

NUISANCE

A scenic winter sunset over a snowy forest. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm orange glow across the sky and the snow-covered evergreen trees. In the foreground, a dark balcony railing is visible, and a small, snow-covered path leads through the trees. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

Elli Eberle

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Impressum

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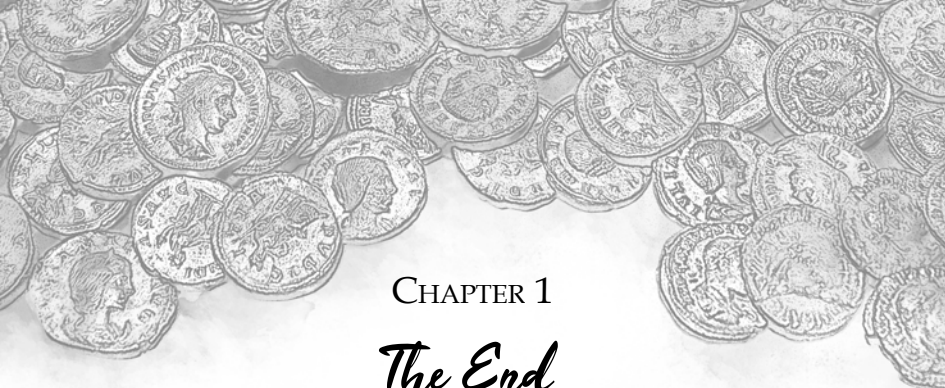
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For Anna and Kate, please don't stab me

Part 1

Fall



CHAPTER 1

The End

"Look at that. A little thief."

A hand grabbed Merridy's wrist, mere centimeters away from the loaf of bread that had been her target. Calloused fingers held her in an iron grip as the owner of the hand shouted, "Guards! Guards!"

"Please." Merridy pulled against the grip, but it was hopeless. "Please let me go. I'm sorry. I am just so hungry."

It wasn't a lie, and the quiver in her voice not just for show. Neither were the tears welling in her eyes. She didn't bother trying to suppress them, on the contrary. Merridy knew she still looked more like a child than like the young woman she was now, and sometimes it was enough to soften a heart or two. Today, however, she had no such luck.

"I'm sick of you vermin stealing my hard-earned money. They'll feed you in the dungeon all right," the merchant snapped. "Guards! Over here!" he shouted again, shoving her in front of him while yanking her arm behind her back.

The pain in her shoulder brought new tears to her eyes, forcing her to cease trying to break free. Breathing heavily against the rising panic, she looked around. A few people had stopped what they were doing, were staring instead. A woman looked

slightly concerned — definitely not concerned enough to interfere — but most faces showed only indifference, perhaps mild curiosity. Behind them, movement in the crowd revealed the vibrant blue armor of the royal guards.

“Please,” she tried again, “let me go. I promise, I’ll never come back again. Please.”

The merchant didn’t bother to reply this time. Though the tears were useless, Merridy *couldn’t* stop them anymore. She had heard horrible things about the dungeons. About the cruelty of the guards, and the cold and dark cells where the prisoners were left to rot away until it was time for their trial.

She struggled, fighting against the hand pressing her wrist against her back. The man’s other hand on her shoulder held her in place, stopping her from twisting out of his grasp. There was nowhere for her to run anyway. Between the merchant’s stall and the approaching guards, she was trapped.

“Please...”

It was too late to hope for mercy. The guards’ broad shapes loomed over her, their faces grim, the silver adornments of their armor glistening in the morning sun. She managed to suppress a desperate sob, turning it into a quiet whimper as she tried to shrink back. The merchant shoved her roughly against the market stall, then twisted her arm a bit more, for good measure.

“What seems to be the problem here?” one guard asked.

While the merchant vividly described how he had caught her trying to steal from him — and how often she must have stolen from him before — Merridy’s breaths quickened. It wasn’t true! She had never before tried to steal from this stall — or this marketplace, for that matter. At least not in months, not like that. But who would believe her over the words of an honest man?

