How?' was probably not much better.

"You said. He'll most likely hold the harvest celebration, despite all. So he will be busy. Everyone will be busy." She kept moving his leg. Back and forth. Side to side. Not looking at him. "The servants, too. They'll all be in the hall, and no one will be on the first floor where I can get in."

"But you'll also never get anywhere near him," Ross pointed out.

"I don't need to."

"I don't understand."

"Poison. In something only he will use. I won't have to get close to him." Absentmindedly, she kept massaging his leg, a kindness he would have enjoyed otherwise – but not when

she was talking about a plan that might decide whether she lived or died. "I only have to enter his study. It's close to the stairs and far from the hall. I'll be long gone by the time he takes the poison," she said. Her tone was stubborn; trying to convince herself or him? "No one would know."

"But why during the celebration?"

"You know how he is. Everything needs to be perfect. And that means everyone will be in the salon, including all the servants."

This was... fuck. This might just work, and that scared him more than anything. Had her plan been doomed to fail, he could have tried to stop her. Okay. That was enough stretching. He took his leg back and pushed himself up so he could look her in the eyes.

"Do you think it's worth the risk?" he asked.

Irina folded her hands in her lap. Taking away her chance to keep her hands busy did not make her look at him as he had hoped.

"He will never stop," she whispered. "The servants talked. The one before my mother. The maid. She couldn't bear it and left. And my mother. She stayed because she... because *we* had no other place to go. And when she became too sick, he turned to me, and now he has this other poor girl, and he will never, ever stop."

So this wasn't only about her revenge. That made it even more complicated. He didn't want her to risk her life, but did he have the right to stop her? He had failed her. Hadn't protected her when she had needed him most. How could he stop her from saving another girl in her place now?

"But where will you get the poison?" he asked, trying one last time to find a way to dissuade her.

Irina laughed. She stopped kneading her hands and gestured at the door; at the forest and Lichen, who was somewhere outside, alike. Yeah, that question had been a foolish

one. They had shown them so many toxic plants.

"So what if..." he repeated her earlier words. "You thought of a way. Then we need to make sure nothing will go wrong." He put his hand on her knee, squeezing it. "I'm not going to Caldeia without you."



## CHAPTER 25

# An eye for an eye

Determined to make the best out of his last few days with Lichen, Ross remained all but glued to their side. Every waking hour, he bombarded them with questions, filling his little book with notes about much more than cooking. From common household chores over relationship advice to ways to blend in while on the road, there were few topics they didn't at least briefly touch on.

In Irina's stead, he spent one afternoon learning about every poisonous plant in the vicinity down to the last strands of black mold growing under a fallen log. With enthusiasm he didn't have to fake, he took notes about the symptoms each one of them would cause, about the different doses that would be lethal, and about the chances of survival should one be able to fetch a healer.

No matter how little Ross wanted their time together to end, the day of departure drew closer. Lichen scribbled a makeshift calendar into his notebook, counting down the days until the harvest festival. Keeping the murderous details to himself, he told them that they wanted to wait for the festival to end before departing, giving it a day or two for the roads and inns to clear again.

When the day came, heartfelt hugs were exchanged, a few tears shed, and they were alone again. With barely two weeks to go before the festival, Irina instantly went to work. She harvested the bell-shaped plants, drying the parts next to the fire in a bowl they weren't going to use for anything else ever again. She dug out the blackened clothes and altered them, finding that they had become too tight around her torso. And she took up her climbing exercises again, even if the branches of the blood-plum were long empty.

While she was busy, Ross took over the cooking and baking duties. How empty the lodge felt without Lichen. Ross missed their voice, the little observations and occasional instructions. He even missed the smell of the herbs they smoked. As much as he loved Irina, he couldn't wait to be among people again. He had never been truly alone, though much of his life had been spent watching rather than mingling, and the bustling life of a city would provide a much welcome change of scenery.

In a few days, they would be on their way. He watched her preparations with steadily increasing unease, imagining all the ways in which her plan could go wrong, yet voicing none of his worries. She knew what was at stake. He could see the nervousness in her posture, in her every movement. The last thing she needed was for him to freak her out even more.

When the day of the harvest festival finally arrived, Ross prepared the charcoal tincture to darken her skin while Irina slipped into the blackened clothes. She was going to kill his father. He should have felt something. A good son would have. But then, his family had never made a secret about their opinion that he wasn't a good son, and so he felt nothing when she tied the small bag to the rope that served her as a belt.

"Be safe," he said, wishing to reach out for her, and stopping



himself from doing so lest he would smear charcoal all over himself. "Please be safe."

\* \* \*

The way to the DeWitt mansion was etched into Irina's memory, and the light of a deep red harvest moon guided her as she approached the village. The blue moon was nowhere to be seen, just like she wouldn't be seen. Like a shadow, she would get in and out, and no one would be any wiser.

Her fingers couldn't stop playing with the small bag on her belt. Every time her pants got stuck on the undergrowth, every time an animal called in the distance or a branch cracked behind her, she wondered why she was doing this. Was it truly to save the maid, or was that merely a welcome excuse to quench the bloodthirst that pushed to the surface whenever she thought about what this monster had done? And did it matter? A few more hours, and she would be free to leave without the nagging feeling that there was something she still had to do.

In the village, the windows of every single house were brightly lit. Irina stuck to the shadows. Past the miller, and the cobbler, and the house of the old woman who sat all day by the window to give the people who passed by a disapproving look, she made her way to the mansion, where she paused under the old oak tree.

The night was quiet, and it wasn't. A hum hung in the air, the faint echo of a myriad of cheerful voices from cheerful people in cheerful homes. The home she approached was not a cheerful one, even if lit torches tried their best to make the dark grounds look inviting.

She kept to the shadows and climbed up the tree like she always had, shuffling forward along the branch that reached for Ross' window. With a nudge of her magic, it opened.

The chirping of insects was her only company as she waited. The banquet hall was on the other side of the house, on the ground floor, so no one had any reason to be anywhere near Ross' old room, but it was better to be safe.

When everything remained quiet, she jumped. Fall softened by her magic, she landed soundlessly on the windowsill and slid inside. This was easy. Almost too easy. Her hand flitted to her belt, making sure the little bag was where it should be, while her eyes scanned the room. Someone had fixed the worst of the chaos she had caused, but to her, it was still a mess. Books were out of order, clothes haphazardly thrown over a chair, the bed unmade, and dark spots of spilled ink stained the rug.

A quick look inside the wardrobe revealed Ross' remaining crutches to be gone, and the shelves were void of the various things he had collected. It seemed like someone had tried to purge every trace of what had made this room his. He wasn't ever going to come home again, and so he wasn't ever going to see this, but her heart ached for him as she crept towards the door.

The corridor lay dark and abandoned, the only source of light the warm glow from the direction of the staircase. Her steps became even slower, five seconds of listening for each second moved. Muffled voices reached her ears, broken up by raunchy laughter. Her fingernails dug into her palms, and she forced her hands to relax, her breaths to stay even.

Walking down step by step, she barely dared to breathe. Her feet shuffled over the soft carpet, her fingertips reaching for the handle of the study's door. He never locked it, because who would dare to enter without his permission? Well; she would.

She squeezed through the opening of the door and pulled it closed behind her, taking a deep, calming breath. She would have found her way in the dark, and the moonlight falling

through the window didn't make that necessary. Her searching hands opened the right drawer, fished out the object she needed.

Ross had asked her how she could be so sure no one else would take what she was hiding the poison in, so she had been forced to tell him about the box. About the herbs that could help a man grow hard, and how he had always made *her* prepare the tonic, the sick enjoyment of letting her know what was waiting for her.

The smell still made her stomach churn as she pried off the lid, and remembering Ross' pale face as he had taken in her words didn't help. With trembling hands, she took the bag from her belt and opened it, careful not to spill a single crumb as she poured the dried plant parts into the box. They blended right in, impossible to make out after she stirred the mixture a bit.

Did he force the new maid to prepare the tonic as well? Was she stirring the cup with the same dread in her stomach as Irina had? And would she be glad once he was dead, or would she be horrified? Irina would never know. By the time his heart stopped, she would long be on her way to Caldeia with Ross.

Her feet made no sound on the carpeted floor as she crept back to the door, resting her hand on the wood and listening with held breath. The door was too thick to allow any kind of sound in, so she sent a quick prayer to the gods and pushed down the handle.

Through the smallest of slits, she surveyed the corridor; dimly lit and completely empty. She pushed the door just far enough so she could squeeze through the opening and pulled it back closed with both hands to control the movement. Someone yelled. Someone laughed. Her own heart felt like it was strangling her, but she had to keep it together. Had to make it out of the house as quickly and stealthily as she had entered it.

She was halfway up the stairs when the door to the banquet hall opened. Warm firelight spilled into the corridor, casting two shadows onto the opposite wall; one tall, one petite.

"Get him to bed and then come back," the master of the house called out.

Cold dread washed over Irina upon hearing his voice. On all fours, she hurried up the stairs, her heart thrumming so wildly in her chest, she thought she might throw up. Slurred words she couldn't make out chased her, footsteps approaching the stairs just as she reached the next floor. She crawled away from the stairs before she jumped to her feet, aware that she had only moments to get out of sight.

Ross' room was too far away, but Mel's was right at the stairs. Her legs trembled so much, they barely carried her weight, and her shaking fingers failed to get the door open. Irina bit her lip to suppress a whimper as she clawed at the handle, useless tears in her eyes that made it even harder to see in the dim light.

They were almost up. She could already hear the man's labored breaths. Too late to run for another room. Too late to find a better spot. In a last act of despair, she pressed herself into the corner of the wall.

The figures reached the top of the stairs: Greer, the brother-in-law of Ross' father—so drunk he was swaying from side to side—and the maid trying her best to keep him on his feet. The sour smell of wine and vomit accompanied them, wafting over to Irina a moment later. She pressed her head against the wall and breathed shallowly through her mouth, fighting back the memories of his breath on her skin, his hands under her clothes, his body pushing against hers.

In her head, the voices in the corridor mingled with voices of the past. Slurred words, pushy and demanding. Getting louder against the whispered pleas, not taking no for an answer. Irina flinched as the maid yelped, only for her protest to

be cut off and turned into a breathless whimper as he claimed her mouth.

The wet sound of his pleasure and her despair was like maggots crawling under Irina's skin. She could feel his tongue pushing into *her* mouth, and she bit her cheek to keep herself from making any noise. She wanted to throw up, and she wanted to run, and she wanted to cut his throat, and she wanted to slam her arm against the wall until the pain carried everything else away.

It wasn't her, and it might as well have been her, and it *had* been her, and no one had cared then, and no one cared now. The maid would get blamed for the delay if Greer kept her much longer, and get punished for dropping something if her hands still shook, and get yelled at if she slept too long after a restless night full of tears. And the next day, he would pretend he didn't remember, while she always remembered; always smelling the wine on his breath, always feeling those hands on her, always wanting to crawl out of her skin.

Another plea was spoken in a trembling voice. The maid was expected back downstairs. A crude remark was the reply, and a door slammed shut. Even as the footsteps faded away, Irina didn't move. Every single one of her muscles seemed to be frozen in place—except for her heart, which was beating so fast, she thought it might break out of her ribs. Slowly and with willful effort, she forced her hands to relax, letting go of her forearms where her fingernails had left deep marks.

She flexed her fingers, but they didn't feel like they were her fingers at all. Her whole body was stiff and numb. She should thank the Seven that she hadn't been spotted and get out of here, but her feet didn't carry her to Ross' room. Step by step by step, they carried her in front of the guest room that had become Greer's permanent residence, and Irina let it happen as if she were merely a guest in her own body.

In front of the door, she froze. What was she doing? She had no weapon, no plan. She wouldn't stand a chance. Even drunk as he was, he was so much stronger than her, and the moment he called out for help, her life was forfeit.

But she also couldn't let it go. Ten years since his wife and child had died. Ten years of crawling deeper and deeper into a bottle. Ten years of crude remarks and groping hands and forcing himself onto those who weren't allowed to push back. He, too, wasn't going to stop. If not the maid, then someone else. There would always be someone lower than him. Someone who would have to take it lest she lose her livelihood.

Ross would understand; wouldn't he? It wasn't like he and Greer were particularly close. He might be angry about the risk she was about to take, but he would accept it when she came back with more blood on her hands than she had planned. He would.

Her fingers closed around the handle, and she pushed the door open.

Greer sat in the armchair in front of the window, the drawn curtains a dark red backdrop for his pitiful form. With his head lolled to the side and his mouth hanging open, he drooled onto a jacket that cost more than Irina's mother had made in a year. An open bottle at his feet dripped wine all over the floor, a mess the maid would have to take the blame for the next day.

He was pathetic, not dangerous. The only thing that made him dangerous was the power his family held over others, and that power wasn't going to save him. Like a shadow, Irina ducked into the shadow between the door and a dresser before she dared to look around more thoroughly. She needed something. Anything. A kind of weapon she could wield with her magic. A candle holder or a vase or —

Her gaze flicked upwards to the row of hunting trophies mounted above the window. A boar head, a wolf head, and

in the middle, directly over Greer, the antler of a mighty deer. The weight alone might have been enough for her purpose, but the pointy ends of the antler held a different kind of allure. Perhaps she could sink one of them into his throat or chest.

Her magic reached out slowly, aching deep within her like a long neglected muscle. After such a long time in chains, she still hadn't gotten used to being able to use it again. She wrapped her magic around the wooden board the antler was mounted on and pulled. It didn't budge.

Squeezing her magic between the wood and the wall brought sweat to her forehead. Even though she discovered three points—with a sense that was neither feeling nor seeing, yet somewhere in between—she couldn't make out how they were fastened to the wall.

Sheer force it was. With her back against the wall to keep herself steady, Irina began to pull. Sweat gathered under her suddenly too-tight clothes, and it became harder and harder for her to keep her breathing quiet, but the damn thing didn't want to give in. She pushed upwards and to the sides, wriggling her magic in an attempt to get the board loose, and finally, it moved ever so slightly away from the wall.

With renewed determination and fading strength, she pushed harder. The wood creaked. Greer flinched, the startled reflex of someone half asleep. Even though her head already felt like it was about to burst, Irina doubled her efforts. If he woke up now, if he saw her now, everything was over. She wanted her revenge, but she also wanted to live.

Greer opened his eyes. The wood creaked again. As he took control over his lolling head to look up, Irina threw every last bit of her energy into her magic. Blood rushed in her head and dripped from her nose as the antler came loose and, with more force than gravity alone would have offered, crashed into the man's face.

The sound reverberated through Irina's bones. Letting go of her magic left her dizzy and ready to collapse, but she blinked furiously to drive away the flickering darkness in front of her eyes. One of the antler's ends had torn open his cheek, one had sunken into his neck, missing any vital blood vessels, and one—one stuck out from his eye, crimson trails trickling over his face from the point of impact.

For a moment, everything was eerily quiet. Time seemed to stand still as she held her own breath, watching whether *he* was still breathing. Then his chest rose, and a scream emerged from his mouth, chilling her to the bone; gargling and sputtering and full of primal terror.

Flailing arms failed to get hold of the antler, getting caught in the curtains instead. Irina jumped up as the curtains came down. As she tore open the door, she could already hear the voices coming closer, half a dozen footsteps or more. She knew she wouldn't make it past the stairs to Ross' room, so she bolted into the other direction.

The first room she passed was locked. As the scream behind her died, she ran on, almost crashing into the second door. It was open. Thank the Seven, it was open. Thundering footsteps were already at the top of the stairs as she slipped inside. Out of breath, she pressed herself against the wall, an arm against her bleeding nose, and pushed the door as softly as possible into the lock.

Mere seconds passed, then the called-out questions got cut off by a scream. Someone cried. Someone called for help. One voice rose over the others, bellowing orders and trying to get people to calm down; Ross' mother, Decima, was used to making herself heard. She was also used to quickly finding someone to blame.

"Is that what you consider safely to bed?"

The impact of a backhanded slap meeting a face echoed through the corridor. Irina could feel the vibrations of the



following whimper in her own chest, the tears of pain and humiliation burning in her own eyes. As Decima kept yelling at the maid, Irina's stomach twisted. She had wanted to save the girl, not get her into trouble. As if she didn't know Decima's cruel hand. As if she didn't have the scars on her back to prove it. Would those be the first lashes to break unblemished skin? Because of her?

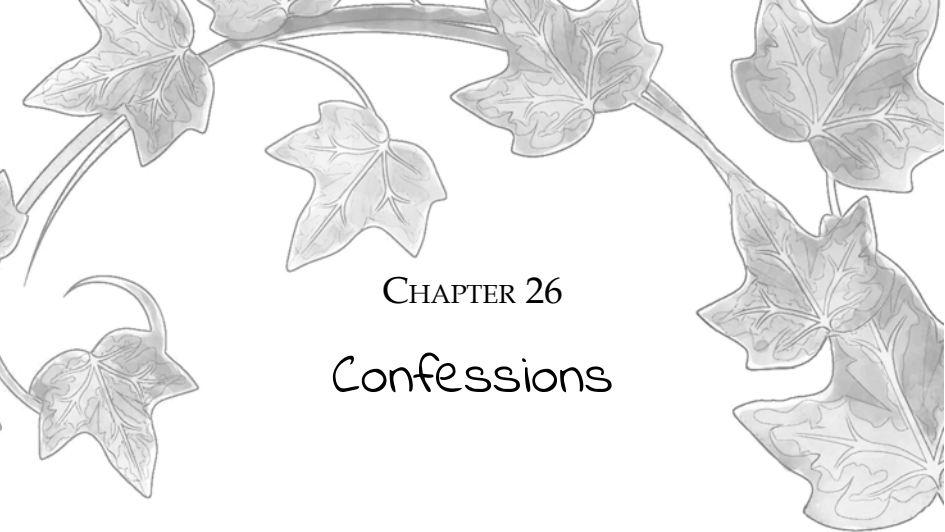
Spilling tears made it hard for Irina to keep breathing soundlessly. Gods, she had to get out. She left the door and stumbled for the window, pushing away the curtains and fumbling with the latch. No oak to help her with the descent, no magic left to cushion her fall. She pushed herself backwards off the windowsill, hanging from her arms for a split second before her fingers slipped and she fell.

The moment her feet hit the ground, pain shot up from her ankle to her knee, and she collapsed. Shoving everything but the need to stay undetected aside, she rolled onto her back, focused on the open window, and *pulled*.

Pain stabbed through her temple with such ferocity, her vision turned black. She fought against the darkness trying to claim her by focusing on her body. Dirt under her fingernails. Blood on her tongue. Cold creeping through her clothes. Slowly, she pulled herself away from the brink of unconsciousness and onto her knees.

With tears in her eyes and panic in her chest, she crawled along the house wall, pressing against it as if it would help her to become one with the shadows. In the light of the full moon, the grounds looked eerily strange and familiar at the same time. The wrong side of the house, the wrong way out, but she couldn't cross the path illuminated by firelight, and she couldn't make her way past the kitchen, either. Getting around the village would be harder this way, but at least she wouldn't have to crawl through the stream. No one was suspecting a murder, so there was no need to hide her trail this time.

Her hands and knees would hate her by the time she made it back, but she was alive. She *would* make it back. Ross would be waiting for her, and he would tell her he understood, and hold her, and promise that everything was going to be all right.



## CHAPTER 26

# Confessions

The full moon sank beneath the horizon, night's darkness gave way for dawn's glow, and Irina wasn't back yet. Ross stared at the door, trying to talk himself out of panicking by finding reason after reason why she was late that didn't include her getting caught.

By noon, he had long run out of explanations, his leg ached from how often he had walked back and forth between the well and the lodge, and his hand trembled at whatever task he picked to keep himself distracted. The soup in the pot over the fire had gone from a bubble to a low simmer, and still he had refilled the water two times.

He should have talked her out of it. Doing this during the harvest festival was too risky. Doing this at all was too risky, period. If only it had merely been a matter of revenge. He would have begged her to stay, but he remembered too well how shaken she had been after seeing the maid, and he could never have asked her to leave the girl to the same fate.

A barely audible scratching noise had him out of his chair and clutching his crutch before the door opened. For a moment, he stared at the empty space in the doorway. Faint movement pulled his gaze lower, and his heart seemed to

skip a beat. Irina cowered on the doorstep, covered in dirt and trembling from head to toe.

"Ivy!"

He was by her side in a heartbeat, his crutch clattering to the ground as he fell to his knees next to her. At the sound of his voice, she looked up, breathing heavily. Blood and tears had left streaks in the dark paint on her face.

"Are you hurt?"

He looked her over, but her clothes were too dark to see whether she was bleeding. What if she was? Gods; what was he supposed to do? Lichen was gone. He could take care of minor injuries, but what if —

His thoughts came to a screeching halt when Irina shook her head.

"But..."

"Just. My foot," she whispered. Her fingers twitched in his direction, as if she wanted to touch him but didn't dare to. "I'm fine."