Certainly not those guards. They looked grim as they took her from the merchant. One of the guards grabbed her arm,

his gloved fingers digging painfully into her skin.

"What do you think? Mage?" the other one asked.

"Doubtful. But let's not take the chance."

He twisted her right arm, and cold metal closed around her wrist, so tightly it pinched her skin. She was no mage, the morlit would be like any other metal for her, but that didn't mean it didn't fucking *hurt*. Another shackle closed around her left arm, then the two were joined behind her back, straining her shoulders. Merridy pressed her lips together to keep herself from screaming.

Whatever else the guards and the merchant talked, the words didn't reach her. She stared at the ground beneath her feet, occasionally casting a glance around. She wasn't even looking for a way to escape anymore, just for anything to distract her from her thoughts, threatening to spin out of control. The crowd had lost interest, and when she did meet a gaze, it was only for a moment before the other person would look away.

There was no one left who cared about her, who would miss her, or try to save her. She was as alone as she had been when she had arrived in this city five years earlier. She could only rely on herself to get out of this. The problem was, she really, really had no idea how to get out of this.

A rough pull on her arm jerked her out of her thoughts, making her scream after all as her shoulders burned.

"Let's go, rat."

Merridy stumbled along, trying her best to keep up with the quick pace of the guards. Her legs were trembling, her steps uneven, and every time she faltered, she was roughly dragged and shoved along.

At some point, her shoe got stuck in a crack in the pavement, and when she was dragged on, her foot slipped out. Merridy tried to stop, pulling against the grip. "My shoe. Please," she whispered, hobbling on one leg.

“Too bad.”

The guard didn't pause, shoving her again instead. Meridy gave up on her shoe and limped along. It only took a few minutes for her toes to become so cold it hurt. Fall wasn't quite over yet, but the overcast sky didn't bring any noteworthy amount of sunlight or warmth. She had no eyes for the gates of the palace garden, or the ornate hedges and late blooming flowers inside.

They didn't walk towards the beautiful palace in the distance, with its blue marble and gold highlights. Instead, the path led them towards some kind of roofed area next to a building made out of dark bricks. The door in the building's side was huge and heavy, thick wooden planks with metal fittings.

Once she went through that door, she'd never see the light of day again, Merridy was sure of it. With every step, her breaths became shallower, until she wasn't sure how she was still breathing. A weight seemed to press down on her chest, preventing her lungs from expanding properly. She couldn't go down there. She'd *die* down there.

The moment they stepped under the roof, something inside Merridy snapped. While kicking at the guard's leg, she threw all her weight—which wasn't much—against his grip. Through his padded uniform pants, he must have barely felt her kick, but he let go of her anyway, probably out of surprise.

Merridy bolted.

She ran towards the garden they had left behind a moment ago, hoping she'd manage to get lost between the evergreen bushes. The sandy path wasn't pleasant under her bare foot, but luckily, there were no sharp stones for her to step on. With her hands tied so tightly behind her back, it was all she could do to hope she wouldn't stumble as she ran around a corner, only to find herself in a maze of hedges.

She couldn't hear how close her pursuers were, her own frantic breaths drowning out all other noises. She couldn't waste a moment to turn around to check, either. The path was gravel now, the stones cutting into her bare sole as she ran, making her limp. There was an opening not too far ahead. Perhaps she could crawl into the hedges, hide somewhere, *anything*.

Someone tackled her, swiping her legs out from under her and making her crash to the ground. Her forehead slammed against one of the stones framing the path, her chin scraping over sand and gravel. She kicked blindly, hitting something, which was answered with a disgruntled noise. Then the guard kicked her in return, driving the air from her lungs as his boot burrowed deep into her side.

"You'll regret that."

Gloved hands grabbed her arm, pulling her up until she thought her arms might pop from their sockets. Merridy tried to follow the motion, to somehow alleviate the strain on her shoulders, a quiet whimper all she had breath for. The guard didn't wait for her to find her footing, instead dragging her along while her feet scrabbled uselessly at the ground.

She couldn't hear what the guards said. Her heartbeat hammered in her head, her vision darkening at the edges. She tried to breathe through the pain, ignoring the stabbing in her side. Blood trickled down from her forehead, reaching the corner of her eye, giving her swimming vision a pinkish tint. She tried to blink it away, without much success.

They dragged her into the building and down a bunch of stairs. The edges of the steps bruised her legs whenever she lost her footing. Merridy grit her teeth, so all that slipped out was an occasional pained whimper, but she was sure there was blood running down her shins.

Once they reached the foot of the stairs, she was dragged along a dimly lit tunnel. Floor, ceiling and walls were formed

from the same rough stones, so dark they almost looked black. It was impossible to tell if they had always been like this, or if they had been blackened over the years by dirt and smoke.

When they came to a halt, Merridy barely managed to keep standing, half hanging from the grip around her arm. One of the guards unlocked a cell, opening the door of tight metal bars. The one holding her pushed her inside, shoving her one last time as he let go of her arm. With her hands behind her back, she couldn't catch herself, only managing to land on her knees before she fell forward, crashing onto the floor with her shoulder.

Merridy sobbed, tasting blood from a bitten tongue or a split lip. The shadow of the man loomed over her, making her tremble. She wanted to crawl away, but couldn't find the strength for it.

"Shouldn't we separate the shackles?" the guard at the door asked.

"Sorry." The other one spit on the ground in front of her. "Must have lost the key when she kicked me."

The first guard laughed, closing and locking the door as soon as his companion had left the cell.

At first, Merridy didn't dare to move, listening breathlessly for footsteps to return. When everything remained silent, she twisted and turned, until she managed to lie on her side and raise her head to look around.

One—hopefully—empty bucket stood in a corner of the cell. Half rotten straw and scraps of cloth were strewn on the floor, and the walls were dotted with metal rings, to some of which chains were fastened. A tiny window, high up in the wall, just beneath the ceiling, let a bit of light in—and a freezing breeze. Merridy shivered, shuffling closer to the wall. With her feet, she tried to gather some of the straw, to somehow pile it up so she could settle on it. The success of

her attempt was questionable, and the bit she accumulated didn't do much to soften the hard stone floor.

She curled up as best as she could, pulling her knees towards her chest. She wiggled her toes, slowly turning blue, then pressed her bare foot against her leg, trying to find a bit of warmth. Her shoulder hurt, and her head hurt, and her arms hurt, and her fingers slowly turned numb, and she couldn't stop crying. Her heart was beating too fast, she could feel it pulse in the blooming bruises on her face.

Nausea joined the overwhelming dread in her stomach. She stared at the metal bars of her cell door, and into the darkness beyond. Watching for any kind of movement, waiting for the guards to return, to drag her to trial, or just hurt her more. She didn't dare to close her eyes, blinking away the tears whenever they blurred her vision.

Somewhere in the tunnel a torch was burning, tinting the darkness with the faintest orange shimmer. It wasn't enough to see more than hazy outlines. Every time the flickering light made the shadows move, Merridy flinched. One time, someone walked past her cell at a quick pace, but other than that, she was all alone. If there were other prisoners, they didn't make any noise.

Hours later, when the torch had gone out and the bit of daylight was long gone, Merridy was still staring into the darkness. The temperature had dropped even more, turning her feet and hands numb. Perhaps, if she was left here long enough, she'd freeze to death before she could be brought to trial. She wondered what would be worse.

They wouldn't hang her, surely not; not for stealing a bit of food. Those kinds of executions were meant for murderers and traitors. Still, she had heard enough terrible tales of other punishments, of whips and brands and gods knew what else.

She didn't know what the punishment for petty theft was. Perhaps she should know, being a petty thief. There was so much she should know, should have done, *shouldn't* have done. It was too late now.

New tears ran down her face, leaving freezing trails on her cheeks and turning the straw under her head disgustingly slick. She was so tired. It had been hours since the last time she had heard footsteps or a voice, and everything was pitch black. Perhaps she could sleep a bit. Where she wasn't bruised, her muscles hurt from shivering, and her eyes from crying. Her throat was dry as well, her tongue sticky. They had left her no water, and for a moment, Merridy wondered if they would just leave her to die here.