She looked about the furthest from *fine* he could imagine, but he gave in to her gesture and wrapped his arm around her. Irina sank against him, holding onto fistfuls of his shirt with trembling hands.

For a while, he just held her, glad that she was back; glad that she was some kind of fine. They couldn't stay on the ground like that, though. Even through her clothes, he could feel how cold she was, and the smell of blood and dirt lingered in his nose even after he leaned back.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

He looked from the door to the fireplace and back. This was going to need a lot of water, and the last kettle he had put on the fire was probably half empty by now, but water straight from the well was so terribly cold.

Irina took the decision away from him. Slowly, she crawled back outside. The way she dragged her right leg; she *was*

hurt. Ross struggled back to his feet and snatched his bag off the table, throwing in rags and soap and her shift. When he reached the well, she was already fighting with the rope, but she lacked the strength to pull the bucket up.

"Let me."

He pulled up the water, poured it into the washing bowl, and soaked one of the rags. Irina watched him with glassy eyes, clearly exhausted. When she made no attempt to take the rag he was holding out to her, he took it back.

"May I?"

She nodded, and Ross scooted closer. At first, he barely dared to touch her, dabbing at the charcoal on her face to reveal the skin below. Slowly, it became clear that she wasn't bleeding and there were no gruesome wounds hidden beneath the layer of soot, and the worry that had held his heart in an iron grip eased.

It took him multiple bowls of water to get her face, neck, and hair cleaned, but that was only a start. Ross untied the cords that kept the sleeves of her shirt close to her arms and inspected her palms. It would be impossible to get all the dirt off her hands without scrubbing, and with all the cuts and scratches, scrubbing was the last thing he wanted to do.

Had she crawled all the way to the lodge? If her foot was hurt badly enough, it was certainly possible. His fingers curled around the hem of her shirt. He had to get her out of those dirty clothes, into something fresh and clean, and under a warm blanket.

As he pulled the shirt up, Irina let out a quiet whimper. Her breathing sounded strained, and she made no attempt to lift her arms to help his efforts. Had she hurt her ribs?

"I ..."

Ross looked up, her name dying on his lips when he saw the look on her face. Desperate panic had replaced her glassy-eyed tiredness, and the shivers he had taken as a reaction to

the chilly wind were clearly a sign of fear. He let go instantly and pushed himself away from her so hard, he fell over backwards.

Ross' head slammed against the well, the dull pounding drowning out Irina's shocked gasp. Under her frantic apologies, he scrambled back into a sitting position, rubbing the side of his head and hoping the world would stop spinning soon.

"Ivy. It's okay. It's okay." His voice shook, turning the words into little more than a garbled mess. "It's me. Ross. It's me. I didn't mean to— Fuck. It's not your fault. I wasn't..."

He trailed off. Shaking and sobbing, curled up into a ball, his words didn't seem to get through to her at all. Fuck, what had he been thinking? To touch her like this, knowing where she had come back from and seeing how rattled she was?

He moved away from her with the slowest of motions, limbs trembling with the effort it took him to keep them under control. Barely taking his eyes off her, he refilled the bowl with water and folded the shift next to it, making sure it would be as easy as possible for her to finish what he had started, because she still had to get out of those dirty clothes.

"I'll wait inside," he said, hoping that somewhere under her panic, she was able to take in his words.

His head pounded as he pulled himself up on the well, eyeing the crutch with disdain for deciding to fall over the moment he was up. Bending down to pick it up left him dizzy all over, and his steps on the way to the lodge were slow to make sure he didn't hurt himself.

Next to the door, he sank to the ground, staring ahead without seeing anything. That wild panic. The fear in her eyes. Set off by the slightest touch and fueled by the fear of punishment. He knew who had put that fear into her heart, and as his tears began to fall, he hoped that she had been able to place the poison.

Lost in his sorrow, Ross startled when the door next to him was pulled open. He wiped his tears away and straightened up, watching Irina crawl over the doorstep. The ends of her hair were wet, her shift hung lopsided around her torso, and fresh grass stuck to her knees. Yet she looked... *better* was not a word that felt right, but under all the dirt and grime, she truly seemed to be unharmed. Mostly.

His gaze was drawn to her forearm, to a length of bruised, torn skin. Images of hands grasping at her, of her desperate struggle to get away rose in his mind, but he fought them down. She would have mentioned it if anyone had seen her.

"What happened?"

"I hit it."

"I can see—" He snapped his mouth shut as the true meaning of her words dawned on him. "Oh, Ivy."

She had done that before, hadn't she? Hurting herself when things became too much. Only when she thought he didn't see, so the gods only knew how many times he hadn't witnessed it.

It was clearly not a topic she was comfortable talking about, so Ross swallowed everything he had to say about it. "Let's get you to bed," he said instead, "then I'll—"

Then what? He'd send her spiraling into another panic by touching her again? No matter how much he should keep his hands to himself, something had to be done about her foot. He had to at least look at it.

"Do you think you can let me look at your foot?"

She ducked her head between her shoulders, but she nodded. With mixed feelings, Ross watched her crawl towards the mattress, where she took one of the blankets and hugged it to her chest. When he settled next to her a moment later, she cast him a wary glance, but her leg poked out from under the blanket for him to examine.

"I need to take your shoes off, okay?"

Irina nodded again, clutching the blanket harder. The left shoe came off easily, chosen first so he could be sure she could bear his touch, but as soon as he touched the right one, she whimpered.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he finally got the shoe off, revealing an ankle that had swollen to at least twice its size. "Where does it hurt most? Here? Or here? Or —"

"Ow!"

Ross put his palm flat on the spot. It was warm to the touch, but that was about all he could say.

"And does it only hurt, or does it feel different, too? Numb? Tingling?" He watched her closely as she shook her head and decided that she was probably too exhausted to lie. "If I move it." He did so very carefully, his heart breaking at her pained cry. "Does it feel like anything is moving that shouldn't be? Anything grinding or displaced?"

"No. Just. Hurts."

That was good, all things considered. He let go of her foot and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I don't think it's broken." He sure hoped it wasn't, because even Lichen wouldn't be able to help with a broken bone, and he had no idea how he would get her to a temple. "Guess in a few days we'll know for sure. Let me get you some of the pain medicine. And a cup of soup, so it won't make you feel sick."

She took everything he offered without complaint, managing to drink it on her own, but barely. With warm soup in her stomach and a cold bandage wrapped around her ankle, she looked like she was barely able to keep her eyes open. Ross pulled the blanket over her legs, careful not to touch her. Lots of things to talk about, and all of them could wait until she had gotten some rest.

"Do you want me to sleep somewhere else today?" he asked.



Irina blinked slowly. "Donnow."

So that was a yes. Ross gathered his blankets and layered them next to the mattress at half an arm's length distance. He didn't want to leave her alone, but that way, he wouldn't accidentally touch her.

When he looked up, Irina was already asleep. Her hands clutched the blanket, and he fought the urge to pull it up to her shoulders and make sure she was fully covered. Instead, he curled up on his makeshift bed and hugged one of the pillows, since he couldn't hug her.

Even though it was barely afternoon, Ross fell asleep instantly, feeling the exhaustion of yet another sleepless night deep in his bones. He woke once during the night, shaking with the fleeting memories of a nightmare that began to fade as soon as he opened his eyes. Neither daring to go back to sleep instantly nor willing to risk waking Irina, he dragged his stiff body outside. The sky was overcast, the air crisp and cool. He sat outside the door until the trembling subsided and it felt like he could breathe again, and when he finally went back inside, he took one of his pills despite not knowing exactly how late it was.

The next time he awoke, dawn had already come and gone, and Irina was still asleep. Sometime during the night, she had shifted closer to the edge of the mattress, and her hand had found its way under his blanket. He focused on the dust dancing in the sunbeams and Irina's touch, trying to forget the last remnants of his unsettling dreams.

His left foot twitched. It was probably past the time to take another pill, but he wanted to enjoy this fleeting peace for a few more moments. All his plans of starting to pack were out the window anyway. They weren't going anywhere with her ankle like this.

It didn't take long for Irina to stir. As she opened her eyes, his foot twitched again, and he let out his breath with a little

sigh. If he needed to take his pill, then so did she, not to mention a new dose of the pain medication. She had to be in pain, even if she didn't let it show.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"I killed Greer."

"Okay." That was not what— fuck. He needed to be more awake for this kind of talk. He pushed himself up. "Okay. Why? No. Wait. Can we get breakfast first? At least some tea."

A cup of tea, pills, toilet, additional murder confessions. In that order. Without waiting for an answer, he turned around and checked on the fire, which had, of course, gone out. Irina held her hand out, wordlessly receiving flint, steel, and tinder. While Ross put fresh wood into the fireplace, she brought the spark to life.

He put the kettle into the growing fire, threw fresh mint stalks into two cups, and fetched their medicine, always aware of her eyes on him. She said nothing as she helped him put on the brace, and even though he had the distinct feeling that she was waiting for something, he needed to clear his head first.

"I'm gonna go to the outhouse." With his good leg, he fished for the crutch, pulling it closer so he could scramble to his feet. "Do you..." He trailed off when he realized how hard it would be for her to make her way across the yard. "If you want. I can get you the bedpan," he offered.

Irina grimaced. He couldn't blame her. As if he would use it unless absolutely necessary—a thought that gave him an idea.

"Wait."

Ross went to the pile of his belongings and grabbed the second crutch, bringing the pair to Irina, followed by one of the chairs he dragged next to the mattress. While he had a hard time walking without it, she couldn't walk at all.

"Ross..."

"I'll be fine." Oh, it felt good to throw those words back at her. He took two steps to prove his words. "Look? Fine."

The credibility of his claim was undermined by the fact that he had to quickly grasp at the back of the chair to keep himself steady. He eased his weight back onto his left leg and took a much more careful step, paying attention this time. There, that wasn't so hard.

Irina didn't look convinced. Ross sighed.

"Fine. We'll take turns. I'll go first, then I can get the tea started."

Ross took the kettle with him on his trip to the outhouse and well. The cold water drove away the lingering sleepiness, but it didn't answer any of his burning questions. Only Irina could answer those, but she took her time. By the time she shuffled back inside, the water was almost boiling, and Ross put the last pieces of their breakfast together as she eased herself onto the mattress.

"So." He looked up from his plate of two-day-old bread and cheese, finding his appetite gone. "You killed. My uncle. Why?"

Her little wince told him more than anything how on edge she was. In the corner of his eye, her plate wobbled in her hand. She put it down quickly, burying her clenched fingers in the blanket instead. Was he imagining it, or was her arm worse than it had been the previous night? Red where the bruises should not be looking this fresh, skin scraped open that should have scabbed over already.

"Ivy." Ross put his hand on the fabric, hoping the barrier would be enough so his touch wouldn't set her off. "I'm not angry." In fact, he wasn't feeling much at all, which was probably something to unpack at a later point in time. "I just need to understand. Please tell me what happened."

She looked up. And she did. Bread and tea were forgotten

as she described her way into the house, each empty corridor, each noise making her jump. He could practically see his father's study, with the old oak desk and the small box he never knew existed, and his heart hammered as if he were running up the stairs himself when she told him about Greer and the maid leaving the hall.

She talked about the girl, but it was clear from the pain in her voice and the haunted look in her eyes that she had seen herself in everything that night: under Greer's lecherous gaze, feeling his groping hands on her skin, and at the receiving end of his mother's ire.

All the memories, all the fear. Using her magic to exhaustion and beyond. No wonder it had taken her that long to return to the lodge. After all of this, she had practically crawled all the way back.

"I was so tired," she whispered, "and my foot hurt so much. I wanted to lie down and rest, but I wanted to come home to you even more. That's why I..." She trailed off, covering the injured spot on her arm with her hand. "It's not. Good," she choked out. "But it. Helps."

Watching her for any sign of discomfort, Ross finally dared to come closer. His fingers brushed her arm, and she leaned into the touch, bridging the distance between them. It wasn't quite an embrace, but her shoulder touched his arm and her knee his thigh, which was so much more than he could have hoped for so soon.

"If everyone in this house hurt you," he whispered. "Why didn't you leave?"

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "You didn't." Her fingers played with the hem of his shirt. "I couldn't leave. My mother was so sick, and we needed the money. Your father would have never let me go. He'd have made sure no one else would hire me." She dropped her hands. "I couldn't— She needed me."

That fucking piece of shit. Instead of rewarding the mother for her years of service, he had decided to exploit her daughter. But if money had been the problem, why hadn't she felt like she could confide in him? Ask him for help?

Deep inside, he knew the answer. Because he had never been there, and when he had come home for the holidays, he had been too exhausted to be of any use. For him, she had put on a smile while she suffered, and he could never, ever make up for it.

"Ivy..." Through all her words, one question had been haunting him. The moment was as bad as any to finally ask it, but perhaps he should get it over with while the pain was still raw, so he would never have to bring it up again. "Did my brother... Did Brad touch you, too? Is that why you killed him?"

"Brad." She choked out a laugh. "He. That day. I came back from the funeral they hadn't wanted me to attend. Your mother screamed at me for being late with my chores, and your father told me he'd deduct half a day from my wages, but I didn't care. In my mind, I was already packing. A few more hours, and I would have been gone."

Ross couldn't stop himself from holding her a bit tighter. The memory of returning home and finding her gone still weighed heavily on his heart, but it would have been so much easier to bear if she had left out of her own free will.

"Where did you want to go?" he asked when Irina remained silent.

"I don't know. Nowhere. Just. Away." She wrapped her arms around herself, trembling. "But before I could get to my chamber, Brad blocked my way. He told me that I shouldn't look so gloomy." She laughed, if one could call it that. "I had just put my mother under the earth, and he told me. He told me—"

She hiccupped, swaying back and forth as she tried to catch enough breath to continue. Ross moved with her, finding it

harder and harder to breathe through the lump in his throat.

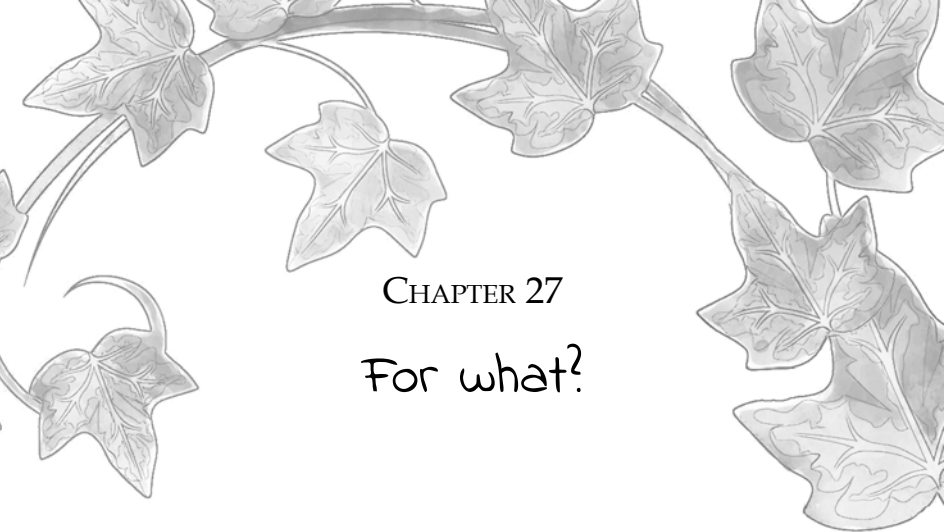
"He told me that he knew of a way to cheer me up, and..." Her fingernails dug into her arms. "He pushed his stupid fucking hands under my skirt and his stupid disgusting tongue into my mouth. I should have. I should have let him. What would have one more time mattered? But I couldn't. I just couldn't. I needed him to stop, just *stop*, and I grabbed the next best thing and threw it at him."

She withered in his embrace, feeling so very small and vulnerable all of a sudden. Ross pulled her closer, tucking her head under his chin as she buried her face against his chest. If he was honest, he had long suspected a story like this — he just hadn't expected all the little disgusting details that made him ashamed of sharing the same blood with those monsters.

"No one wanted to tell me what had really happened," he mumbled. "They made it seem like you had lost your mind and attacked him out of nowhere, but I knew it couldn't be true. I just knew."

"I never wanted to kill him." Her voice was muffled, the words tickling his chest. "But I'm not sorry for what I did."

"No." He was sorry that she had been driven this far, sorry for what it had cost her, but he did not mourn his brother's death. "Neither am I."



## CHAPTER 27

### For what?

Once again, Irina was all but confined to her bed. The boredom these unfortunate circumstances brought with them was familiar, but Ross tried his best to distract her. He read to her from his books, dug up every tale his schoolmates had ever told him about Caldeia, and put Lichen's teachings to good use, turning their meager resources into meals that were honestly better than what Irina had gotten at his family's house.

At least his diagnosis seemed to be true, and her ankle was most likely not broken. The swelling was going down. As long as she didn't put any weight on it, it hurt less with each passing day – and Ross made sure she did not even think of putting weight on it. Since she only used his crutches to go to the outhouse and back, she didn't feel too terrible about leaving him stranded for a few minutes at a time. He was a bit taller than her, so they weren't quite the right height, but when she was given the choice between using the bedpan *again* and hobbling ungracefully around, she would pick the latter every time.

Everything could have been just fine, if not for the lingering restlessness tormenting her every waking hour. On one of her trips to the outhouse and well, she waited for the water

in her bowl to be still before she leaned over it, watching the outlines of her face. Her fingertips traced the scar across her cheek, a scar she was reminded of every time she opened her mouth, every time she *smiled*.

It wasn't the only one. Scars on her chest and thigh, carved by the bandit's knife. Scars around her ankles after months of wearing the morlit shackles. Scars on her back from when the whip had drawn blood. Scars on her palms from when Greer had pushed her into the shards of a broken bottle, yelling at her to clean up the mess. The scarred area on her inner arm where Ross' father had thrown a pot of scalding tea at her for putting it down on the wrong side of his desk. The semicircular scar on her shoulder where Brad had fucking bit her.

All those people had left a mark on her, as if to remind her that neither her body nor her life truly belonged to her. Bit by bit, with every one of them growing stiff and cold and unable to lay hands on her ever again, she had been taking both back.

Her hand moved to her hip. She couldn't see the scars on her back, couldn't reach the ones on her shoulder blades without contorting herself. Not that she needed to. As if she could ever forget them. The lady of the house would never have stooped so low as to pick up the whip with her own hands, but she had ordered it done. Watched it, with an expression carved from stone and satisfaction in her eyes, seeing the whore who dared to get raped by her husband punished.

Ross had been so shocked to hear about it. Would he accept one more death? One last strike? With the harvest festival come and gone, he had wanted to be on the road already, but what would a few more days matter? It wasn't like there was anyone left to use the hunting lodge and discover them.

"Ivy? Are you all right?"

She shook her head so her hair fell over her cheek and picked up the crutches, hobbling back inside. The door was



another struggle, first getting it open wide enough to shuffle through and then pulling it closed behind her without falling over. She was relieved when she was back on her mattress and gladly handed Ross his crutch so he could check the fishing nets.

"Sorry. I got distracted."

While he was gone, Irina stared into the fire, feeling as restless as the flames licking up the wood. It hadn't even been a lie. She was distracted, but not by a leaf swaying in the wind or the water sparkling in the sunlight or whatever else sometimes reminded her how beautiful the world was. She was distracted by the slowly solidifying plan to kill his mother, and no matter how often she told herself that he would understand, she wasn't at all sure about that.

"Got a big one," he announced on his return, the bag around his shoulder dripping wet. "And I fetched some of those garlic herbs Lichen showed us. I think it's gonna be a good dinner."

He must have interpreted her miserable expression and lack of enthusiasm wrong, for he sat down with an overexaggerated sigh and patted the bag.

"When we're in Caldeia, we'll eat the sweetest fruit cakes and the freshest vegetables and the finest meat for months until one day you will say: You know what, Ross, I really miss fish and oats."

When she didn't react to his teasing words, his expression turned serious.

"What is it?" he asked. "Does it hurt? Do you need another dose?"

Irina avoided his gaze, staring at her lap. "What if I kill her, too?"

"What?"

Her head jerked up, but the confusion on his face seemed genuine. He hadn't heard her. She could pretend she had said

something else, join his jokes about fish, anything to keep this conversation from happening.

"What if I kill her, too?"

Ross swallowed. "Who?" he asked in a tone that told her he already knew the answer.

"Decima."

She couldn't bring herself to call the woman his mother. 'Mother' was the woman enduring all the hardships to keep a roof over their heads and food in their bellies, not a monster blaming a little boy for the circumstances of his birth. Not only had she done nothing to earn this title, the word held an intimacy that made it hard to talk about cold blooded murder in the same sentence.

"Why do you want... to kill her?"

Irina clutched the blanket on her legs. He would understand. He had to.

"She's cruel. And mean." Irina winced. Gods, why did she sound so pathetic? "She knew what he was doing and she punished *me* for it, because she couldn't punish him. He looked at me wrong, and she had me beaten for missing a stain. She saw me leaving his room, and she had me whipped for serving a meal too cold."