She pressed herself against the wall, finding no warmth there, not even feeling the rough stone with her numb fingers. Licking her too-dry lips, she tried to stop shivering, to relax her muscles and ease the tension in her shoulders.

She had always managed to hold onto hope, somehow; hope of seeing her family again, of finding a place for herself, of seeing the next sunrise on a better day. Right now, hurting and freezing and knowing that she was all alone, there was no hope left. A single tear ran down her cheek as she finally managed to fall into a restless slumber.

One way or another, this was the end.



CHAPTER 2

The Dungeon

Cold as it was, Merridy didn't sleep for long. Before the first light of dawn, she lay awake again, shivering and staring into the darkness. Sometimes, she managed to suppress it for a few precious seconds, to give her muscles a much needed break. It never lasted long, and when she started shaking again, it felt even worse than before.

By the time the shadows started to lift, she was so exhausted she wanted to cry. Her tears had dried up a while ago, though, and hadn't returned yet. Perhaps for the better; her mouth was so dry, the thought of losing any more water was excruciating.

There was some water she had to lose, though. Slowly, she dragged herself into the opposite corner of the cell, where she stared at the bucket in front of her. It was clear as day which purpose it served; just as clear as it was that she wouldn't manage to do so. Perhaps she could have somehow maneuvered herself over it, but there was no way she'd be able to pull her skirts down. And even if she did, she wouldn't be able to pull them up again.

She couldn't risk being found like that. Gods knew what the guards would do *then*. Cowering in the corner, Merridy

pressed her head against the wall. Knowing that she had no other choice didn't make it any easier.

By the time she crawled back to her pitiful pile of straw, a new tear had found her way down her cheek after all. The sanitary conditions of her imprisonment were probably the least of her worries right now, but they were so very humiliating on top of all. Rubbing it in that no one saw her even as a person; not on the streets, not in the dungeons. Rat, the guard had called her, and that was all she was to them. Filthy vermin, to be chased away or hurt at will.

She laid down, feeling how the warm wetness got replaced by bitter cold, draining what little hope the arrival of daylight had brought. Staring at the bleak dungeon walls, she wondered how long she'd be left to rot here. It was another thing she probably should have known; how the justice system worked, who spoke the sentences, deciding about life and death. She vaguely recalled that those kinds of trials were held on a certain day each week, but she couldn't remember which day that was. In fact, she didn't even know which day it was today. It didn't matter much when all of them were the same; filled with cold and hunger and the ever-present hopelessness.

A hopelessness that deepened when eventually the cell door opened and a guard walked in. She didn't think it was one of the two who had arrested her, but it wasn't like she had taken her time to memorize their faces. He stepped closer, until mud-encrusted boots filled most of her field of vision.

"I heard you attacked one of the guards."

Attacked? Merridy barely managed to suppress a hysterical laugh. That one pathetic kick surely didn't qualify as an attack, and she had paid dearly for her attempt to escape. Unfortunately, she was sure her opinion didn't matter.

"Perhaps I have to teach you some respect. On your knees."

Merridy stared up at the guard, but didn't move. Partially out of defiance—if those brutes wanted respect, perhaps they should try to earn it—but mostly because she didn't have the strength for it.

"I'm not bringing you any water until you learn who's in charge here."

Merridy swallowed dryly. So much for her pride. But there wasn't much of it left in the first place, and she was so, so thirsty. She wriggled on the floor, trying to get her legs under her. Her knees ached from the fall the previous day, and she couldn't feel her toes anymore. Somehow, pressing her bruised shoulder against the wall and scraping her feet over the floor, she managed to sit up. She pushed further, clenching her teeth as her weight settled on her bruised knees.

The guard stepped next to her, making her wince. She remained kneeling, though, even if her shivers were no longer merely from the cold. The question of what exactly she'd be willing to do for a bit of water crossed her mind, but she pushed it back decidedly. There was no use in worrying about things that might happen, when there were enough things currently happening to worry about already. Like her shackled wrists being grabbed, pulled back and upwards.

Merridy couldn't suppress a pained whine, shuffling towards the wall until she could go no further. The guard didn't let go of her hands. Instead, something rough touched the skin above the shackles, pulling tight. Merridy automatically flinched, finding that she was stuck like this; still stuck, even as the guard stepped in front of her again. He must have tied her hands to one of the metal rings in the wall. Bent forward to alleviate the strain on her shoulders, she couldn't even look up at him.

"That's better."

The guard took a step to the side, perhaps to look at her from all angles, as if she was a piece of meat on the market.

"If you're still good by the time I finish my round, I might even get you some water."

Cold dread settled in her stomach. "Please," she whispered, knowing that her pleas wouldn't help. He couldn't just leave her like this!

He did leave her like this.

The door slammed shut, the noise echoing in her ears, drowning out her startled whimper. She stared at the dirty floor in front of her, a sob caught in her throat. Now, with no one to watch and punish her, she tested her bindings. They held. Twisting her hands did her no good, and neither did pulling against the rope. All her efforts rewarded her with were burning shoulders, and new tears in her eyes.

There was no chance to distribute her weight in a less painful way. When she held herself up, to keep the weight off her arms, it rested on her knees instead. Pressed against the hard stone floor, they were on fire, and shuffling around did nothing to help, only scratching her skin raw.

When she gave up, settling on her thighs to give her knees a short respite, the rope pulled her arms up. It wasn't enough pressure yet to dislocate her shoulders, but it sure felt like it.

She kept changing positions. The more time passed, the harder it got for her to bear each one for more than a few seconds. In between, she pulled against the rope or pressed her numb feet against the wall, anything for a sensation that wasn't the burning in her shoulders or knees.

The thirst was all but forgotten. The cold was all but forgotten. Now it was weakness that made her muscles ache and tremble, until she could no longer hold herself up. Her legs cramped, ignoring her attempts to get back into position. Stiff muscles screamed as her arms stretched in this unnatural position, bearing too much of her weight. Blood ran down her wrists from where the morlit shackles dug into her skin, making her sleeves stick coldly to her skin. Her pulse

hammered in her temples, leaving her strangely lightheaded. Even breathing had become hard, each breath burning in her lungs and arms alike as her torso moved.

Her eyes kept falling shut, depriving her of anything to anchor her gaze and distract herself with. Sometimes her head dropped as well, until the sharp pain in her shoulders dragged her back to awareness. Then she flinched, pulling muscles in impossible places, spreading the pain to her sides and her neck and her calves. Her heartbeat had stopped trying to settle down, leaving her in a constant state of instinctive panic. Feeling sick and hot and cold, she tried her best to ignore the nausea that had settled in her stomach, and the fluttering of her pulse in her bruises.

She whispered pointless, pleading words, despite knowing there was no one here to hear them, to listen to them. She already knew, when the guard would come back, she'd do anything he wanted, *anything*, if only he would let her down. She'd kneel, beg, crawl at his feet for a moment of reprieve.

When the sound of jingling keys returned, the dread it brought was almost drowned out by relief.

"Seems like you have learned your lesson." The guard came closer, nudging her left shoulder with his boot. "Didn't you?"

Merridy kept her gaze on the floor. She didn't have the strength left to lift her head. She didn't reply, either. Perhaps she couldn't have. Her throat was as painful and raw as if she had screamed, not merely sobbed quietly.

"It's gonna be like this: I'll let you down, then you'll drink your water like the fucking mutt you are, and if you behave, I might bring you some food tomorrow." He set down a bowl of water in front of her. "Understood?"

Merridy stared at the bowl, trying to comprehend his words, to understand what he wanted her to do. Her thoughts were slow, muddled by the lack of sleep and the constant pain.

This time, he must have expected a reply. He kicked the same shoulder he had merely nudged before, making her scream in pain. Her body jerked against the restraints, trying to escape the agony, but only making it worse.