Was the new girl walking around on eggshells already, equally scared of the master of the house's attention as of his wife's wrath? Was she growing a fear that refused to fade, her heart beating out of her chest at the sound of a raised voice, flinching at the movement in the corner of her eye? Irina didn't even know anymore if she needed it for her own revenge or to save the maid. All she knew was that she wanted that wretched woman dead.

"Even if your father is dead. Even if they're all dead. She will keep her money, and she will continue to abuse her power."

"Okay. I... I understand." His hand went to the bag, pulling uselessly on the strap before he remembered to lift it over

his head. "I need to prepare. The food. I should. Focus. Why don't you rest a bit? And we can talk more. Later."

The way he had to force out every single word spoke volumes about his internal struggle. Irina pulled the blanket to her chest so he wouldn't see how her fingers dug into her bruised forearm, the pain not enough to drive away the sudden dread creeping up on her.

"Would you stop me?" she whispered.

"I can't stop you."

It was an answer. It wasn't the one she had hoped for.

\* \* \*

Ross focused on gutting the fish, and cutting the herbs, and putting everything into the pot at the exactly right moment. Anything to keep himself at least marginally distracted while Irina's words repeated over and over in his mind.

His mother wasn't a good person. He knew that. How could he not? He didn't doubt a single word Irina spoke, on the contrary; he was sure there were still loads of things she hadn't told him, and probably never would. And he had promised Irina he'd be on her side, so why couldn't he just accept her need for revenge one last time? What was so different this time?

He should have loved all of his family, should have been horrified at the thought of each of their deaths. But Brad had been an accident, and Mel's murder might very well have saved his life, and his father would only die if he took his herbs to force himself onto yet another victim, and he was making excuses after excuses, wasn't he?

He was an accomplice in the murder of his family, and it was better not to forget that.

They ate in unusual silence. Ross was glad when Irina claimed that she was tired and, after one last and long trip

outside, crawled under her blankets. He took his time cleaning up, scrubbing the pots and bowls until they shone and chopping wood until long after sunset, deliberately ignoring the remains of the pile Lichen had prepared for them before their departure.

When he finally returned inside, it must have been after midnight, and Irina was fast asleep. He took his pill and piled his blankets next to the mattress. He never took Irina's willingness to share the bed for granted, especially not when she was already upset. Whether *he* wanted to with her words still echoing in his mind was another question, and one he pushed aside. If it came down to choosing between Irina and his mother, he knew what he would have to pick. His heart just needed to accept it.

As it turned out, his heart was much less willing to accept it than his mind. With every day that passed, Ross found it harder and harder to breathe. He had no illusions that she had just forgotten about her murderous plans, even if this time, she didn't talk to him about her strategy. Perhaps she could sense that he didn't want to know the details, but if she was aware how deeply uncomfortable he was, she didn't let it show.

Every time he wanted to bring it up, his tongue choked on the lack of arguments he could offer. He had no other reason to beg her not to do it than that he didn't want her to. Would she care that the thought alone made him feel sick, no matter how often he told himself that she was right? That he wanted to cry when he imagined the hands he loved so much kill the person he should not love, yet somehow did?

"I think it's fine."

Ross snapped out of his thoughts and back into the present where Irina took a careful step, one hand resting loosely against the wall. For a few days, she had already only used

one crutch, leaving him free to come and go as he pleased with the other.

"Still hurts a bit, but I can walk, and we already lost so much time. Tomorrow, I can —"

"Irina."

"—go back and finish this, and the day after, we can be on our way to Caldeia. Do you think you could let me keep using —"

"Irina."

"—the crutch for that? You understand the map Lichen drew better —"

"Irina, *please*."

She snapped her mouth shut and cast him a wary glance.

"Please don't do this."

"What?"

"Please don't kill her."

Irina moved as if to cross her arms but stopped the movement halfway through, opting for keeping one hand on the wall instead. She was not half as steady on her feet as she pretended to be.

"Why?"

"She's my mother."

"So what?" she snapped. "No one gave a fuck about mine. We couldn't afford a healer. We could barely afford her medicine and to *eat* at the same time, and after all they did to her, they threw her away like trash and let her die."

Her eyes lit up with an eerie purple glow as she jabbed her finger in his direction.

"You know what your *mother*" — she spit out the word — "said when she found out? She said that I can finally focus on my work again, because I don't have a reason to go out anymore. So what. What," she screamed, her voice almost breaking, "makes that monster more deserving to live than *my* mother?"

Ross flinched at the sheer volume of her voice. "Nothing. Nothing." This was going as badly as he had feared, and then some. "I'm sorry. For everything. I am. But I can't. If you do this, then. I can't stay." He had to fight his tongue and throat to get the words out. "I can't look at you and think how you killed her. I just. I just can't."

"So now you want to stop me?"

"I can't stop you," he admitted. "I can only beg you. And. If you do it. If you kill my. My mother. I will leave."

"Then leave. I don't need you."

She took the crutch from where it was leaning against the wall and threw it at his feet. Even upset as she was, she didn't throw the crutch with enough force to damage it, nor did she hit him.

"I don't need anything from you. Not your help. Not your pity. Not—" Her voice broke, and she turned away from him with a quick motion.

"Ivy..."

He reached out, his fingertips brushing her arm. She whirled around and slapped his hand away. For a moment, her eyes widened in shock over her own actions, then her expression hardened.

"Don't call me that." The purple glow of her eyes flickered. "You're right, you *are* a shit friend. I thought you of all people would understand me. That you would be on my side."

"I do," he said softly. "I am. It doesn't change anything."

"Fine."

This time, she didn't turn quickly enough for him to miss the tears in the corners of her eyes. For a moment, she stood stock-still, shoulders trembling—then she jerked her head up, straightened her back, and left the lodge, slamming the door closed behind her.

Ross didn't look out the window. He didn't want to see her leave. Instead, he stared into the flickering flames, watching

them die like his hope that she might reconsider, until the fireplace was as cold and empty as his heart.

\* \* \*

Irina smacked a low hanging branch out of her way, wishing it would offer her at least a bit of resistance instead of making fun of her rage by swinging gracefully back into position. She couldn't stomp, and she couldn't kick at things—she couldn't even slam her arm against something unless she wanted to risk incapacitating herself any more than she already was.

Who the fuck did he think he was? Choosing that monster of a woman over her. After everything they had been through, he should be on *her* side. He could shove his big, sad eyes, and his softly spoken words, and his apologies. He had made his choice, and she hers.

In her fury, she hadn't taken anything with her other than the object she needed to fulfill this last task: a metal wire she had found in a corner of the lodge. During those days with nothing to do but staring up at the ceiling, she had practiced grasping the ends with her magic strongly enough to lift a log off the ground. What had worked with Greer might work with Decima as well. She wouldn't have to go near her. If she was lucky, she wouldn't even have to enter the house.

It would still be risky. Even if people believed Greer's death to be an accident, they would be on edge, not to mention the uproar the demise of Ross' father would have caused—if he was dead yet. He probably was. Two weeks would have been a long time for him to keep his dick in his pants.

As the sun began to set, the growing pain in her ankle fulfilled the task of distracting her from her anger. She would have needed the crutch for a few more days, but he could keep that thing, and everything else for that matter. She had swallowed the urge to ask him to leave her at least some of

the money, perhaps one of the bags.

She didn't want his charity. He wouldn't be able to carry everything by himself, and she would make do with whatever scraps he left her. If she had nothing but the clothes on her back, if she had to sleep at the side of the road, if she had to scavenge the autumnal forest for food, it would still be better than last winter. Anything would be.

Of course, nothing would be as nice as the future they had dreamed of together. Without him, there was no point in going to Caldeia, or any of the other big cities. Those streets had no place for people like her: poor, outcast, with no education to speak of. Her best hope was to find a farm of some kind, where she could offer her work and not her body in exchange for a place to sleep, food, and a few coins at the end of the month.

Ross, on the other hand. Without his family undermining his efforts—and without Irina dragging him down—he had a bright future ahead of him. She had no clue about things such as this, but that degree of his must be something to be proud of, something that would open him doors. If he wanted someone to help him with his housework, he could hire them. He didn't need her. He hadn't needed her in a long time.

With the village already in sight and the light not yet fully gone, she couldn't afford to think of him and get distracted. Her focus had to lie on getting to the house unseen, and opting against wearing the tattered remains of her black clothes turned out to be a fortunate decision. In the waning light, her brown pants and undyed shirt blended in better with drying grass and half barren trees than the black fabric would have.

"I don't care! This house? It's cursed."

Irina flinched at the raised voice, sinking deeper into the evergreen hedge that hid her from sight. Ten steps in front of her lay the back door of the mansion, allowing access to the kitchen through a storage room. And in front of the door



stood the old housekeeper, gesturing wildly with one hand while holding a scarf around her shoulders with the other.

"First those poor kids. Then the master's brother. And now the master himself." Her voice rose to a wail, and Irina couldn't stop a smile from creeping onto her face. That answered her question of whether the poison had been effective. "The gods have forsaken this family."

Whatever the person inside the house said to get the housekeeper to stay, it wasn't very effective.

"Money won't help me when I'm dead. Engul had the right idea." She pulled the scarf tighter around her shoulders and straightened up to emphasize her words as she declared, "I'm not staying a minute longer."

Without a look back, the housekeeper stomped off while Irina watched motionless. So the porter had left, too. There couldn't be much of the staff remaining—she wouldn't be surprised if the maid had legged it as well. Time to put the lady of the house out of her misery of having to fetch her cup of tea herself.

She waited for a few more minutes to make sure the back door remained closed before she crept past, looking for illuminated windows to tell her where her target might be. Luck was on her side; the only lit window was on the ground floor, belonging to the tea room, and a young tree grew not far from it. Dark orange leaves clung stubbornly to spindly twigs, shielding her from sight as she settled on the highest branch that looked like it would hold her weight.

The curtains were open, the light inside bright enough to allow her to see with little chance of being spotted in return. In a room filled to the brim with expensive knick-knacks and pointless trinkets, her target sat on the spotless sofa of cream colored velvet, crying in the arms of a woman Irina had a vague memory of seeing before.

That was unfortunate, but not really a problem. Sooner or

later, one or both of them would go to sleep. She only had to wait. Granted, waiting would have been more pleasant had she thought to bring food or water, but she had held out longer than a few hours without either. And once she got back to the lodge, Ross would —

Be gone. He would be gone.

The emotions she had pushed aside came crashing back down on her. He was *gone*. She would never see him again. Never again listen to his voice when he read to her from his books or explained a topic so complicated, she gave up trying to understand. Never again help him with stretching while he reminded her to take her own pills. Never again wake up with his arm around her, for a moment able to forget the cruelty of the world.

The people inside the tea room turned blurry, which didn't matter, since they didn't move at all. Neither did Irina. Her head rested against the bark of the tree as she stared at the window without seeing anything. She had made her choice, but with her righteous anger snuffed out by sorrow, she was no longer so sure whether it was the right one.

Was this pitiful figure sobbing in the arms of her sister — it had to be her sister — worth losing the only good thing in her life? If she did this, she was going to hurt him, because for some reason, he still loved his mother enough to want her to live, despite her treating him like an inconvenience at the best of times. If she did this, she would throw away all their plans for the future, all their promises of being there for each other — and for what?

By the time the sister went to bed, leaving Decima sitting alone and forlorn on the sofa, Irina's bloodlust had vanished. The prospect of spending the rest of her life without Ross filled her with such despair, her desire for revenge paled in comparison.

She snuffed the part of her that wanted to run right back to the lodge. The white moon was new tonight, and the light of the waxing blue moon was not nearly enough for her to find the way. She couldn't afford to get lost or hurt. Perhaps she should have found a better place to hide, but somehow, she couldn't tear her gaze away from the window.

Finally asleep, Decima had dropped to the side, mouth open, hair unkempt, and clothes disheveled. Two weeks ago, the mere sound of that woman's raised voice had been enough to send her heart into a frenzy. Now, Irina watched the lines grief and tears had left on her face and the occasional twitch surely brought on by distressing dreams. The woman she had feared so much was a mere shadow of herself. Even if she didn't kill her, she had gotten her revenge.

With no other choice than to wait for dawn, Irina remained sitting in her tree. The leaves offered her at least a little protection from the chilling breeze, but it wasn't nearly enough. Her teeth wouldn't stop chattering, and even though she hid her hands in her armpits, her fingers slowly turned to ice. The cold left her unable to doze off for more than a few minutes at a time, and when the night finally came to an end, she was as sore as she was tired.

A sliver of gray painted the sky near the horizon, and the roosters in the village announced a new day. Inside the tea room, the door was pushed open, and a maid Irina had never seen before entered. Spotting the lady of the house, the maid froze for a moment before she hurried to Decima's side, gently shaking her awake.

Whatever Decima's reaction, it couldn't have been too harsh, for the maid helped her sit up properly and brought her a glass of water with no hint of hesitation and only concern on her face. It must be the light of dawn making it harder to see what was going on inside, for that cold-hearted beast surely could not have uttered the words *thank you*.

Irina closed her eyes. If she hadn't decided so already, now it would be too late for her revenge anyway. It was time to go home. Her fingers were frozen, her back and shoulders aching, her butt all but numb. She slid off the branch and gritted her teeth against all the little aches, feeling lightheaded from the lack of food and ready to kill someone for a drop of water.

She had to get out of here quickly, before the rest of the village woke up and someone spotted her. Limping across the browning meadows rimmed with frost, she headed for the nearest edge of the forest. Her ankle, too, wasn't too happy about having spent the night sitting in a tree, but the pain wasn't important. Hunger and thirst weren't important. The only thing that *was* important was to make it back to the lodge before she lost Ross forever.



## CHAPTER 28

# The curtains are yellow

Despite her best attempts to hurry, the sun had already risen above the trees when Irina arrived at the lodge. The pain in her ankle was worse than it had been in days, and despite the chill in the air, she was bathed in sweat and out of breath.

“Ross?” she called out as she opened the door.

Only silence answered her. With growing despair in her heart, she entered the lodge, taking in all the signs telling her that she was too late: the hearth without a fire, the fishing nets and traps piled in one corner, the stacks of fabric on the table, and the single crutch leaning against it.

She dragged herself to the mattress and sank down. Her legs prickled the moment her weight was off them, and tears gathered in her eyes. She wanted to hear his voice. She wanted to feel his embrace. She wrapped her arm around the blanket and hugged it. Not even a full day without him, and she already didn’t know how she would bear the loneliness.

After a few long minutes of self-pity, she angrily wiped at her eyes. No. It wasn’t over yet. He couldn’t have left before the morning, so he was at most a few hours ahead of her. She could still catch up with him.

Ignoring the pain, she struggled to her feet, feeling the dizziness as her body protested against the interrupted rest. Her body would just have to deal with it. She stumbled to the table, grabbed the backpack he had left her, and looked around.

Gods, she was so tired, everything was blurry. She rubbed her eyes and took a shuddering breath, trying to focus. She needed to pack. Everything that looked remotely useful had to come with her; clothes and knives, fire steel and tinder box, the block of soap and the brush meant for horses, as well as every scrap of food and the rest of the flour. She checked the storage room under the floor, picked up a couple of the dishes, and rolled up her favorite blanket – Ross' was already gone – to tie it to the backpack, pushing back her worries about the steadily increasing weight.

He had left her too much; too many of the coins, all of his pain medication, and the only water skin. As she filled it at the well, she wondered if he had even taken any water with him. Enough food? Enough coins to get him to Caldeia? She doubted it. Why was this fool so damn stubborn and so damn selfless?

She had to find him. With a groan, she hoisted the backpack onto her shoulders and grabbed the crutch, turning her back on the place that was no longer a home without him.

A few hours later, Irina watched the position of the sun with dismay. The shadows were growing longer already, and she had barely left the first village behind. Ross wasn't a fast walker, but she couldn't be much faster. Between the weight on her shoulders and her aching ankle, she all but hobbled along.

Walking out on the open road was unsettling. She tried to shake the feeling of eyes on her, of people following her; hunting her for what she had done. She reminded herself that no one but Ross *knew* what she had done. Everyone who had

ever known her thought she was dead, and she was so far from the village she had grown up in, no one would recognize her anyway.

Still, every time she met another traveler, she stiffened, hiding her face in the shadow of her cloak's hood. Some people greeted her with a silent nod, which she returned, others ignored her completely – which she also returned. Luckily, she remembered the first two villages Lichen had drawn on the map in Ross' notebook, so she didn't have to ask for directions. If she hadn't found him by the time she left those behind, she would need a better plan anyway.

Her wrist and shoulder ached, not used to using the crutch for so long, and her ankle forced her more and more often to take a break. It wasn't overly warm, but she was bathed in sweat, and her waterskin was already almost empty. As she took another sip, her feet stretched out in front of her, her worries flared back to life. Had he really taken no water with him? There were occasional streams next to the road, but would he actually pause and struggle with walking off the path to drink?

She had to find him. Irina pushed herself off the fallen log and moved on, scanning the horizon for any sign of life, anything that looked like a lone wanderer leaning on a crutch like she did. The straps of her backpack cut into her shoulders, and the added weight made the pain in her ankle so much worse. She ignored both. Just a bit longer. Just a bit further.

One step turned into dozens, one minute into hours. She didn't stop anymore, fearing that she wouldn't get up again if she did. Her gaze, torn between focusing on the ground so she wouldn't stumble and scanning the road ahead, fell on a building in the distance. If it was an inn, she would have to rest there for the night. It was getting too late, and she was too exhausted to keep going.

One last time, she gathered her strength and pressed on. In the slowly fading light of day, she thought it was yet another log at the side of the road, tempting her to take a break. As she came closer, though, the shape was off; too smooth and too flat and too lumpy, the texture of fabric and leather rather than bark.

Forgotten was the pain as she started to run, crutch out of sync with her steps and gasping breath out of sync with her hammering heart. Next to Ross, she fell to her knees, wondering for a terrible, unbearable moment whether he was dead.

He was lying on his stomach, pinned down by his backpack, with his left arm trapped under him and his right hand wrapped in dead stalks of thin, brown grass. The side of his face was caked in mud, his eyes closed.

Her backpack slipped off her shoulders and fell away unnoticed, giving her the freedom she needed to reach for him. Her fingers stroked his dirty cheek, trembling as much as her voice. He was still warm, and he was still breathing, and he was still *alive*.

"Ross?"

She could see the effort it took him to open his eyes. His left eye pointed inwards, making him move his head from side to side, brow creased as he tried in vain to focus on her.

"It's okay. It's okay." She stroked his chin, adding touch to her voice. "I'm here."

No point in asking him what had happened when he looked at her like this. With one hand, she cradled his head, using the other to unclasp her cloak and push it under his cheek. She had to free him from the backpack.

The first strap was no issue, but the muscles of his left arm were so stiff, much more than usual. She massaged his arm, moving it slowly until she could slip the second strap off, allowing her to roll him onto his side. He watched her with an expression somewhere between confusion and trust.



"Are you hurt?"

His lips moved, but he made no sound. A quick glance revealed no obvious injury, so she plucked the waterskin off her backpack and supported his head as she helped him drink.

When the waterskin was empty, she looked him over, more thoroughly this time. His clothes were wet, his body caked with mud, and he smelled of urine, but she couldn't see any blood. That was good. It had to be.

"Do you know what happened?"

Not even an attempt at a reply this time. Irina bit her lip and leaned back, allowing herself the first deep breath in what felt like an eternity. The air smelled like rain. It didn't matter what had happened—what mattered was that he needed a fresh change of clothes and a warm place to sleep. She just hoped he would be able to walk, because she couldn't carry him; she probably couldn't even drag him.

"Everything's gonna be fine," she mumbled, putting her still shaking hands to work. Even if he would be able to walk, he wouldn't be able to carry his pack, so she tied it to hers, all but doubling the weight. "There's a building ahead. It might be an inn." Even if not, she would beg for shelter for the night—a stable, a shed, anything. "We'll get there, and then you can rest."

He offered no resistance as she pulled him up with her and slipped his crutch over his forearm. At least he seemed to be able to sit without help for a moment. She kept an eye on him as she gathered her backpack and the second crutch. When she helped him to his feet, his left leg didn't carry any of his weight, and his fingers twitched with little tremors.

"Come here." She bumped her side against his arm. "Let me put your arm around me."

Lifting it when his muscles were tight like that couldn't be pleasant, but he needed the stability his crutch gave him, so she couldn't grab his right arm. She bit her lip as the additional

weight settled on her injured ankle, but she made no sound. Using the crutch had been the right decision.

Step by painful, exhausted step, the light in the distance grew brighter. When Irina saw the wooden sign next to the road, she could have cried with relief. A smiling sun pointed them in the direction of the inn. They would be able to rent a room without having to beg for mercy, and without feeling bad for overstaying their welcome. They didn't need a night; they needed a whole week, at least.