"Understood?" the guard repeated, the word barely audible through her frantic panting.

Merridy nodded desperately, squeezing her eyes shut with how dizzy the movement left her.

At least he kept his promise. He reached for her wrists and fiddled with the rope. After a moment, her arms dropped down. Merridy sobbed with relief, almost collapsing now that nothing held her up anymore.

The guard shoved the bowl towards her with his foot.

"What are you waiting for?"

Merridy stared at it, hesitating. Not out of defiance this time. She just couldn't figure out how to accomplish that. But she had to, before he would take it away again, or worse, tie her right back up. She couldn't risk that.

Slowly, she bent forward, realizing quickly that this wouldn't work. She wasn't sure she could sit any other way. She wasn't sure he'd *allow* her to sit any other way. Shifting her knees apart instead, whimpering as the mistreated skin scratched over the ground, she managed to get lower, bit by bit.

She had almost reached the water when the guard stomped down between her shoulder blades. Not with too much force, or he might have broken her back or her neck—but with enough force to slam her face into the bowl. The edge of it split her lip, and the impact made the other side of it smash against her forehead, landing on the bruise that had already formed there.

The contents of the bowl splashed onto her face, dripping down. Out of reflex, Merridy tried to catch some of the drops with her tongue. When she tasted blood instead of water, she

froze, curling up with a terrified whimper. Her tongue flitted over her teeth, to check if they were all still there.

Pain pulsed in her hips and thighs, muscles and ligaments having been stretched further than they were supposed to. Trying to protect her most vulnerable parts from any further attack, she made herself as small as possible, squeezing her eyes shut. But no attack came. Instead, the guard laughed, picking up the bowl.

"Too bad. Better luck tomorrow."

Tomorrow. She sobbed again, whimpered pleas leaving her lips as the last remains of her pride shattered. She couldn't endure another day like this.

She was ignored; of course she was. A laugh was all the guard left her as he pulled the cell door closed behind him. Merridy flinched, staring at the wet spot on the floor. She licked her lips, her own blood the only moisture she could find. It was too late to wonder if she'd sink far enough to lick the water off the floor. It had long seeped into the cracks between the stones, leaving nothing but a layer of wet dirt behind.

When the cold of the floor came crawling back through her thin clothes, Merridy gathered the last of her strength, pushing herself back onto her makeshift bed. The straw was disgusting and itchy, but the slightest bit less cold. Huddling into the corner, she closed her eyes.

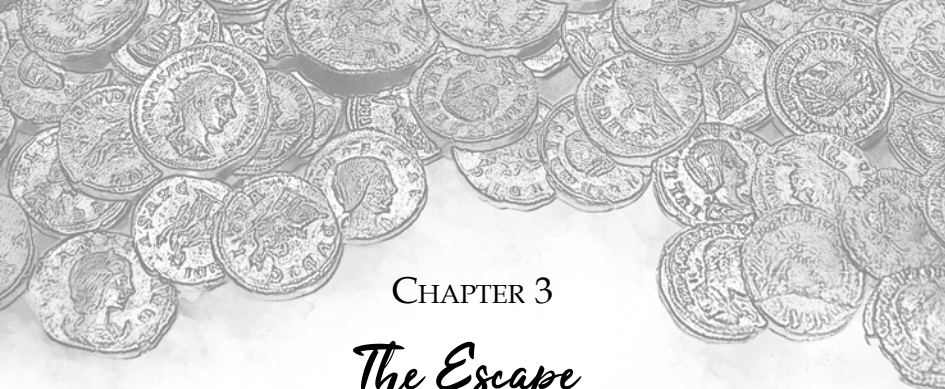
Her head hurt. Everything hurt, really. From crying, and from shivering, and from kneeling for hours, and from thirst, and from getting slammed into things.

Even her heart hurt, knowing that this was all people saw in her. A stray, hiding in back alleys, begging for scraps, not worthy of compassion. Even if a miracle happened and she somehow made it out of here, it surely wouldn't be long before she found herself arrested again. She had no other choice; with the fading of Summer, her ways to earn money

had dwindled rapidly, and if she didn't want to starve, she had to steal.