In her attempt to get the door open, she dropped her crutch, cursing under her breath as it wedged itself in the doorway. That damn thing could stay there for all she cared. She pushed Ross inside, almost whimpering at the feeling of warm air on her skin and the smell of hearty food in her nose.

The inn's main room housed half a dozen tables, a counter, and a large fireplace with a roaring fire. Behind the counter stood a plump woman with rosy, round cheeks and a pastel yellow apron that matched the pastel yellow ribbons in her braided, strawberry blonde hair.

"Oh, dear." Her eyes were wide as saucers as Irina came to a stumbling halt. "Are you all right?"

"We—"

Irina froze. Shit shit shit, she hadn't thought about their story at *all*. Was it safe to give a reason for their travel? She definitely couldn't use his real name; they would be lucky enough already if no description of his missing person had come this far.

"Were you attacked? We used to have a real problem with bandits around—"

"No. No!" Gods, the last thing she needed was for someone to fetch the guards. "He just. He fell. He isn't feeling well. My brother and I, we— We walked too far today."

Irina pulled Ross with her as she approached one of the chairs, nudging it out from under the table so she could make

him sit on it. Without having to make sure he didn't collapse, perhaps she would be able to scrape enough willpower together to make it through this conversation.

"Does he need a healer?" the woman asked.

"No. We need. Rest." Her words came out more desperate than intended. "Just. A bed. And some warm water. Please," she whispered.

"Of course, of course. Henley?" the woman called into the kitchen opening up behind her. "Dearie, would you make sure the room's ready, please?"

A second woman appeared, at first glance the exact opposite of the one behind the counter. She had short, dark hair, and was wearing plain, dark pants and a tight brown shirt, partially unbuttoned and spanning over muscular arms and shoulders. She gave Ross and Irina a calculating look before snatching one of five keys off a wooden board. With a limp, she walked out from behind the counter and entered the hallway to their right.

Irina hoped it wouldn't take too long to prepare the room. She knew she would hate herself for it in a moment, but she let the backpack slide off her shoulders, pushing back the thought that she would have to pick it up again.

"That's my wife, Henley, and I'm Faerla." Faerla smiled. "Let's get you set up. How long do you want to stay?"

"I don't know."

How much money did they have, and how long would the journey to Caldeia take, and how much would a room cost there? She would have needed Ross for all of those questions, but unfortunately, he was very much not available to answer them at the moment.

"How about we start with three days, and you'll let me know if you want to stay longer?"

"Okay," Irina mumbled. "How much... does it cost?"

"Let's see."

Faerla scribbled some numbers onto a small blackboard, humming under her breath. "Let's make this quick. You can pay me tomorrow morning. A couple of meals... And you can use the well and the laundry room... How about..." She turned the blackboard around.

Without any clue of which prices were appropriate, Irina merely nodded. She would have agreed to anything to finally get off her feet. The half-open door let in a chilling breeze, so she dragged herself to pick up the dropped crutch and hobbled back to Ross with it.

Henley returned, announcing, "The room's ready." Despite her limp, she approached Irina with quick steps and offered her the key. "Let me help you?"

She cast Irina a questioning look, hand hovering over the backpacks, but Irina was too exhausted to protest. No matter the fact that all their belongings were in those bags, she was much more concerned about getting Ross into the room in one piece. His weight alone was almost too much for her, but she got him to his feet and coaxed him to follow their host to their room, the door of which Henley held open for them.

"I picked this room because it's on the ground floor." Henley put their bags down and leaned Irina's crutch against the stool serving as a nightstand. "No stairs. Not as warm as the ones above the kitchen, so I left you two extra blankets, and I'll be back with your water in a moment."

Irina could have cried with gratitude. As sparsely furnished as the room was, it had all they needed; a bed with a nightstand on each side, a table with two chairs and a burning oil lamp, a chest, and a dresser with an arrangement of bowls, cups, and pitchers on top of it. There was even a worn patchwork rug on the floor, and thin, yellow curtains hung in front of the windows.

She helped Ross sit on a chair but waited until Henley had brought the water as well as two cups she put on one of the

nightstands. As soon as the door clicked shut, Irina crouched down in front of Ross.

"Ross? Hey? Can you look at me?" When he turned his head so his right eye was facing her, she forced herself to smile and placed her hand on the clasp of his cloak. "Tell me if you need me to stop."

Only when he nodded did she remove the cloak, finding the fabric beneath clammy and cold. No wonder he was shaking from head to toe. She swiftly took the layers off one by one, having to remove his brace to get the stiff, mud-caked pants off him.

The bucket of water by the door was pleasantly warm. She poured some of it into a bowl, grabbed the washcloth from the dresser, and got to work. As the dried dirt came off, the shallow scrapes she uncovered on his chin and cheek prompted her to put the washcloth aside and run her fingers through his hair, checking his scalp for injuries. When he leaned into her touch with closed eyes, she took a bit more time than strictly necessary, combing her fingers through his hair to get a few dried grass stalks out.

He was clearly completely exhausted and frozen to the bone; they both were. Satisfied to have found no injuries, she continued washing him, glancing up from time to time, since she wasn't at all convinced he would truly be able to tell her to stop. When she reached his legs, a tear ran down his cheek, and Irina pulled her hands back.

"Are you all right?"

His nod was stiff, and he didn't look at her, but she decided to continue. She needed to get him to bed. While washing his legs, she frowned at the patch of rubbed raw skin where the clasp of his brace met his shin, and she tried to be extra careful so she wouldn't hurt him more.

When she poured the dirty water out of the window and went to fetch clean clothes, the belt holding the two backpacks together

had pulled itself too tight. Of course, her knife was somewhere *inside* her backpack. With strength and patience fading quickly, she tore at the buckle until she finally got the bags apart and snatched the first shirt-shaped wad of fabric she found.

"Here."

He let her put his arms through the sleeves with no resistance, but the tightness of his muscles reminded her that he couldn't possibly have taken his pill for the night, and probably had forgotten the noon one as well. Luckily, the bottle was quickly found, and he took the offered pill before she led him to the bed.

Sitting behind him, with his back against her chest and one of her arms holding him upright, she picked up one of the cups. The soup inside smelled delicious. She made sure the temperature was all right before putting the cup to his lips, coaxing him to drink. Every sip he took was a small victory. She was sure he had barely eaten today, if at all.

"Ivy."

The sound he made was close enough to her name for her to recognize it. She put the cup away and wrapped her arms around him, feeling once more how stiff he was. She had to tell him. He had to know that she hadn't betrayed him.

"I didn't kill her," she whispered. "I couldn't." As he relaxed against her, she held him tighter, indefinitely glad that she hadn't added to his pain. "I won't leave you."

His head dropped against her shoulder, and the last of his strength seemed to leave him. Irina eased him down onto the mattress, stroking his still-damp hair and pulling every available blanket over him. They did nothing to stop his shivers. She should wash up and go to bed as well, but she couldn't tear her eyes off him. If he had taken another path. If she hadn't spotted him. If he had hurt himself when falling. If anything had gone ever so slightly wrong, she would never have seen him again.

How could she ever have thought her revenge was more important than him? Her fingertips hovered close to his face, but she didn't dare to touch him, afraid it would wake him up. He needed his sleep. If she was honest, she wasn't so far from passing out herself.

She gritted her teeth as she put weight on her foot one last time to hobble across the room and lock the door before she changed her clothes, throwing the dirty ones onto the pile with the rest. In a matter of minutes, she washed her face with the now cold water and drank her cup of now cold soup. Dizzy with exhaustion, she finally crawled under the blankets with him, leaving the oil lamp burning on the table.







## CHAPTER 29

# Taking it slow

Ross fought through the remnants of unsettling dreams, driven by the overwhelming feeling that something—that everything was off. The surface he was lying on was too soft, the air he breathed didn't smell of dust and woodfire, the muffled sound of voices reached his ears, and his body hurt as if someone had broken half of his bones.

When he finally pried his eyes open, his heartbeat picked up pace while he stared blankly at whitened walls and plain furniture bathed in warm sunlight. He didn't know this place. All he remembered was walking on the road, and he definitely was no longer on the road. He also was no longer wearing his traveling clothes.

Where were his things? His crutch, his medicine, his money? He tried to jerk up, only to freeze at the weight across his waist. Irina. As long as she was here, everything was all right. He let his eyes fall closed, leaning into her warmth and the rhythm of her calm breaths.

As he drifted between dreams and reality, more memories trickled back, bringing tears to his eyes. The endless road. Their fight. The cold of the muddy ground seeping into his clothes while he was too weak to get up.

But Irina was back. They could still build their future together, pick up the shattered pieces of his dreams he had left behind in the lodge. As beautiful as that thought would have been to drift off to, his leg spasmed, and he flinched. The weight of her arm vanished, goosebumps running down his back from the lack of her warmth.

"Ross? Ross!"

A touch on his hand made him flinch again, and he groaned as his muscles protested against the movement. It took his mind a moment to catch up with the fact that she was suddenly in front of him, but when it did, he snapped his eyes open.

"What's wrong? Does it hurt?"

Of course it hurt, and he didn't fucking care. The only thing he cared about was seeing her. Taking in her unkempt hair and her sad brown eyes and her hand hovering in front of his face, as if she didn't dare to touch him.

"Ross?" she asked with worry in her voice.

He opened his mouth, but he didn't know what to say. Not even her name wanted to leave his lips. He really had to pull himself together and regain control over his body, starting with his good arm. He took her hand and was rewarded with a smile so warm and relieved, it made his eyes burn.

"Why don't I fetch some breakfast and pay for our room, and then we'll—" She caressed the back of his hand. "We talk, and if you can't talk, then I'll talk for two, okay?"

And just like that, he was crying again, and he hated himself for it, because his tears wiped that beautiful smile off her face.

"I can stay," she offered, but Ross shook his head.

She gave him a long look before she asked, "Do you want me to get food?"

He nodded.

"Okay." She squeezed his hand as she pulled herself closer, pressing her lips to his forehead. "Take it slow. I won't be long."

He already missed her warmth the moment she took her hand back, but it was probably for the better if he got a few minutes to himself to gather his thoughts – not to mention that he was starving, and the idea of breakfast made his mouth water. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them again just in time to see her limp towards the door.

“Mh.”

At the noise he made, she froze, turning around. Talking didn’t quite work yet, but the glare he gave her must have been clear enough, for she lowered her gaze to her ankle.

“I’m fine,” she mumbled.

“Chr.”

“If I take the crutch, I can’t carry our breakfast.” She raised her hands, showing off two presumably empty cups in one and her purse in the other. “I’m fine, really.”

“Hm.”

Stubborn. Worse than him. She had a second working arm, so she could ask for a tray or basket, but this was a fight he was too exhausted to fight right now. He could, however, glare at her until she pulled the door closed behind her.

At least the annoyance had done a good job of clearing his mind. He stared at the ceiling while he flexed the fingers of his right hand and wiggled his right foot. Once he was positive that at least half of his body would do what he wanted, he sat up and looked around. It was a cozy little room, and from the real bed to the cheerful curtains a definitive upgrade to the musty hunting lodge. On the table, he spotted the bottle with his pills, and next to the nightstand leaned the crutch that would allow him to get there.

Irina’s words echoed in his mind as he shuffled closer to the crutch, but he pushed them aside. This *was* taking it slow. He only needed to walk a few steps. And if he hobbled those few steps only to be completely out of breath when he dropped down onto a chair, he made it.

He pinned the crutch between his legs so it wouldn't fall over and snatched the pill bottle, taking two of the pills at once. His backpack lay on the table where Irina must have dug through it in search of something. Unfortunately, hers was on the floor and out of his reach, and he had left his pain medicine for her in the hut.

With the crutch, he poked half-heartedly at the strap of her backpack. It would be rude to dig through her belongings, even if technically, most of the things inside belonged to him. She would surely understand, though. Not that it mattered, because he couldn't get the backpack close to him anyway.

The door opened.

"I'm—" A step. A huff. "Back," Irina said. "Didn't I say you should take it slow?"

"I wa. Walked." Gods, why did his tongue feel like a foreign object in his mouth. "Very. Sl. Slow. Ly."

The smile on her lips took the seriousness out of her glare. A whiff of warm spices reached him, and he sniffed, trying to guess the contents of the bowls she carried.

"What. Do you. Have. There."

She grinned, putting down the bowls with a flourish.

"Oats."

With a groan, Ross leaned his head against his crutch, and Irina laughed. She dropped a linen bag on the table and took the second chair.

"It's actually good. If you have milk. And spices. And fruit. And—"

"Mm."

If one knew at which end to grab a ladle, maybe. Well, he would have all the time in the world to learn, to build upon the basics Lichen had taught him. They had a future ahead of them, and not even plain oats in water could have ruined his mood, though the meal Irina pushed in front of him certainly lifted it.

For a while, they ate in silence. With every spoon he raised to his lips, Ross could feel her gaze on him. She didn't even try to hide it. Every time he looked up, she smiled, but it was a smile full of sadness.

He didn't want her to be sad. They were together again, and in a few days, he'd be as good as new, which would give her ankle time to heal as well. Or was there another reason for her to be sad? Had he imagined last night's words?

"Wh. Why. Did," he started, hoping she would finish his question for him if he spoke a bit slower than strictly necessary.

"Why did I change my mind?"

He nodded, his heart thumping inside his chest.

"I sat outside her window, waiting to catch her alone." Irina stared at the table in front of her. "I was cold and miserable, and I thought about coming home to you, and—" She raised her head, tears shimmering in the corners of her eyes. "I realized I wouldn't. That you would be gone. They had taken my past, and I was about to hand them my future as well."

She pushed her arm across the table, grasping his left hand. Soft, warm fingers encompassed stiff, cold ones.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice was close to breaking. "For what I said. I didn't want to lose you. And I didn't want to hurt you, but now you're hurt, and it's my —"

"No." It was hard to glare at her with tears in his eyes, but he tried. "Not. Your. Fa. Fault."

His words didn't seem to convince her, but she stopped arguing and returned her attention back to her bowl. She didn't let go of his hand as she continued eating, even if that meant having to hold the spoon with her left. Between bites, she made good on her promise of talking where he couldn't, telling him about the housekeeper's dramatic exit, the state she had left the lodge in, and the couple that ran this inn.

When their bowls were empty, he nudged her and nodded in the direction of her backpack.

“Bag?”

Irina pulled it closer with her foot and lifted it onto the table, pulling on the straps so she could open the backpack wide.

“What do you need? Socks?” When he shook his head, she continued digging, offering him object after object until she froze. “Shit,” she muttered. She pulled the bottle of painkillers out and held it up. “You need those, don’t you?”

Ross nodded.

“Sorry. Sorry. I should have asked you.”

He tugged on her arm and shook his head. *He* could have asked *her* as well, but he hadn’t. It was better to take those with food in his stomach, anyway.

“Okay.” Her smile looked forced. “Let me get you some water.”

He shook his head and raised his spoon.

“Really? They taste terrible.”

With a grin, he wriggled the spoon at her. They did taste terrible, but a spoonful was swallowed much faster than a whole cup of terrible tasting water.

She took the spoon and counted ten drops. Ross counted with her out of habit. When she gave him a questioning look, he opened his mouth; no point in taking the spoon himself and hoping his body would play along.

It really did taste terrible. Irina laughed at his grimace, and the sound healed a part of his heart. He just wanted things to go back to normal—no, better than normal, because if he was honest, their normal for the past few months had been pretty shit.

Irina piled their bowls and spoons and nodded at the bed. “And now back to bed with you.”

He raised his eyebrows at her but otherwise didn’t move.

“You’re stiff as a board,” she explained. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Of course, she had noticed. With a groan, he slipped his crutch on and pushed himself to his feet. She couldn't let him suffer in peace for a single day, could she? He hobbled the three steps towards the bed and let himself fall backwards, arms splayed.

"Not like that. On your stomach, please."

Well, that was new. He let go of the crutch and wriggled around, the pillow under his face muffling his groan when he finally managed to turn. Breathing was nice, though, so he pushed through the tension in his neck and looked to the side, watching the perfectly blue sky outside the window.

The mattress shifted. Irina's hands found their way from his shoulders to his neck, warm and tender. A little whine escaped his lips as she began exerting pressure, loosening those muscles that made his head feel like it was about to burst.

From his neck, she moved back to his shoulders and around his shoulder blades, putting her palms flat on his skin to share some warmth in between. The room blurred in front of Ross' half-closed eyes.

"So you're not. To. Tor." Stubborn tongue. He huffed, and Irina paused in her movements until he managed to get the word out. "Tormenting. Me."

She laughed and resumed her way down his spine.

"Might just break off your leg if I try that now."

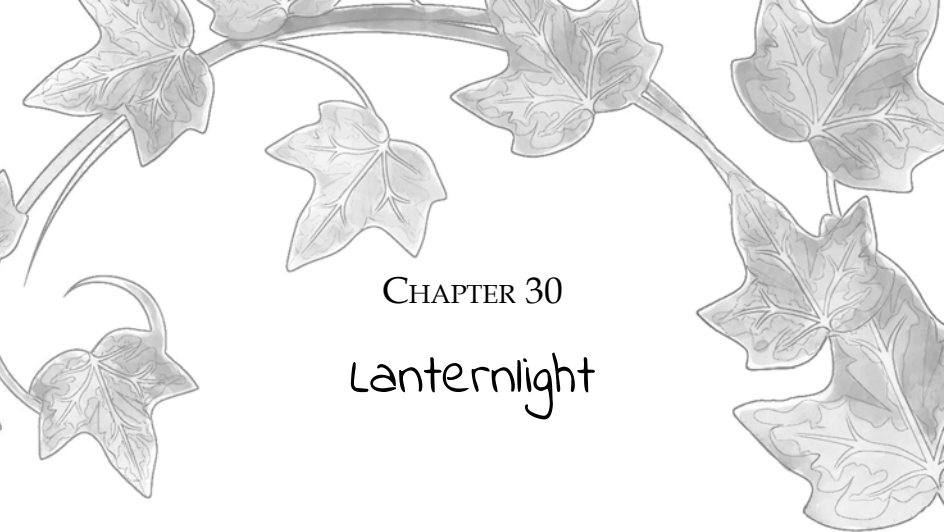
While that was unlikely, he wasn't going to complain about getting a massage instead. She still moved his arm and leg, bending knee, elbow, and ankle, but not to the full extent she normally did. Trusting her fully, he let himself fall into her touch, as relaxed as he could be.

He was half asleep when she put his leg down and pulled one of the blankets up to his shoulders. Ross cracked his eye open, watching her stretch out next to him. She was back. She was really back. He had to touch her to make sure it wasn't just a dream.

When his left hand twitched closer to her face, she grabbed it and pulled it to her cheek, pressing a kiss onto his palm on the way.

“Get some sleep,” she said, and Ross did.





## CHAPTER 30

# Lanternlight

For two days, they only left their room to wash their clothes, fetch food, and visit the outhouse. Irina massaged and stretched Ross in the mornings and was content to spend the rest of the time napping alongside him. She didn't grow bored easily anymore; not when she listened to his heartbeat, and watched the clouds pass by outside the window, and had a future she could dream of.

On the third day, she ventured into the backyard to enjoy the light of a beautiful and warm autumn sun, while Ross, tired of sitting in their room all day, made his way into the main room. It was there she found him when she came looking to fetch dinner. He was talking to Henley about something she didn't bother to eavesdrop on as she slid into the kitchen to find Faerla.

So soon after the harvest festival, few people were on the roads, and fewer still stopped by for more than a quick drink. Only at lunch time, one or two tables were sometimes occupied, otherwise the inn was pleasantly empty, and even that was almost too much for Irina. Lichen had been weird, in an endearing way that made it easy to exist alongside them, but Faerla and Henley were so terribly *normal*. Not for the first

time, Irina wondered if she would be able to fit in once they reached Caldeia, but such thoughts were futile. She had to. For Ross.

When he talked to people who actually treated him like a person, he was happy unlike she had ever seen him before, and she wouldn't be the one to condemn him to a life as a hermit. She just had to figure out how to be normal. How not to flinch at each shadow, and not to panic when someone addressed her, and not to get overwhelmed when more than one person spoke at once.

An audience of two was much less scary than a whole city, so she forced herself to join him more often when he sat in the main room and talked to their hosts. They welcomed her warmly, but with every new topic the three of them broached, Irina felt more and more out of place. She had never gone to school, never seen a play, never read any of the classics. She had no opinion about laws she barely knew or taxes she had never handled. She couldn't answer questions about her favorite leisure activities, and one light-hearted joke about falling in love for the first time ended with such an uncomfortable silence, they dropped the topic immediately.

To his credit, Ross always noticed her discomfort, but even though he did his best to steer the conversations away from her, Irina was glad when a week after their arrival, he declared himself fit to travel. She doubted that he had fully recovered, but they had a long way to go, and she could keep an eye on him and make him rest before he exhausted himself again.

With more food in their bags than she would have thought possible to carry and heartfelt well-wishes in their ears, they finally set out on the road again. The weather was lovely enough, and they made good progress, even if Irina insisted on taking lots of breaks and stopping early in the day.

As they approached Caldeia, the roads got more crowded

and the inns more expensive. They purchased food at farms they passed instead of cooked meals in the evenings, and more than once, they had to sleep in a common room, sharing a bed because Irina barely managed to close an eye with so many people around.

When, after roughly three weeks of travel, the outskirts of Caldeia finally appeared on the horizon, Irina was relieved and intimidated at the same time. For half a day, they walked through fields and farms, some clusters as large as a whole village, before the city walls came into view. They loomed over them at three times a person's height, and guards at the gates watched the endless stream of travelers and merchants with a bored expression.

And the city! Irina couldn't stop staring. Endless roads paved with flat, smooth stones that glimmered in the sunlight. Houses upon houses upon houses, more than she could count, more than she could have ever imagined. Sprawling parks in which bushes and trees were turning to flaming colors and the last late flowers bloomed. Storm drains and street signs and merchant stalls and fluttering banners and over everything a constant hum like she had stepped into a giant, human-made beehive.

She clung to Ross' arm. Everything was so bright, and so busy, and so *loud*. No matter where she looked, people moved; some tall, some small, some in a hurry, some strolling along, some holding hands, some carrying things, and some weren't even *human*. A person a good two heads taller than the tallest human, with dark brown bark for skin and golden petals for hair, caught her attention, and she almost tripped over her feet staring after them.

Someone pushed past her, and Irina flinched. This was. Too much. Everything was too much. She hadn't even been here for an hour and she already felt like hiding in one of the smaller streets, curling up, and pressing her hands over her ears.

“Ivy?”

She whirled around. Ross was looking at her with that worried frown on his face, whatever question he had asked her no more than a faint echo in her mind. Even through his worry, his eyes glowed like they always had when he had talked about Caldeia, just so much brighter. She couldn’t ruin this for him. She pulled the corners of her mouth up, but she knew she wouldn’t get a word out. Instead, she looked to the side, as if admiring the colorful painted facade of the house next to them.

“Let’s find a place for the night,” he said.

At least she thought he said it. It was hard to focus on a single sound through the mess of impressions fighting for her attention. Irina nodded, which must have been the right answer. She stared at the ground as they continued to walk, her skin prickling with the need to find some quiet, to get away from prying eyes.

This was not how her dreams had looked, but he wanted to be here, and she wanted to be with him, so she would have to learn how to deal with it.

\* \* \*

Caldeia was more impressive, more magnificent, more colorful than Ross could have ever imagined—and it was painfully clear that Irina hated it. She clung to his arm like her life depended on it, jumping at every loud noise, at every quick movement.

Why hadn’t he thought of that possibility? He had *seen* how shy she had been around Henley and Faerla. For someone who’d grown up in a place like their village, a real city had to be overwhelming, and that was without spending months trapped underground without daylight or human contact.

If he had thought of it, he might have reconsidered the

destination of their journey and picked a smaller town, but it was too late for that now. Winter was approaching fast, and they didn't have the funds to risk getting stuck for days or weeks in one of the overpriced inns along the main trading routes.

If she truly couldn't be happy here, they might be able to leave come spring, but for now, they would have to make the best of it. This city had to have some quieter areas. The parks they passed looked idyllic, with meadows and walkways, benches and pavilions, ponds and streams, and various areas he supposed were meant for different kinds of recreational activities.

He pulled Irina into a smaller street, trying to recall what he had memorized of the city's circular layout. To hopefully find employment, he would have to keep close to the center, for the merchants and guilds and businesses that might have need of an accountant kept close to the palace district. Unfortunately, finding affordable accommodations would be next to impossible there. His classmate had told him of inns with rooms so expensive, the costs for a single night could have fed a family for a month.

Staying too close to the outskirts wasn't a much better idea. There was no way he'd be able to walk that far, every single day. They would have to find something in between, perhaps away from the major roads and tucked away between residential houses. If they were lucky, a smaller inn might not only provide more privacy but also have cheaper prices. With this hope in mind, he decided to zig-zag around the center in a wide circle, adjusting the distance depending on what they found.

Irina still clung to his arm, but she didn't squeeze his hand in an iron grip anymore. Keeping her away from the biggest crowds had been a good decision.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Her nod wasn't very convincing. Ross tried for an encouraging smile.

"We'll keep off the main roads, and as soon as we find a decent place, we'll rest for the night."

Two hours later, Ross' shoulders ached, his leg kept failing him more and more often, and they hadn't found a place to stay yet. Irina steadied him with each step, even though she looked as exhausted as he felt.

First, they had wandered through an exclusively residential area, then they had somehow managed to walk in a circle, then someone had kindly pointed them in the right direction, but they had strayed too close to the center, and the prices he had inquired had been far out of their range. With the light of the day slowly fading, he was now willing to take the next place they found, costs be damned.

"Look. Isn't that a sign?"

He followed Irina's gaze as she squinted ahead, and his heart did a little jump. It definitely was a sign. If he closed his left eye to keep his double vision in check, he could even make out the name: Lanternlight.

"Let's find out if they're open."

The lantern giving the place its name dangled cold and dark next to the sign, but warm light shone behind the windows, and when he pushed against the door, it swung open on well-oiled hinges. Warmth and the smell of old furniture saturated in woodsmoke and years of served meals poured out and made him long for nothing more than a bed.

He stepped aside so Irina could follow him, closing the door behind her to keep the cold out. The room in front of them was much smaller than he had expected; barely half the size of his parents' banquet hall. A colorful mix of chairs gathered around three tables of various sizes, and two more stood next to a fireplace, the flames in which were the source

of warmth and light alike.

"Hello?" he called out when he spotted neither a person nor some kind of counter.

As the silence stretched on, he wondered if he had misunderstood the sign and wandered into the living room of someone with strange ideas about interior design. Before he could suggest to Irina that they should leave, wood scraped on wood, and a short person with spindly limbs and snow-white hair appeared seemingly out of nowhere, thick glasses sitting deep on their nose. Their age and gender were indeterminate; their mood wasn't.

"Whatcha want?" they asked with a scowl.

"Is this an inn?" Ross blurted out, too perplexed to remember his manners.

"Sometimes." They crossed their arms, as if their posture needed that gesture to become any more hostile. "I open for the festivals. More people than beds in this city some days. Since there currently is no festival, this is currently not an inn."

"I see." Ross' heart sank, but he tried to keep a smile on his face. "I apologize for the confusion."

"Mhm." They pushed their glasses up and gave him a scrutinizing look. "You're not from here, are you? Don't seem like city kids. Neither of you."

"No. We just arrived. I'm hoping to find work in the city, and we need a place to stay."

"And you decided the best place to search was as far as possible from the main road?"

"We were looking for something quiet," Ross explained. He didn't elaborate on his hopes of finding something cheaper as well. "As you said, we're not city kids, and all of this... It's a bit much for us."

They scratched their chin. As they stepped away from the wall, it became evident that they hadn't appeared out of thin

air, but walked up the stairs leading to a basement. They pulled the basement door closed behind them and walked up to Ross, somehow looking down on him despite barely reaching his chin.

"You two look all right. There's no festival until Winter's Heart, and that one isn't much for traveling, so I'll make you an offer. You can stay, but it's room only. You clean up after yourselves. You take care of your own meals. Less I see of you, the better. What do you say?"

"That depends on if we can afford it," Ross replied honestly.

"Normal rate is three silver a night. Let's say half of that, or... how about ten a week? Do we have a deal?"

That was more than Ross felt comfortable with, and much less than he had been quoted in similar establishments. Adding to that the fact that they would pretty much have the place to themselves, it was an offer he couldn't refuse.

"We do," he said. And, "Thank you."

They grunted. "Lemme get the key."

Said key was a heavy lump of iron tied to a gaudy length of braided fabric. At least it wouldn't be easy to lose. They held out the key to Irina and pointed past her to the wall opposite the fireplace.

"That way. Name's Caulle, by the way."

"I'm Ross. This is my sister, Irina."

Caulle nodded and led them through a narrow door and up a flight of steep stairs.

"There's two rooms; yours is the one to the right. At the end of the corridor," they said, pointing ahead as if the two-and-a-half steps of worn floor deserved that name, "is the shared bathroom, but seeing as you're the only one here at the moment, it's all yours. I have my own," they added as they glanced back over their shoulder and noticed Ross' questioning look. "Got any questions?"



Ross and Irina shook their heads in unison.

"I'll leave you to it, then. You can pay me tomorrow morning." They walked away without a second glance. Already halfway down the stairs, they called out, "Don't bother me unless the house is on fire."

Irina unlocked the door and pushed it open. The room was small and lacked such frivolities as curtains and rugs, but it was tidy and it had a bed, and that was all that mattered. Ross sank onto the mattress with a groan. As he closed his eyes, it felt as if the world spun around him and blood rushed in his ears. Gods, he was so tired.

While he tried to gather enough strength to undress, Irina took stock of the room, pushed their bags into a corner, and grabbed the oil lamp off its hook on the wall. She left the room for a moment, and warm firelight danced behind his closed eyelids when she came back, so Ross assumed that she had used the hearth downstairs to ignite the wick.

"There's water. It's just. It's coming out of the wall."

He cracked his better eye open. The lamp was back on its hook, and Irina held the complementary jug with both hands, a look on her face that could only be described as awe.

"Yeah." Ross grinned. Her joy and wonder were contagious. "I heard the whole city has water pipes." The school he had attended had them, too, and it was a luxury he had dearly missed every time he had returned home. "Once you get used to them, you'll never want to miss them again."

Irina laughed as she poured each of them a cup of water. Ross watched her with a smile on his lips. Perhaps things would work out. Perhaps this was the place for them. In the morning, he was going to start looking for work.



## CHAPTER 31

# Running out

"I can show you my —"

Ross' hand froze halfway on the way to his bag when the man across the desk cleared his throat.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Mister..." He cast a quick glance at his notes, which were suspiciously empty. "DeWitt. We currently have no opening for someone with your —" The pause was barely audible, but it was there. "Qualifications."

"I understand." Ross put on a smile that was as fake as the man's politeness and reached for his crutch. "Thank you for you. You. Your time."

He kept his head up high as he was escorted back to the entrance, the smile plastered on his face. This was going so much worse than he had feared. Three weeks, and he had nothing to show but rejection after rejection. He rarely ever made it past the reception, getting sent away with excuses and apologies that the position was already taken, and when he *was* invited in for an interview, he was treated like a curiosity more than like a prospective hire.

If it hadn't been his future at stake, he could have made a game out of betting what the next one would stare at: his eye,

his hand, or his crutch. The only thing none of them looked at were his graduation papers. It didn't help that his growing anxiety made it harder for him to keep his eye and voice steady, and that even though he took twice his usual dose, spasms ran through his left side at the most unfortunate moments. He *knew* it was worse when he was stressed. That knowledge did nothing to lessen his stress.

Only when the doors closed behind him did he feel like he could breathe again. The air was cool and crisp, filling his lungs and reminding him that his time was running short. He had broken down the gold coin so he could pay without raising suspicion, but the Lanternlight's discounted rate was still a lot for two people without income, not to mention that food was more expensive here than it had been on their travels.

Perhaps Irina had been more successful. After a week of hiding inside their room, she had started venturing out, first with him, then on her own. Only yesterday, she had insisted that she could earn some money while he was looking for employment. That there was always something to wash or clean. That she was *fine*.

She clearly wasn't fine. She was nervous, easily startled, and overwhelmed when faced with too much noise or more than one person at once. Cleaning dishes at a busy tavern, she would be surrounded by so much noise and so many people, yet that was what she had planned to do today. Ross hated the idea, but she had insisted, and they needed the money.

He stopped and leaned against a lantern pole so he could let the crutch dangle from its straps as he dug around in his bag. His notebook held the address of the tavern she had told him, which he read while deliberately ignoring the calculations of how long their money would last on the opposite page. At least the walk there would give him time to get his emotions under control.

The tavern he arrived at half an hour later was only a few blocks from their inn but much larger. Colorful pots filled with late blooming flowers adorned the windows looking out onto the street, a handwritten board announced today's meal options, and the hum of voices and laughter reached his ears even a few steps away from the door.

Ross pulled himself up the stairs to the entrance and stepped into warm air that was thick with humidity, smells, and noise. Since they had only one key to their room, they had agreed upon meeting around sunset and walking back to the inn together. He was a bit early, but perhaps she was done with her shift already. Ignoring the sticky feeling on his skin, he went straight to the counter, catching the attention of the burly man polishing glasses in front of a wall full of shelves filled with colorful bottles.

"Hello. I'm looking for..." Should he give her name, a description? "My sister. She started in the kitchen today. Washing dishes?"

The man snorted, and Ross' heart sank to his knees.

"About this size? Long, brown hair?" When Ross nodded, he added, "You're a few hours too late. Ran out..." He looked around as if the tables could answer him. "Around lunch time," he said. "Looked like she was being chased by a pack of wild dogs."

Fuck.

"Why?" Ross tried desperately to keep his voice calm and his expression even. "Did something happen?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." The man shrugged. "No explanation, nothing. One moment she was scrubbing away at a pot, the next she dropped her sponge and ran."

Fuck fuck fuck.

"Now if you don't want to order anything?" He paused long enough for Ross to fill the expectant silence between them with the shaking of his head. "If you find her, you can

tell her she doesn't need to come back. I don't think this is the right place for her."

Ross forced himself to give the man a half-hearted smile and turned around on the spot. Oh, how he agreed. He should have talked her out of it. No; she shouldn't have felt forced to go in the first place.

He stepped out of the tavern and looked at the darkening sky. Lunch time had been hours ago, and *he* had the key to their room. Driven by a deep seated sense of urgency, he walked as quickly as his tired legs allowed, hoping nothing more than that she was back at the inn.

She was not at the inn. Not waiting on the stairs in front of it. Not sitting in the dining room. Not hiding upstairs in the bathroom. With trembling hands, Ross pulled the key from his bag, knowing that she couldn't be inside their locked room. As he opened the door, he called out anyway.

"Irina?"

Nothing. His left arm spasmed as he limped back down the stairs, looking around once more as if she could have materialized in the few minutes it had taken him to check the bathroom. Of course, she hadn't.

"Irina? Are you here?"

Dread crept up, making it hard for him to breathe. Night was falling, it was bitterly cold, and she could be anywhere. What if she had gotten lost? What if she had gotten *hurt*? Against the protest of his exhausted body, he dragged himself upstairs once more. He snatched the glowing crystal off the table and a scarf off a chair, stuffed both into his bag, and locked the door behind him.

Stumbling out onto the street, with the last slivers of brightness in the sky fading fast, he realized how nearly impossible finding her would be. There were too many directions, too many streets, too many corners. Caldeia was a labyrinth.

He fought against the rising panic. She needed him to find her, and he couldn't do that if he couldn't *think*. A few deep breaths in, deep breaths out. His fingers squeezed the grip of the crutch. Searching without a plan would get him nowhere. He had to retrace her steps.

The last time anyone had seen her had been at the tavern, so he hurried back as quickly as his legs would take him, staring at the warmly lit windows that looked so much more inviting than the endless street cloaked in the shadows of the night. It hadn't been night when she had run, though. He tried to see the place through her eyes, how it would have looked hours ago. House upon house framing the street, warm sunlight on cold stones, the cluster of people and voices at her back driving her away from the tavern. To where?

He looked to the left. Scattered street lamps tinted the pavement in flickering orange, the glow brighter ahead where the street met one of the main roads. She would not have fled towards there, he was sure of it, so he turned to the right and began to walk.

"Ivy?"

He didn't dare to call her name too loudly, afraid to draw unwanted attention. It was questionable whether she would reply to him, anyway. Her instinct was to hide. Huddling under her blanket. Pressing herself into a corner. Sitting with her back against the wall, the stones so similar to the ones in the prison. That damn cell had been her cage, but it had also been all she had known for months. If the tavern had been too much for her, she would have gone for the familiarity of darkness and quiet, which also meant that she would have chosen smaller streets over bigger ones.

Clinging to the sliver of hope this conclusion brought, Ross picked up speed, entering the first side street he found. There were no more lamps to light the way, so he pulled out the crystal and pushed it between the crooked fingers of his left hand.

"Ivy?"

Where the crystal light spilled out between his fingers, it painted pale streaks into the night. He walked until the street met another—bigger and surely busy during the day. He looked at painted fences and streetlights, and his heart told him that she wouldn't have gone there.

If only his heart was right. Still determined, he went back to where he had come from and entered the next side street that looked small and dark enough to have been enticing to her.

"Ivy?"

A cat shot out of a hedge and raced soundlessly across the way in front of him, but that was the only movement he could make out. He walked to the end of the street, his heart sinking with each step.

By the time he entered the third street, his confidence was fading. What if he had gotten it all wrong? What if she had run into a completely different direction? He had no better lead to go on, though, so he searched street after street, walking back and forth in a steadily expanding area. Two times, he checked back at the Lanternlight, and both times, it was as empty as they had left it in the morning.

Cold crept into his limbs until he couldn't feel his fingers anymore, and his muscles hurt so much, he wanted to cry, but he kept going. Every time he crossed one of the bigger streets, he saw fewer and fewer people, until it felt like he was the only person awake. It was only a matter of time until his body would force him to end his search, but he refused to give up yet; not while she was somewhere out there.

"Ivy?"

His voice, too, had faded to barely more than a croak. With his right hand, he spread the fingers of his left hand, letting more light fall in front of him. Where before he had passed fences and hedges that lined tiny front yards, he was now surrounded by nothing but dark brick walls. This wasn't even a

regular street, he realized, but some kind of back alley.

He walked more carefully as he pushed on, shining his light left and right. Trash, broken crates, and discarded furniture littered the ground, and the occasional pothole made him cling to his crutch. What a mess. With a disgusted grimace, he walked past a moldy sofa and found himself at a dead end.

The two houses at his sides met the back of a third, a solid brick wall that blocked his way forward. A decorated manhole cover lay in front of his feet, shards of a broken glass bottle shimmered in the light, and a crumpled bag sat in the corner where two of the walls met, but otherwise, the space was empty.

His heart beat faster as he nudged his hand higher, spilling the light further.

That wasn't a bag.

"Ivy?" he whispered as he shuffled forward.

Her head snapped up, eyes wide in fear, and she instantly covered her face with a whimper. With a quick motion, he dimmed the light until it was barely enough to see the ground in front of his feet. Slowly, he shuffled closer until he stood next to her. When she made no attempt to get away from him, he dared to lower himself to the ground, careful not to touch her.

"Ivy. It's okay. I'm here."

Up close, he could see that she was trembling. She wasn't wearing her cloak. Whether she had forgotten it in the tavern or lost it while running, it was probably gone for good. Gods, how long had she been sitting there in only her tunic? She must be half frozen. He pulled the scarf out of his bag.

"Ivy?" Slowly, his hand crept towards her, fingertips brushing her chilled skin. "Come here."

Even though she shivered under his touch, he didn't let go. He couldn't wait for her to snap out of it, she had to get out



of the cold as soon as possible — and into the light. Blood had dried on her fingers and was still trickling from a few long scrapes down her forearm, and he only hoped — how absurd to call it a hope — that she had hurt herself in her distress, and that she hadn't been attacked.

When his arm reached her shoulders, she looked up, and this time, it seemed like she truly saw him. After a moment, she even leaned against him, which allowed him to drape the scarf around her shoulders before he pulled her even closer. The scarf was too small to be of much use, but it was better than nothing.

"It's okay. It's okay." For a moment, he soaked up the feeling of holding her, but she was freezing, and the night would only get colder, so he whispered, "Let's go back?"

Irina nodded. Together, they struggled to their feet, and they stumbled through the dark, and they shared what little warmth they had, Irina clinging to his left arm just like he clung to his crutch.

It must have been midnight already by the time they made it back to their inn. For the last part of the way, Irina steadied him more than she clung to him, but not even her help made it easier for him to climb the stairs when his left leg was all but refusing to move. Ross' hand shook as he pulled out the key, not from the cold, but from sheer exhaustion.

Entering their little refuge did feel a bit like coming home, trinkets and pieces of clothing strewn on every available surface turning this place into theirs. No matter what the next day brought, no matter how dire their future might look, for this night, they were fine. Warm, safe, and, most importantly, together.

Behind him, Irina stopped in her tracks. "I need..."

She ducked out of their room and into the bathroom. Ross dropped onto a chair with a groan. That was fair. He might

have to go there himself in a moment, but first, he threw bag and cloak on the floor and poured himself a cup of water to wash down his nightly pill. His stomach was rumbling, but he was too exhausted to feel truly hungry. They barely had any food left anyway.

Had Irina eaten today? He dug through the bag, finding nothing but a crust of bread, half a sausage, and a wrinkly apple. Armed with the bread and a cup of water, he sat on the bed, waiting for her.

When she returned, her face and her forearms were glistening wet. He took it as a good sign that she had washed herself. Less good were the fresh trickles of red running down her arm. He hobbled the one and a half steps to the table without his crutch, digging through the mess of their belongings until he found a strip of fabric, which he brought back to the bed.

"Let me see?"

She approached him slowly, with her eyes cast down. The wounds on her arm weren't too deep, skin scraped rather than cut or torn. One might have thought she had merely bumped into something, but he knew better. He sighed as he started to bandage it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be." With her help, he tied off the ends of the makeshift bandage. "It's not your fault."

"But—"

"No."

It didn't matter what had happened, how seemingly small the thing that had set her off. She couldn't control her reactions any better than he could control the left side of his body.

"Come here." He patted the mattress next to him before he took the cup off the nightstand. "Drink. Eat."

She took the cup but refused the bread, mumbling something about not being hungry. Ross was hardly in a position

to argue with that, so he left her sipping her water and went to the bathroom himself.

When he returned, Irina was already buried up to her nose in blankets. Ross crawled into bed next to her, wrangling his limbs under the blanket and putting his arm around her. When she snuggled against him, her hands grasping fistfuls of his shirt, his heart was so full of love and sorrow, he thought it might burst. His little Ivy. He wanted to hold her, to protect her, forever. At least for a few fleeting hours, he could.

"I have one more try tomorrow," he said, thinking of the address he had copied from a noticeboard tucked away half-way behind an overgrown bush. "Perhaps it'll work out. If not, I'll... I'll figure something out."

If the words sounded half as hollow as they felt on his tongue, it was no wonder Irina said nothing.

The sky was overcast when they woke up, matching their gloomy mood as they peeled themselves out of the blankets. Every muscle in Ross' body hurt, and he barely could get his left leg to cooperate. He downed two of his pills and a spoonful of his pain medicine, hoping it would get him through the day.

As soon as the drops kicked in, he begged Irina to eat something and changed the bandage on her arm, glad that the wound showed no signs of infection. In return, Irina put out his best clothes, helped him put on the brace, and followed him into the bathroom to shave the hint of a stubble that had decided to sprout on his chin overnight.

Ross looked at his reflection in the mirror as she turned his head this way and that, examining her work. He looked good, he guessed. Definitely not like he was on the run from the ghosts of his murdered family and had spent the past half year sleeping on the floor in a musty hunting lodge. But what did it matter if all people saw were the crutch and his hand?

Back in their room, she helped him get dressed, which gave him more time to get lost in his spiraling thoughts. If today didn't work out—and he had little hope that it would—he had to consider other options. At the current rate, their money would run out before winter was over, and he was starting to wonder how far exactly he was willing to go to keep that from happening.

"Can I come with you?" she asked as she closed the last button of his shirt. "I don't want to be alone."

"Of course."

If he was honest, he was glad to have a distraction. While Irina got ready, he double-checked the contents of his bag to make sure he had his notes and pills with him and walked down the stairs. It was way too cold for Irina to leave the inn in only her thin tunic, so he took a deep breath, gathered some of the courage he was going to need today, and called their host's name.

Caulle was displeased about the interruption, but at least they listened to Ross' plight. Instead of merely pointing him in the direction of an affordable place, they offered him an old coat a patron had forgotten in his room years ago, and despite their scowl and their crossed arms, they asked for much less money than it would have been worth. Ross paid gladly. When Irina came down the stairs, he put the coat around her shoulders, earning himself a surprised look and the first smile of the day.

Outside, fog blanketed the city and drowned out all color. Irina buried her nose deeper in her scarf. Neither of them spoke much as they followed the streets into the city center, even the sound of his crutch on the pavement somehow muffled by the weather. The roads became wider, the houses taller and more expensive looking, until they found themselves at the address he had noted down.

"This." He swallowed. "This is it."

Every other building he had entered during the past three weeks paled in comparison to the sprawling mansion of dark wood and marble. A myriad of windows adorned the outer wall, separated from the street by a wide patch of well-tended greenery. The entrance was impossible to miss; a wide flight of stairs broken up by hand rails, with a ramp on one side, and a much less steep one on the other, leading down along the wall instead of directly onto the street.

Ross' legs trembled as he walked up the ramp, letting his crutch dangle from his forearm in favor of clinging to the much sturdier railing. This was so far out of his league, it wasn't even funny, but what other choice did he have? The worst that could happen was yet another rejection, he told himself as he pushed the door open and stepped inside an entrance hall that was every bit as magnificent as he had expected, and then some.

The wooden floor was so polished, he wouldn't have been surprised to spot his reflection, richly colored tapestries and gold ornaments adorned the walls, and a giant chandelier made of gold, glass, and glowing crystals illuminated the room. A bored looking, middle-aged woman sat behind the counter, twirling a strand of her hair. When she spotted them, she let go of her hair and pushed her glasses upwards, giving him a critical look as he stepped up to the counter.

"He." He cleared his throat. "Hello."

Ross' right hand squeezed the crutch while the fingers of his left hand twitched. He pushed his arm down, hopefully out of sight. He was too nervous, the awareness of how much there was at stake for him impossible to ignore. His muscles tensed up as if he hadn't taken his morning pills, and he had to coax his throat and tongue to form the words one by one.

"I'm here to apply. For a job offer. The listing said you're looking for an Acc. Accoun. Tant."

"He-he-hello," the woman mocked his words. "Sweetie, I don't think you're —"

"Jessica!"

Ross flinched so hard, he had to reach out for the desk to keep standing. While it hadn't been exactly a shout, the voice was loud and stern.

"What did I tell you about speaking to people like that?"

Carefully, Ross eased his weight back onto his crutch and looked to the side. The voice belonged to a man with brown skin and thin locs that were put up in a bun. He was wearing a buttoned vest over a silk shirt which was tucked into perfectly tailored pants, all in different shades of dark red and orange. His eyes, too, glowed in a deep orange. He must be a mage — an upset one, at that.

"He's not a client!" the woman protested. "Look at him. He's a —"

"If you finish that sentence, you can pack your things."

The color of his eyes spoke of fire — his tone of ice.

For a second, the woman's mouth hung open — then she snapped it shut and turned away with a barely audible huff. She aggressively started sorting papers in front of her, pointedly ignoring all of them. The man glared at her for a moment before he shook his head and turned towards Ross, replacing the anger on his face with a charming smile.

"I'm sorry about that," he said. "How can I help you?"

Ross scraped together the pieces of his courage and returned the smile. "I saw your listing. For an accountant."

The hint of a shadow crossed the man's face, and Ross' heart sank.

"I see. Well, the problem is —"

There it was.

" — the position was filled a month ago. Someone was supposed to take all the notices down but must have missed this one. I'm sorry."

Ross nodded mechanically, too tired to wonder whether it was the truth or yet another cheap excuse.

"Were you specifically looking for that position, or...?"

"Anything," Ross said. It sounded more desperate than he had planned, and exactly as desperate as he felt. "Anything."

"Hm." The man scratched his chin, giving him a long look. "Why don't you come with me and we have a little chat. I can't promise anything, but perhaps I can at least give you some recommendations."

That was better than nothing. Ross nodded.

"Before I forget, my name is Laurent."

"Ross," Ross said. No mister this, no sir that, just Laurent. This was surreal. "And this is Irina, my sister," he added.

Laurent's smile seemed sincere. "Nice to meet you." His nod in Irina's direction seemed sincere, too. "Let's go. That way. Unless..." He eyed Ross' crutch. "Will stairs be an issue? Then we need to take a slightly longer way."

Surreal. Ross shook his head. Assuming the man's office or wherever he wanted to talk to him wasn't in the attic, this building had only three floors, and he could handle that.

It turned out to be only one flight of stairs, which were also way less steep than the ones in their inn. Ross was barely out of breath when he arrived at the top, only for the view to take said breath away. Wherever he looked he saw dark, polished wood, thick, patterned wallpaper, and mounted glowing crystals, all in the same, warm yellow hue. Framed paintings and documents hung in the spaces between doors to both sides of the hallway.

Did every corner of this place look like it was drowning in luxuries, or had he managed to stumble upon someone important?

"Here we are." Laurent stopped in front of a heavy wooden door, decorated with carvings and sporting his engraved name in the middle, inlaid with gold. "Do you want to join

us," he asked Irina, "or do you want to wait outside?"

"I'll wait," she squeaked. She sounded as intimidated as Ross felt.

Laurent made an inviting gesture in the direction of three thickly cushioned chairs next to his office and opened the door. Ross had expected the office to be even more luxurious than the corridor, but all things considered, it was surprisingly normal. Sure, the furniture was heavy and probably worth a fortune and the chair he sat on was softer than anything his butt had touched in months, but the shelves were predominantly filled with books, and instead of framed pictures, a large map of the continent adorned the wall on the opposite side of the room.

"So. Tell me a bit about yourself." Laurent sat down and pushed some papers together, placing them face-down. "What kind of jobs are you looking for in general?"

Ross froze. The muscles in his calf twitched and burned. Seconds dragged on, each one a little eternity, and his fucking mouth wouldn't cooperate. He could have cried with frustration, if that hadn't made it all so much worse.

"If you've only seen that notice," Laurent started casually, as if the last minute hadn't passed in deeply uncomfortable silence, "you probably know little about this place. Why don't I give you a quick overview over what we do?"

Ross nodded. The movement was a bit jerky, but at least his body cooperated with that.

"The origins of the trading guild go back several hundred years—though back then, it wasn't called that yet. Technically, it's not even called that now, but no one ever uses *association of trade, customs and excise supervision* except for paperwork."

As he soaked up every single word, Ross felt himself relax. Laurent spoke calmly and slowly, but with the voice of someone who truly enjoyed the topic, making it almost possible to



forget that he only did it out of pity. He spoke about the origins of the guild, its history, the different departments, gave a quick overview over Caldeia's current economic situation, and ended with a description of his own position.

"But enough about me." Laurent leaned back. "Do you want to tell me about you? Or do you want me to go more in depth about our relations to the other guilds?"

Ross' eyes burned, not from shame this time. He recognized the offer of a way out for what it was, but he figured he had calmed down enough to try for a real conversation.

"Perhaps. Later," he said, testing his voice. "It's something I would like to take notes for."

When would he ever get the chance again to listen to the whole economic history of this city like that?

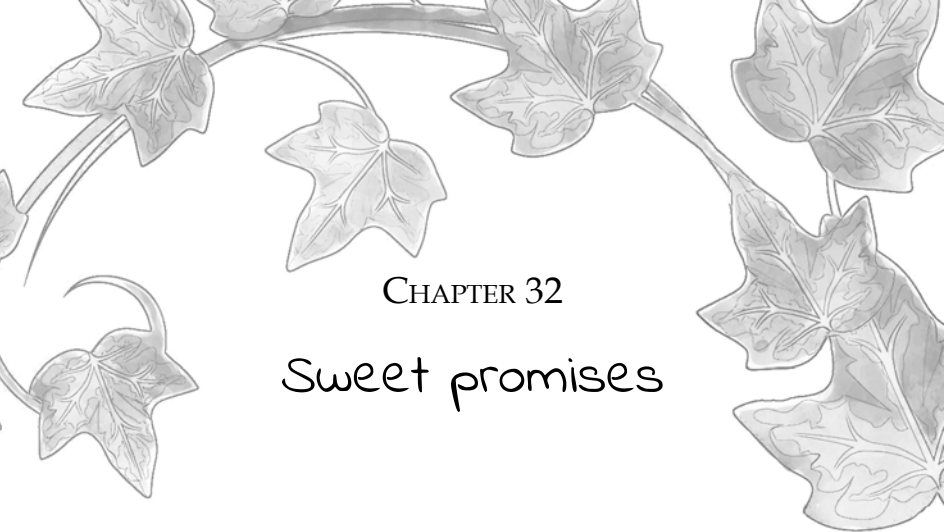
Laurent laughed, but it was a friendly laugh. "Which would make you by far the most captive audience I've had in years." He pulled a blank sheet of paper in front of him and picked up a pen. "All right. Let's start with your credentials and go from there."

"I had multiple private tutors. Until I turned sixteen." Ross took a deep breath. He could do this. This was what he had practiced in his mind, over and over again. "Then I attended the. The Georg-Ludovic School of Mathematics and Business. For five years. Graduated about a year ago." He paused, fighting down the too-familiar self-consciousness before he added, "With honors."

Laurent hummed. "Impressive. Which were your major fields of study, if I may ask?"

Ross' hand loosened its death grip around his bag and slid inside, reaching for the leather-bound folder.

"Business accountancy. I can show you my papers."



## CHAPTER 32

# Sweet promises

Irina stared at her toes. The dirty, worn shoes were so out of place among all this splendor. As out of place as the rest of her. Occasionally, she could hear muffled voices behind the closed door, but it was impossible to make out a single word.

They were taking a long time. That was a good sign, wasn't it? It had to be. That meant they had something to talk about. She hoped so much that Ross was lucky—not only because they needed the money, but also because with each passing day, she saw the light in his eyes fade. He had been so excited for their new life here. It was cruel that no one was willing to give him a chance.

A quiet tapping noise pulled her out of her thoughts and she raised her head. A woman was walking down the corridor, holding a long, thin stick in one hand and wearing a thick coat that was open at the front, showing a knee-length black and red dress.

The noise came from the tip of the stick, which she moved across the space in front of her with each step, tapping the ground on each side. Irina stared at the movement as it came closer, perplexed and glad about the distraction at the same time.

What was the point of—

The tip touched her shoe, the woman froze, and Irina understood.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, head inclined in Irina's general direction.

"No!" Irina blurted out. "It's my fault. I was lost in my thoughts."

The woman must be using the stick to find obstacles, and Irina was an obstacle.

Giving her a wide berth, the tip of the stick moved back to the wall, sliding along the edge until it bumped into an object that could have been a door stopper—if the door didn't open inwards. Apparently content with what she had found, the woman turned back in Irina's direction.

"Are you waiting for my partner? Laurent Beaufort," she added.

"No. Yes. I." Irina took a deep breath. "He's talking to my brother. I'm just waiting for them to be done."

"Ah. Sounds like it might take a while. May I join you?"

Irina made an inviting gesture before she remembered to use her words.

"Of course. The chairs to my left are free."

The hint of a smile lit up the woman's face. Her dark brown skin and equally dark brown eyes seemed to glow, framed by black hair in four tight, neat braids. She was beautiful, dressed in expensive, stylish clothes, and moved with a natural grace Irina could only be jealous of. Watching her, she felt even more out of place. Her finger found the frayed hole in her matted woolen coat, and she tugged it out of sight. Instead of complaining that it was ugly, she should be grateful Ross had managed to find a replacement so quickly.

"Are you clients of the guild?" the woman asked in the casual tone of striking up conversation for conversation's sake.

"No. They're talking about a possible job offer."

The woman hummed. "Didn't know he was looking to hire someone."

"I don't think he is," Irina said. "He just saved my brother from the rude receptionist and then offered to hear him out, is all."

"Jessica?" A frown pulled the corners of the woman's mouth down. "She's a piece of work." With a shake of her head, she offered her hand. "Name's Aurelia."

Irina took it and shook it shyly. "Irina. Do you work here as well?"

"Here? Gods, no. I'm a candy maker."

"A candy maker?"

"Mhm." Aurelia pinned her cane between her chair and the empty one between them, so she had both hands free to wrap around her knee. "I own a candy store down near the artisan district. Whatever candy you can think of, I sell it." She grinned. "Well, except for chocolate. There's a chocolatier down the street, and she wouldn't like the competition."

"So it's true," Irina mumbled.

"What is?"

"Ross said — My brother." Irina wondered if her cheeks were as red as they were hot, figuring that it didn't matter much, since Aurelia probably couldn't see it. "He told me this city is so huge, it has stores that sell only one thing. Like candy, or books, or... or... spoons!"

Aurelia laughed. "I'm not so sure about the spoons, but yes, there are lots of specialized stores. So you're not from here?"

Irina shook her head out of reflex but added a quiet noise to the motion.

"Mhm. Does that mean you've never seen a candy store before?" Aurelia asked in a tone that pretended to be scandalized.

"No." Irina added a theatrical sigh. "But now I want to."

"Well, if you're ever in the area, I can give you a tour. I can

even show you how it's made. Now that I have an apprentice, I deal with too much paperwork and too little sugar."

Talking to Aurelia about nothing in particular was surprisingly easy. A few times, Irina caught herself merely nodding along, which led to an awkward pause in conversation as Aurelia waited for her reply. After so many years of having to be as invisible as possible, it was a struggle to remember that she had to make herself heard.

"One time I filled out the order sheet wrong, and I ended up with—"

The door to Laurent's office opened, and Aurelia fell silent without revealing what had been wrongfully delivered to her store. Irina wouldn't have heard it anyway. Her eyes were glued to the doorway as the sound of Ross' crutch approached.

"All right." Laurent held the door open for Ross. "See you tomorrow morning at nine, then. I'll pick you up at the reception. Just ignore our little miss sunshine, I'll have a talk with her supervisor."

Did that mean...? The question must have been plainly visible on her face, for Laurent addressed her directly.

"The notice he saw was outdated, but I have been thinking about getting a personal assistant. Since we'd be working closely together, I would like to make sure it's a good fit, so we settled on a probation period of four weeks, starting tomorrow."

That was good news, right? She glanced at Ross, but he seemed a bit too overwhelmed for her to read his expression. She jumped up and took his hand, interlacing her fingers with his. It had to be good news. He gave her a small smile, while behind her, Laurent greeted Aurelia in a way that made it more than clear that this was not a business meeting.

"We're about to go out for lunch." With one arm wrapped around Aurelia's shoulders, Laurent pointed down the

hallway. "I would show you the way to our cafeteria, but I fear at this hour, all that's left is dry bread and the worst of today's soups." He lowered his voice. "It's beets. Never get the beet soup."

Irina's opinion of dry bread and beet soup would very much depend on the question of whether they would have to pay for it, but she nodded along anyway.

"So if your brother is busy tomorrow," Aurelia said. She held her stick—her cane, as Irina had learned—steady, leaving it to Laurent to lead her. "Does that mean you have time to visit me? You could come here together and I'll pick you up."

That sounded like a better plan than sitting in their room all day, staring at the walls and wondering if everything was going well.

"I'd love to," she said.

Walking side by side with Ross through the streets, Irina cast him stealthy glances. He was happy, yes, but she knew the look on his face. He was also about to let his spiraling thoughts pull him into a pit of worries and self-doubt, and she wasn't going to let that happen.

"Hey." She nudged his shoulder. "Look. There's a marketplace. We don't have anything to do the rest of the day, and we need food, so can we take a look? *Please?*"

Ross laughed at the exaggerated pleading tone of her voice. "Sure."

And what a distraction it was. Market stalls lined up like beads on a string, putting goods on display while the merchants behind the stalls called out to pitch their wares. Spices and kitchen utensils, jewelry and colorful bags, glass figurines and freshly grilled sausages, earthen dishes and wooden toys. She stopped in front of the latter, her gaze drawn to a wooden snake. Each segment of its body was sanded down

and painted in a different bright color, making it the cutest little rainbow she had ever seen.

Curious, Irina picked it up. It was heavier than she would have thought, and the segments of its body shifted to fit the shape of her hand. She gave in to the urge to pet the blue little head with two fingers.

"Finest craftsmanship. No sharp edges, no way to pinch little fingers." The merchant slid into her field of vision, making her painfully aware of how childish she was. "The paint is non-toxic and absolutely safe, even if the little one puts it into their mouth. You won't find this kind of quality anywhere else, and it's only ten silver!"

Irina's heart sank. She couldn't trade a week of shelter for a useless trinket, no matter how much it called to her. With a decisive shake of her head, she put the worm down, pulling her hands back quickly, afraid the merchant might claim that she had broken it and force her to buy it.

"Ivy?"

Her head snapped up, and she met Ross' questioning gaze. She pulled her lips into something resembling a smile and hurried back at his side, taking his hand once more. One day, perhaps. If they didn't have to worry about where to stay, or what to eat, or how their situation would look four weeks into the future.

As they continued to walk, she didn't pay that much attention anymore, soaking up all the shapes and colors more than looking at the details. Of course she would have liked a warm pair of gloves or shoes that really fit, but there was nothing that couldn't wait. Every useful thing she discarded as unimportant made her feel sillier for being sad about leaving the toy behind. She was glad when they reached the other side of the square, where the last row of stalls was dedicated to various kinds of street food, spreading such a delicious smell, Irina's mouth began to water.

"What do we want to eat?" Ross asked.

"I don't know." She squinted at the merchants but could only make out the one closest to her, and the greasy sausages that one offered weren't overly tempting. "Perhaps something with cheese?"

"Here." He pressed a bunch of coins into her hand. "Cheese sounds good. Pick something and find us a nice place in the park over there. I'll be right back."

"What? Why?"

"I saw a stall with notebooks back there, and I need a new one. I will have to take a lot of notes." He patted his bag. "All Lichen taught me is in there, and their drawings, and... It doesn't feel right. I want to start over."

She could see that.

"So." She grinned. "Oats with cheese?"

\* \* \*

Ross hurried along between market stalls as quickly as he could without tripping someone with his crutch, hoping that he wasn't too late. Past the painted ceramic dishes and the knitted scarves and... there it was! Tucked in between a wooden duck on wheels and a wooden board with holes filled with various colorful pins sat the worm-thing, just where Irina had left it.

On the last few steps, he slowed down to a casual stroll, taking a slow breath to calm himself. He didn't know much about life outside his parents' home, but one thing he knew was that visible desperation rarely changed the price of something in one's favor.

In front of the stall, he shifted his weight onto his right leg, reached into his bag, and counted out coins equaling ten silver without looking. When the merchant noticed him, he held out the coins and pointed at the toy with the crutch dangling



from his forearm.

"I'd like to buy this... worm?"

Having the exact sum ready made it clear that he remembered the price, which in turn made it harder for said price to spontaneously increase. Money exchanged hands, the merchant counted the coins, and an exaggerated smile appeared on his face.

"Thank you for your patronage. I'm sure your wife and child will love it."

Ross nodded gracefully. His wife and child. He picked up the worm, which really was kinda cute, and stuffed it into his bag. Ten silver was a lot, but anything that might give her back the tiniest bit of that innocent joy was worth the cost, and the payment Laurent had offered him for those four weeks alone would make sure they could afford to rent a room until spring.

On his way to the park where he hoped Irina would be waiting, he stopped at a stall selling leather-bound notebooks. It had merely been an excuse to sneak away, but he liked the thought of starting a new chapter of his life. Besides, it was probably for the better if no one who took a look over his shoulder could stumble over Lichen's plant sketches next to his notes of which ones were toxic, what their symptoms were, and what dose was lethal.

Lichen. He had to send them a letter soon. His eyes wandered over pretty stationery, but he decided against buying anything yet. That had time until things had settled.

Thinking about how unlikely it was that he would ever see them again made him sad, but if he got that job, and if he really succeeded in building a new life for himself and Irina, he knew they would be proud of him. He *wanted* to make them proud. He wanted to prove that he could be what they had seen in him. And he wanted to thank them, again and again, for saving Irina.

He found her on a wooden bench at the edge of the park, a wrapped bundle on her lap, head held high and scanning the crowd until she spotted him. Her smile warmed his heart, and he walked faster just so he could be by her side a moment sooner. The life he had always dreamed of was so close, and without her, he would never have made it this far.

"I got us pastries," she said, lifting one edge of the bundle. "They're both with cheese, but this one's with meat, and that one's with vegetables, and I thought we could share them and see which one's better."

Ross happily agreed with that suggestion, producing the half filled waterskin from his bag and sharing it as well. They ate in silence, enjoying the warmth the sunlight brought. The fog was gone, and everything looked so much more vibrant than he would have expected this close to the first snow. Or was it only his mood that made everything seem so much brighter and more colorful?

"So, which one was better?" he asked.

Irina inclined her head and looked at the empty packaging. "Meat," she decided, just as he said, "vegetables." They both laughed, and he reached into his bag and around the worm-thing to grab the small bottle of spare pills he always carried with him. This time, he only took one.

Irina leaned against him, eyes half closed as she looked out across the park, a dreamy smile on her face. Ross followed her gaze. This city was every bit as beautiful and full of wonders as he had imagined, and he was so glad Irina was slowly warming up to it. As long as she found enough quiet places and had a safe haven to return to, he had the hope that she could be happy here, too.

His hand wandered back into his bag. He had thought about waiting until the evening when they were back in their room, but the moment was just too perfect.

"Ivy?" he whispered as he pulled the worm-thing out.

"Hm?" She turned her head and froze. "What? No! Why? Ross!"

"I saw how you looked at it."

"But." Slowly, she reached for it. Her fingertips brushed over the painted wood, and only when he nudged it in her direction did she take it. "Why?"

"To say thank you. I wouldn't be here without you."

It had clearly been the right decision. Even now, she couldn't stop caressing the creases between its body segments, and she held it so gently as if it were a fragile piece of art and not a sturdy toy meant for the hands of a child.

"But it cost so much."

"It'll be fine. Even if those four weeks don't work out, Laurent promised to help me find something, because he..." Ross swallowed. A part of him was still overwhelmed. "He understands. Why I struggled. He looked past all that, and he is willing to give me a chance, and I just hope I won't let him down."

Irina held the worm-thing in the crook of one arm and wrapped the other around him. "You won't," she said, and for a moment, Ross could believe it.



## CHAPTER 33

# Exceeding expectations

The fog returned the next morning, but their gloomy mood didn't. They got up before dawn and shared a bag of sweet bread rolls before Irina insisted there was enough time to do the stretching exercises he had neglected those past days.

Afterwards, Ross sat on the bed, digging through his bag, while Irina combed through his hair with her fingers. Discarding everything he wouldn't need, he only kept his new notebook, the small bottle of pills, his coin purse, and his reading glasses. He would take their key as well, and she would come back to the trading guild once she was done marveling at a store full of candies.

Knowing that she was with a friend today would ease his worries and allow him to focus on his work. He smiled and looked up just in time to see her tuck the worm-thing under her blanket, the featureless blob of a head peeking out.

"Why do you like it so much?"

Irina raised her head, looking a bit embarrassed. "I don't know," she mumbled. "It's pretty? But in a way that... makes me happy when I look at it."

She traced the little thing's head, a wistful expression on her face.

"I forgot how colors look," she whispered. "It was always so dark. Even blood wasn't red when—" She snapped her mouth shut and grabbed her forearm, where under her ratty coat bandages were wrapped around sore skin. "Sorry."

"Ivy..."

He extended his arm, and she slipped into his embrace, tucking her head into the crook of his neck. What wouldn't he give to take the burden of all the horrors she had endured off her shoulders, but he couldn't. He could only keep her safe and make sure no one would lay hands on her ever again.

"Let's go?" she said.

Ross nodded.

Hand in hand, they followed the streets to the trading guild, their breaths adding little white puffs to the white blanket of fog that covered the city. The rude receptionist pretended not to see them as they entered and sat down in the waiting area, and both of them returned that favor.

Laurent and Aurelia arrived shortly before the large clock above the entrance announced the agreed upon time. He gave the receptionist a short nod, but Aurelia ignored her, too. Perhaps Ross hadn't been the only one on the receiving end of her mockery.

"Good to see you," Laurent said in greeting. "Ready to fight with some numbers?"

Ross nodded and pushed himself to his feet, though he hoped that it wouldn't be much of a fight. To him, handling them was more of a game—a game he was good at. It was time to prove it.

"All right, let's go." Laurent turned towards Aurelia, picking up her hand that rested lightly on his shoulder. "I'll show him the cafeteria for lunch, so see you tonight?"

"See you tonight."

He kissed her cheek before releasing her hand, fingers trailing through the air for a moment, as if letting go of her was

the hardest thing. Ross smiled to himself. Even if he had never experienced the feelings that might drive someone to such affections, love was a nice thing to witness, reminding him that most people weren't as cold and bitter as his family.

\* \* \*

Irina had trouble keeping up with the quick and determined pace her guide set, too busy looking around and soaking up all the impressions. She had never strayed this far in the direction of the artisan district, as Aurelia had called it. The streets were broader and cleaner, people moved around with less haste, and stores displayed their goods behind giant windows of clear glass rather than on tables outside.

Every time she fell behind, Aurelia paused, head inclined to listen for her steps. "Irina?" she asked more than once, and every time, Irina hurried to catch up.

"I'm here! I'm here. I'm sorry."

"Is it really such an impressive sight that you forget your feet?" Aurelia asked with good-natured humor in her tone.

"The village I'm from had a miller, a cobbler, and a general merchant," Irina muttered, eyes glued to the display of a store that seemed to sell nothing but painted vases. Vases! How many of those did one need in a lifetime? "When a traveling merchant came by, it was the highlight of the month."

Well; it had been for those who could afford their wares.

"Why did you leave?"

"Our parents are dead, and we wanted to start over. Get away from everything." It was the easiest lie for her to remember, because it was barely a lie at all. Ross was her brother in all but blood, and her mother and his father were indeed dead. "A friend told him of this place, and he was excited about all the possibilities it offered."

"And you? Do you like it here?"

"I don't know," Irina admitted. "It's. A lot. I hope I can get..." She trailed off, looking after another of those plant creatures, talking animatedly to a person barely half their size. If the gray hue of their skin peeking out between scarf and hat was any indication, they weren't human, either. "Used to it," she finished her sentence when she regained her speech.

Aurelia hummed. "Perhaps you need to find different things than him to be excited about. We're not in a hurry. Let me know if you want to look around."

She slowed her steps, her cane moving at a more leisurely pace. Sometimes, the tip of the cane searched along a wall, and sometimes, her free hand felt over a lantern post, but most of the time, Irina had no idea what she used to orient herself. Aurelia pointed out a store or two as they passed, one of them the chocolatier that, according to her own words, wouldn't be happy about competition. Irina barely had time to look at half the things in the window before she had to hurry to catch up once again.

"We're here."

Oh. Oh! Irina craned her neck, eyes wide. The two windows framing the entrance to the store were decorated with pastel garlands and wood-cut, painted snow crystals, strewn in between open bowls filled with the most colorful candies in all kinds of different shapes. Striped candy canes hung from thin threads, lollipops were arranged in a vase like flowers, and a low pedestal displayed a flat cake, the color somewhere between chocolate and honey.

"Come on in."

Irina basically bounced up the stairs, her excitement growing with everything she spotted. The three walls of the store were covered in shelves filled to the brim with identical glass jars, each one holding a different type of candy. Handwritten signs under each jar announced their names, but Irina was

too far away to make out the words. Her eyes wandered on, over the counter to the table in the middle of the room, laden with prepackaged bags, stacks of soft candy, and bundles of lollipops.

"Feel free to look around, and tell me if you'd like to try something."

"I don't have much money," Irina admitted.

And the few coins she had taken with her were meant for lunch, though looking at a jar filled with glistening red hearts, she was tempted to forsake lunch in favor of trying one or two of those.

"Oh no. You are my guest." Aurelia walked towards the doorway next to the counter. "Do you want to take off your coat? You can hang it up here."

Irina trailed behind her, slipping off her coat and hanging it on a hook on the wall next to Aurelia's coat. The backroom was less colorful, framed by closed cupboards and dominated by two large metal tables.

"Once Ianim gets here, I can show you how to make candy canes. Wanted to show him anyway. He's my apprentice," Aurelia added. "He only started a couple of months ago, but he's learning fast."

She walked back into the salesroom, automatically ushering Irina along, who tried not to stand in the way. While Aurelia took care of the counter, wiping it down and counting the change in the till, Irina wandered this way and that, admiring caramel bars, bonbons shaped like lemons, and rainbow swirls on sticks that looked like miniatures of her worm.

"What's your favorite fruit?" Aurelia asked after a while, apparently done with her preparations.

"I don't know. Apples?" Irina offered hesitatingly.

Her mother had sometimes brought them home in fall, frying them in dough and sprinkling them with sugar, and every memory with her was worth so much more than whatever



scraps of exotic fruits she had sometimes been given by Ross' family. If she was honest, she had never before been in a situation where she could afford having favorites.

"Hm. I do have some apple candies, but most of them are rather sour, and you don't strike me like someone who likes sour things." Aurelia inclined her head. "Am I wrong?"

"Isn't candy sweet?" Irina blurted out.

"Most is. But I also have sour candy, and salty," Aurelia said, gesturing in the direction of the table, "though that's more a thing with caramel and chocolate. Some herbal candies are tangy and might turn your tongue to ice, and a few are spicy, but I would not recommend them."

"Oh."

How was she supposed to decide? There had to be hundreds of flavors, most with names she had never heard before. She shuffled closer to the shelf, reading a few of the signs. Bleeding hearts. Rose petals. Raspberry cream. She had never had raspberries before, and she didn't know one could eat rose petals, and she hoped the bleeding hearts would not, in fact, taste like blood.

"How about I pick one," Aurelia suggested, "and you tell me if we're moving in the right direction?" When Irina hummed her approval, she turned towards the wall, fingers brushing over the signs under the jars until she settled on one. "Those are this year's special. Winter's dream. The base is pretty much regular caramel cream, but I've added a bunch of spices to the swirls."

Irina took the offered candy, star-shaped and creamy-white, streaked with swirls of pink and blue. It looked almost too pretty to eat. She didn't know what she expected, but when she put it into her mouth, she let out a little squeak. It was so sweet, and everywhere her tongue went, it tasted different, like milk and sugar and winter and the smell of the spices shelf in Ross' pantry. She would never have guessed such a

little thing could taste like *so much*.

The bell above the door chimed. Irina turned around to see a young man entering the store. He, too, was wrapped into a warm coat, and like Aurelia, he held a cane in one hand. The door fell closed behind him as he pulled a knit cap off his head and stuffed it into a pocket of his coat, revealing short, brown hair falling into deep blue eyes.

"Morning," he said.

"This is my apprentice," Aurelia explained before she called out to him. "Ianim! Get your apron ready. We have a guest today. This is my friend Irina, and today we'll show her how to make candy canes."

\* \* \*

That wasn't right. Even worse, that wasn't good. Worst of all, that wasn't *legal*.

Ross pushed up his glasses to rub his eyes before he resumed staring at the rows of numbers in the book in front of him. Laurent had given him the import tax records of one of Caldeia's biggest trading houses from a few years ago and asked him to prepare a report like he normally would.

Writing the report had been the easy part. It was what he had learned, taking those numbers, sorting them into categories, and adding them up. Line upon line filled the sheets of paper in front of him, and even though his hand was starting to hurt, no longer used to holding a pen this long, he had been proud of his progress. That was, until he had noticed the first discrepancy.

The different kinds of goods had different numbers, declaring the category they belonged to. And the different categories were grouped up in different tax brackets. Ross didn't know all of them by heart—not yet, at least—but he knew the major ones. That was enough to notice that a word he didn't

know, probably some kind of plant from the Sentient Wilds, had suddenly appeared with the tax number for raw food, one of the lowest tax brackets there was. Which wouldn't have been a reason for concern, if he hadn't seen the same word two pages back with the number for exotic construction materials, which were rated at almost triple the rate.

He skimmed the pages, skipping back and forth. Always three positions, always spread over the last week of the month, always strange names of things he didn't know, always listed as raw food or medicine. Most of them, he found in other spots throughout the book, always with *different* tax codes that were consistent otherwise.

It couldn't be wrong. Those reports had already been generated and signed off, which meant that either the person doing them had missed those positions, or someone had manipulated them afterwards. Neither was a good outlook, if he was honest, and the first day of his probation period seemed to be the worst possible moment to point out that someone—Laurent himself, for all he knew—had messed up. Possibly messed up. Perhaps he was missing something. He turned the page, and another, and another, eyes finding exactly what he expected, and what shouldn't be there.

"How's it going?"

Laurent's voice, though not particularly loud, made Ross jump so hard, he threw his pen into the air. It landed soundlessly on the soft carpet while his hammering heartbeat sent blood rushing through his head.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." Laurent picked up the pen and held it out to Ross, who took it with trembling fingers. "Are you all right?"

Ross forced himself to nod, aware that he wouldn't get a word out. He should just. Keep his mouth shut. Finish the report. Add up the numbers as they were, double check the sums, and hand his papers over. This was the chance they

needed to settle in Caldeia, to get through the imminent winter. Irina counted on him. She had been so hopeful, so happy. He couldn't fuck this up.

What if he was wrong? What if he made a fool out of himself, showing how little he understood of the real world? Perhaps some outlandish plant of the Wilds could be used as both food and building material. And what if he *wasn't* wrong? What if Laurent had messed up?

Gods, what if he *hadn't* messed up? What if this had been done on purpose? Ross' vision was too blurry to focus on the numbers, but he remembered most of them, and his brain calculated the differences all on its own. The sum it came up with was significant; significant enough to tell him that this wasn't a mistake, that someone was doing this on purpose, saving thousands by wrongfully declaring goods as something else.

"Ross? Can you hear me?"

Laurent's voice was barely more than static scraping over his racing thoughts. The more he told himself that he had to calm down, the harder it became to breathe, black spots dancing at the edge of his vision. Faintly, he was aware of the tension of his muscles, of his leg and arm twitching, but the much more pressing issue was the fact that he couldn't get his lungs under control.

"Ross?"

His shoulder burned as his arm tried to break free. Ross gasped for air, clinging to the pain to pull himself back into reality. Slowly, the darkness faded. He turned his head so he could look past the blackened left side of his glasses at Laurent, who squatted in front of him, holding onto his left wrist. His grip was firm, but not painful; the only pain came from the spasms still running through his leg and arm.

"Are you back with me?"

Ross nodded, and Laurent let go.

"Sorry. Wasn't sure if I should touch you, but you were about to slam your arm into the table."

Ross opened his mouth, and moved his tongue, and slowly, ever so slowly, got it to cooperate, saying, "Th. Thank. You."

"Do you need anything? To lie down? Water?" He spoke slowly, giving Ross the chance to reply to each offer. "Medicine? A healer?"

Right. His medicine. It was probably noon already, which would explain why Laurent had decided to check in on him. He looked around, finding that his bag had somehow fallen to the floor. He was in no shape to grab it, so he merely pointed at it, and Laurent picked it up.

"May I look inside?"

When Ross nodded, Laurent dug through the few objects, coming up with the small bottle. He took one of the pills and offered it to Ross, who accepted it with a trembling hand.

How could he explain that he had merely worried his own body into freaking out? He couldn't, he decided, so he did the next best thing and put his hand on the edge of the open book. Laurent would see it in his notes anyway. The only way out of this was forward.

"I found some dii. Dis. Dier." Frustrated, he gave up trying to get that particular word out. At least his right arm was willing to do what he wanted, pointing at the book and at his notes. "Here. Here. Here. Each month." He tapped at one of the listings. "Wrong tax number."

Dark orange eyes skimmed over the numbers he had written. Laurent's face betrayed nothing of his thoughts. He picked up the papers, checked the other calculations as well, but not once did he look at the book.

"I am impressed," he finally said. "No one has ever noticed that before."

It took Ross a moment to grasp the meaning of those words, but when he did, he started to shake again—from relief this

time. Laurent knew, and he wasn't angry at him, which meant...

"Was that a test?" he asked, still struggling to get the words out.

"Not in that sense, no. Whether you found it or not would have had no influence on my decision to hire you, but it's good to see that you have such an eye for details."

That didn't make sense. Those were official records.

"How?"

Laurent knocked on the book. "It's a copy. Pretty good copy, I give myself that. I made it a few years back for a similar occasion, but it has come in handy once or twice since."

The whole thing, a copy? Even knowing that it was one, Ross couldn't see it. All the entries were kept in multiple different yet recurring handwritings, with varying strengths and various hues of ink. The sheer effort this must have taken was incredible.

"I'm sorry if that is what upset you," Laurent said. "It was never my intention to make it seem like a trap. If it helps, you can think of it as bonus points, and you certainly earned them."

It did indeed help a little; that or the pill slowly kicking in, allowing his muscles to relax. He took off his glasses and placed them in their case on the desk, blinking against the sudden brightness and the blurry double-vision in his left eye alike.

"Now, it's almost noon, and you look like you could do with a break. Do you think you can walk? Then I could show you the cafeteria. Or I can fetch you something, if that's what you'd prefer."

Ross prodded his leg. It didn't react, which was good enough for him. "I think. I Can. Just not the beet soup," he recalled Laurent's words.

Laurent laughed. "Not the beet soup."

\* \* \*

Irina sat on a chair in the back of Aurelia's store, bouncing her leg and sucking on a candy cane she had witnessed being made. Magic. This was pure magic. Transforming a bag of sugar into a thick golden liquid that became colorful and solid, forming little rainbow swirls that tasted like... She didn't even know what it tasted like. Every color was different, and she ran her tongue along them one by one one moment, only to lick the whole thing the next.

Ianim, she had learned, was only there in the mornings most days, which meant she had spent the rest of the afternoon talking to Aurelia. At least between customers. There had been lots, and Aurelia seemed to know many of them personally, making small talk as she filled their orders.

Irina was glad no one paid her any attention. Sitting at the edge of the room, pretending to be invisible, she watched as Aurelia handed yet another customer his purchase, dozens of assorted candies in pretty, almost translucent bags of waxed paper.

"So. You're looking for fruit cake, specifically?" Aurelia asked as the door fell closed behind the customer.

Right. They had been talking about her self-assumed mission of finding the perfect fruit cake for Ross, and Irina had inquired about recommendations for bakeries, only to find out that Aurelia didn't frequent any.

"Yeah. Growing up, it was his favorite thing, and I know he misses it." She missed it, too, but not as much as Ross. "If this city has so many bakers, perhaps one will make one similar enough."

"You could make it yourself. Adjust the recipe until it's right."

Irina grimaced. "I can't bake."

Except for the bread Lichen had shown her, but the dough starter hadn't survived their journey to Caldeia, and without a hearth or oven, there was no point in getting another.

"I could teach you," Aurelia said cheerfully.

Irina sucked on her candy cane. It was a kind offer, but one she couldn't accept. She couldn't even purchase the ingredients, let alone pay Aurelia for her efforts.

"Thank you, but I can't afford that." She stared at the toes of her worn shoes. "I need to find work first," she mumbled.

Even if the next four weeks went well, it wasn't fair that Ross should shoulder all of their expenses alone. If she finally accepted that she was far from able to face any kind of crowd, perhaps she would find employment as well, so she could pay her share and start with getting herself some better clothes.

"What kind of work are you looking for?"

"Perhaps cleaning something, or... I don't know. I tried washing dishes in a tavern, but it was too much for me. Too loud." What was she doing, telling an almost stranger that? "I'm not good with too much noise," she whispered. And too quick movement, too many smells, or anything over two people. She didn't add that.

"Then why did you pick it?"

"What other choice do I have? I learned nothing else, and I'm not even good at it."

The only thing she was good for was to — No. She pressed the tip of the candy cane against her lip until it hurt. She wasn't going to think of those people anymore, wasn't going to let the memories of their words ruin the start of her new life. The facts remained the same, though: she had few skills and little knowledge of the real world.

"I was just a maid," she whispered. "And now I'm not even that."

Overly aware of how awkward the silence was that settled between them, Irina wished she had kept her mouth shut. It was the best and the worst possible moment for the bell to chime. While Aurelia served her customer, Irina cowered on her chair, prodding her arm. Hopefully, the little distraction



would be enough, and Aurelia would forget the topic and resume talking about candy instead.

She didn't do her that favor. As soon as the door closed behind the customer, she leaned with her hip against the counter and faced Irina.

"So you were a maid, and you think that's worth nothing," she said. "I think whoever employed you didn't appreciate your work. That's their problem, though, and says nothing about you. I know that's hard to believe when you're young and eager to gain some kind of recognition." Aurelia inclined her head. "If you want to give it another chance, I'm sure lots of people are looking for a little help around the house. If there's one thing I know, it's that there's always something that needs to be cleaned. I've played with the thought before, you know. Of hiring someone to help, I mean, but I haven't gotten around to it."

Irina looked around. "What for?" she asked. The store was spotless; well, almost. If she craned her neck, she could see a thin layer of dust on the topmost shelves, but those jars were for decoration only, Aurelia had told her. And perhaps the window decorations could use a wipe down, but nothing that would take longer than half an hour, if that.

"Being blind makes it really hard to see dust and stains." Aurelia chuckled. "It does make it easier to ignore them, though, which is why I haven't bothered yet. And because it's always such a hassle to find people who understand how important it is that everything stays exactly at its spot."

That made sense. Irina hummed into her candy cane. She was here already, there were still at least two hours to go before they would return to the guild, and she had nothing better to do.

"Anything in particular you'd like some help with? I could give you a hand instead of sitting around." She hesitated ever so slightly before she added, "Some dusting perhaps?"

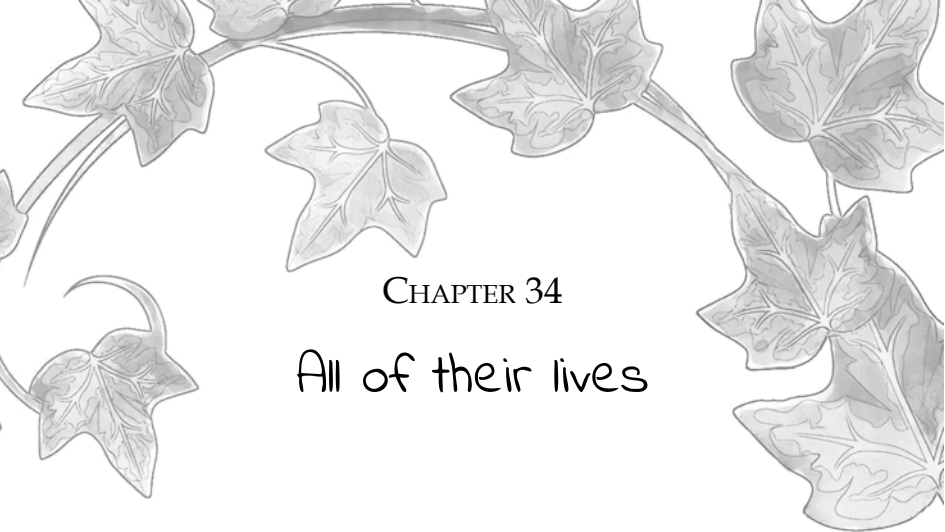
"That bad, huh?"

Heat crawled into Irina's cheeks, but Aurelia laughed. She reached under the counter, pulled out a rag, and pointed it at Irina.

"How about a deal? You get rid of the dust, and I'll buy the ingredients and show you how to make fruit cake."

That offer was definitely skewed in Irina's favor, but Aurelia looked so excited about it, Irina couldn't bring herself to point it out. She grinned.

"Deal."



## CHAPTER 34

# All of their lives

How quickly four weeks had passed. Ross walked up the stairs and entered the guild hall, greeting the new receptionist with a nod and a smile. From what he had heard, Jessica hadn't been fired, but she had been demoted to a position without contact with the public.

As far as he was concerned, that wasn't necessarily a downgrade. He was glad that he only dealt with Laurent, who had shown him nothing but patience and kindness. With each passing day, Ross' nerves had calmed down a bit more, slowly accepting that he only had to prove his skills, not prove that he was worth being treated as a person.

Ross walked down the hallway, by now so used to the distance, he didn't have to read the names on the doors he passed anymore. Laurent was already at work, sitting at his desk and looking up when Ross entered.

"Good morning. Your papers arrived. Just in time, I'd say." With a broad grin, Laurent handed Ross an envelope. "Welcome to the guild, Mister Vaughn."

Ross returned the grin, unsure what he was more excited about: that today was the last day of his probation period, or that his name change had gone through without a hitch. He

hadn't thought twice about shedding the last connection to his family by taking Irina's surname as his own. Not only did it feel right, it would also make it harder for people to find out about his past.

"And here is your contract. I already put in the new name." Laurent held out a stack of papers. "Please look it over."

Ross took those papers as well and walked to his desk at the other side of the office, unable to banish the grin from his face. Once he had a reliable, steady income, they could finally afford a place of their own. With Laurent's help, he had already found one, and together they had worked out a payment plan. Ross had signed the contract a few days ago, but he and Irina hadn't yet had time to pack up their stuff and move. That was the only drop of bitterness, the fact that at the end of each day, he was getting more and more exhausted, barely able to do more than collapse into bed once he arrived at the Lanternlight.

Sitting down, he pushed his leg into a comfortable position and leaned his crutch against the desk. Part of the exhaustion came from the distance he had to walk each day, which would decrease slightly now. He hoped that would be enough, because he really couldn't imagine a more perfect job, and he didn't want to mess it up by being too tired and in too much pain to pay attention.

They had gone over his expected payment and assigned tasks as well as the general expectations of working for the guild before, so most of what was written there wasn't new for him. He read each word carefully, anyway. Everything was what he expected, at least until he reached the last page.

"There's something missing," he said. Looking up, he found Laurent leaning against his desk. "The numbers on this page..."

"Yeah. I wanted to talk to you about a few details."

Ross' heart thumped in his chest. Was his work not worth the money? Was he too slow? No. Laurent would have told him if he was unhappy. For once, Ross forced his racing thoughts to slow down and merely waited for Laurent to elaborate.

"The last four weeks, I have worked under the assumption that you would assume a full time position. Is that what you want?"

"Yes," Ross said without hesitation. Of course it was.

"Perhaps I phrased that wrong. It's not uncommon for people to work fewer hours or at odd times, like only at night, or only a few days a week. I thought... I know it's none of my business what you can or can't do, I just thought you should know that you have options if the full hours are too much for you."

Ross' cheeks burned. Was it that obvious? "I don't... know," he mumbled. It was tempting for sure, but fewer hours would mean less money.

"I've been here since way too early. Why don't I grab a cup of coffee while you think it over?" Laurent pushed himself off the desk. "And don't worry. It doesn't have to be set in stone. You can tell me what you think works for you, and in a month or two, we can revisit the arrangement."

That was a generous offer, and one Ross was wholly overwhelmed with. As soon as the door closed behind Laurent, he took out his notebook, by now filled with pages upon pages of instructions, abbreviations, important names, and anecdotes. He opened it on one of the last pages and scribbled down numbers.

The house they had found was well within a lower budget as well as furnished with the bare necessities, so they didn't have any additional immediate expenses—and Irina earned some money as well now. Two times a week, she visited Aurelia, dusting and sweeping and doing the laundry.

The tip of the pen hovered over the page. He didn't want to add her earnings to his calculations for food and housing. She should never again feel the need to keep doing something she was no longer comfortable with, but perhaps he could consider that she would be able to buy a few things for herself.

Almost an hour passed until Laurent returned, giving Ross time to go over each calculation multiple times, fretting whether he really hadn't forgotten any expenses. No matter how long he had studied finances, how excellent his degree, the privilege of having been born into a rich family had done nothing to prepare him for the modest life they were going to lead now.

"Terrible rush today," Laurent said unprompted. "And then they ran out of coffee and I had to wait for a new batch. Have you decided?"

Ross looked up and nodded. His muscles weren't as tense as they usually were when he was nervous, but he still had to force his mouth to cooperate as he said, "I would like to take the offer. But I need to confirm the wages."

"Of course." Laurent walked over to him and pointed at the pen. "May I?"

When Ross nodded, he scribbled a few numbers next to Ross' calculations. They didn't quite match his assumptions; the weekly wages were higher than they should have been after merely subtracting the hours. His mind whirled as he compared the numbers, finding that he could even afford to shave off three hours each day.

Perhaps he shouldn't. Perhaps he should take a bit more money. Even if they didn't need it right now, it was always wise to save, but the thought of getting home to rest so much earlier was irresistible.

"I would like. That." He put his finger on the numbers and looked up, somehow still expecting his decision to be the wrong one.

Laurent nodded. "Let me add the numbers," he said, and Ross pushed the last page of his contract towards him.

Laurent wrote down the details in his neat, accurate handwriting, before signing the contract with a flourish. Ross' signature was much less pretty, but it was there, on a real contract for a perfect job in the city he had dreamed of. It was almost too good to be true.

"All right." Laurent stood up and went back to his desk, taking a quick look at the spot where his calendar sat. "I was here early because I have an external appointment today, and while I could probably find a task for you to do, I think you still have to move, don't you?"

Too stunned to reply, Ross merely nodded.

"So how about you take today off? It gets dark way too early these days, that way you won't have to do it past sunset."

\* \* \*

Inside the chest and under the bed and behind the nightstand – Irina checked each spot a third time, making sure they wouldn't forget anything. Their two backpacks were stuffed to the brim, but unlike on their arrival, Irina had needed a third bag to fit all their belongings.

Not only Ross had added a few things to his wardrobe. With her first own money, she had bought two warm, plain dresses, finally dropping the clothes taken from the lodge's chest. Ross shouldered the burden of paying for their new house, so she made sure to purchase their food whenever possible, as well as putting a bit of money aside for when their medicine would run out and they would have to restock. What little remained, she was saving for now, but she already dreamed of all the things she wanted to buy: a block of nicely smelling soap, a comb or hair brush that wasn't meant for horses, and, most of all, new shoes.

As she straightened the sheets on the bed, the door opened. Irina whirled around, her heart beating a bit too quickly, since she hadn't expected Ross to be back so soon.

"Ross? Is everything—"

He looked so happy and excited, she didn't have to finish that question. When he shifted his weight onto his right leg and extended his arm, she hopped over to hug him, grinning from ear to ear herself.

"I'm fine. I signed my contract. Laurent gave me the rest of the day off because he has an external appointment," Ross repeated what Laurent had told him. "I thought I could help you pack, but it seems I am too late for that. Is everything ready?"

"Let me check the bathroom again!"

She did, and of course, she found nothing there. She had cleaned everything until it was spotless, just like she had aired their bedding and swiped all the floors. There really was nothing left for her to do.

"Ready?" Ross asked.

Irina nodded.

One last look across the room and she pushed their bags out of the door and locked it behind her. Excitement made her almost bounce down the stairs, only slowed down by the fact that she carried all of their bags alone so Ross wouldn't have to worry about that.

"Caulle?" she called out.

Footsteps stomped up the stairs from the basement, and a white-haired head peeked through the opening door. "What's on fire?" Seeing her standing there with their bags, understanding dawned on their face. "Ah. You're leaving?"

"Yes." Irina stepped up and hung the key back on the empty nail on the wall. "We found a place to stay more permanently. We cleaned up everything, if you want to check?"



They shook their head. "I'll trust you. You were all right," they said.

Irina grinned. If that wasn't the best compliment they could ever expect from their grumpy old host.

"Thank you for letting us stay," Ross said, stepping next to her. "You really saved us."

Caulle huffed, mumbled something under their breath Irina didn't understand, and added slightly louder, "Take care, and Bright Winter's Heart."

"Bright Winter's Heart!" Irina said, but the door was already closed again.

She and Ross looked at each other, grinned at each other, and grabbed their bags.

With every step towards their new home, Irina's excitement grew. She had seen it before, of course, when Ross had shown it to her to ask for her opinion, but she hadn't been back since. From what she had seen, there was a good bit of cleaning to do, and it being so early in the day meant that she would get most of it done before the evening.

It was a tiny little house, far closer to the city center than they should have been able to afford, where it sat wedged in between a much bigger manor with a sprawling, walled-off garden and the hedge surrounding the neighboring park.

Ross pulled the key out of his bag and unlocked the door, gesturing for her to step in first but following closely behind. Inside, it smelled a bit musty and very dusty. Irina put down their bags and opened the windows, looking out at the strip of overgrown wilderness some might call a garden. Unlike the house's interior, that was a problem for spring at the earliest.

Said interior was quickly examined. It consisted of two rooms, one with a bed, a chest, and a lopsided wardrobe, the other with a hearth, a table, and a set of mismatched chairs.

Threadbare, moth-eaten curtains hung in front of one of the windows, a few empty shelves held nothing but cobwebs, and in a small alcove next to the door stood a bunch of well-used tools for cleaning and gardening. Before the sun set, she would put that broom to good use.

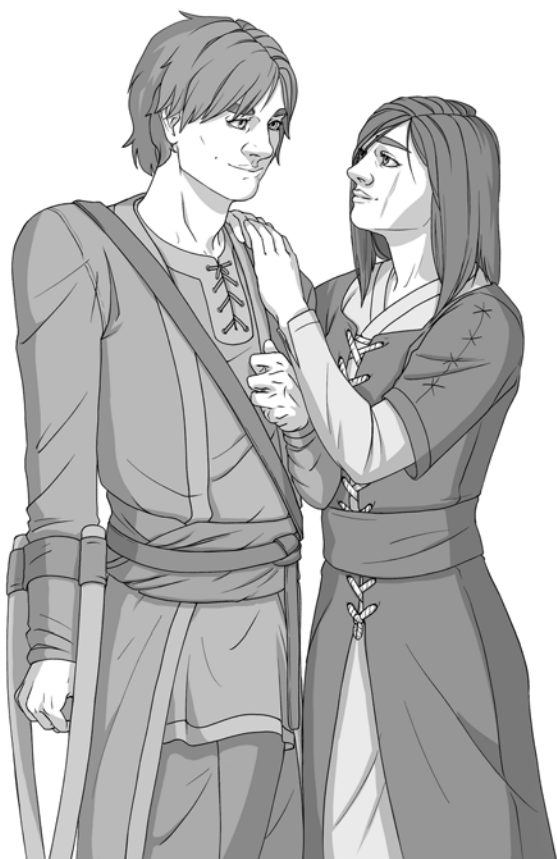
The bathroom was off to the side of the entrance, the walls not matching, as if it had been added later — but it *was* a bathroom, with running, albeit cold, water, and a bathtub that could be heated with a fire. When his pain got too bad, Ross would finally be able to take a hot bath again. The prospect had her almost more excited than the idea of taking a bath herself.

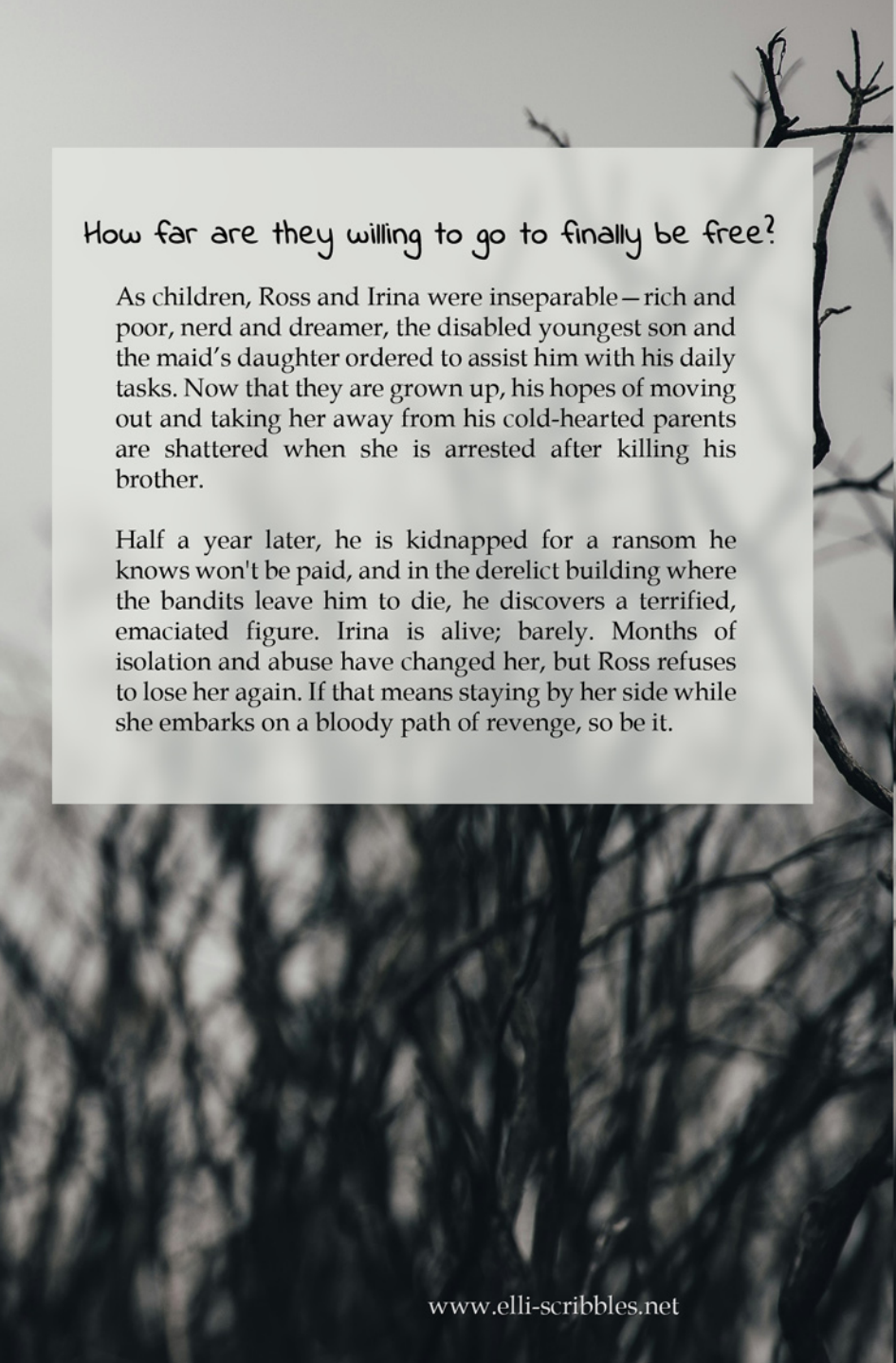
Irina laughed and turned on the spot, arms spread wide. It wasn't much, but it was theirs. Next to her, Ross let himself fall onto a chair.

"Do you still like it?" he asked. The tone of his voice was strained. "It's small, and there's so much work that needs to be done, and I don't know if I can be of much —"

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, cutting him off mid-sentence. With a sigh, he leaned his head against hers.

"Who cares," she said. When she looked around, she didn't see the dust or the cobwebs. All she saw was their future. "I have you, and you have me, and we have all of our lives to turn this place into our home."





How far are they willing to go to finally be free?

As children, Ross and Irina were inseparable — rich and poor, nerd and dreamer, the disabled youngest son and the maid's daughter ordered to assist him with his daily tasks. Now that they are grown up, his hopes of moving out and taking her away from his cold-hearted parents are shattered when she is arrested after killing his brother.

Half a year later, he is kidnapped for a ransom he knows won't be paid, and in the derelict building where the bandits leave him to die, he discovers a terrified, emaciated figure. Irina is alive; barely. Months of isolation and abuse have changed her, but Ross refuses to lose her again. If that means staying by her side while she embarks on a bloody path of revenge, so be it.