Merridy blinked her eyes open, finding the cell blurry and more colorless than it should be, even in the pitiful bit of light falling through the window. The previous night, she had feared she might die from the cold. Now she wondered if she would die from thirst. She didn't want to believe she'd die in here, but it was hard not to.

As the cell spun around her and her eyes slid shut, she realized that no one would miss her if she did.



CHAPTER 3

The Escape

Cedric hummed contentedly as he strolled down the narrow corridor, keeping an eye out to make sure he was alone, while at the same time looking like he had every right to be here. He knew he had, in fact, absolutely no right to be here, but that seldom stopped him. Just in case, he had picked plain clothes, matching the colors of those the palace servants wore. Even his usual cane — dark, polished wood inlaid with shimmering bands of amethyst — he had left at home. Instead his fingers closed around a worn handle, this cane cheap wood, sporting more than one scratch.

At first glance, he might be confused for someone who had every right to use the many secret passages behind the palace walls. Secret, not because no one knew about them, but because no one wanted to see ornate hallways tainted by the people lighting fireplaces and dusting furniture. And if he was lucky, no one would get to glance at him, let alone for longer than a polite nod and hasty retreat required.

Another winding staircase, then the air grew colder. The dungeons, partially underground, were cool even at the height of summer. Right now, at the beginning of winter, they were all but freezing. Cedric was glad he had thought

to put on his warmer coat, and even gladder he would be out of here in a bit.

Knowing that this was the riskiest part of his route, Cedric stopped behind a ledge, listening. Everything was quiet. He sent out his magic, though it didn't work very well through the man-made structures. It worked well enough to assure him that he was alone. He had long memorized the pattern of the guards patrolling, but there could always be extraordinary circumstances, like an arrest.

Out of habit, he scanned the cells he passed. Every bit of information could be useful, be it the favorite drink of the queen's scribe, or who was currently locked in the dungeons. Most cells were empty, tinted in gray light from the small holes serving as windows. A haggard figure sat in one of the cells, a face he neither knew nor cared to know. Then, a few steps further, he froze.

This cell wasn't empty. Inside, lying on her side, curled up and hands behind her back, was a girl. Probably not a girl, he corrected himself, but a petite woman. Even the fucking guard usually didn't throw children into the dungeons.

Something about her face looked familiar. Before he had realized what he was doing, Cedric was already holding the dungeon's master key in his hand—acquired extremely legally, thank you very much.

He hesitated, his hand hovering in the air in front of the lock. Probably the partner, sibling or child of one of his acquaintances, that was all he could come up with. He really shouldn't get involved. He didn't know why she was in here, had no way to evaluate how much of an uproar it would cause to get her out.

But she looked so vulnerable, shivering on the cold floor in way too thin clothes. Her face and her clothes were stained with dirt and dried blood, her light brown hair a tangled mess to which straw stuck. From the way she was lying, he

assumed that her hands had been tied behind her back, which was a fucking cruel thing to do.

The moment the door opened, her head shot up. She whimpered quietly, wriggling on the floor to press herself further into the corner, away from him. Anger and disgust simmered in him at her obvious display of panic, wondering what the fuck the guards had done to her.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, his voice as calm as possible. "Do you remember me? My name is Cedric."

The panic vanished from her face, but the fear in her eyes stayed. That probably meant she *did* remember him. Just great. He enjoyed his reputation when intimidating a petulant business partner, not when trying to get a frightened chi— woman to safety. Fuck, even if she was older than she looked, she'd still be young enough to be his daughter.

"You're Carl's girlfriend, aren't you?" Finally, the memory clicked into place, the words leaving his lips on their own. "You were with him. At the party."

He dug the details of that evening out of a drawer in his mind. When Yvan had told him that one of the guests had stepped away, to snoop around upstairs, he had expected a botched attempt at espionage. What he hadn't expected was for him to find a young woman, hiding away in some corner... reading one of his books. She had been so engrossed, she hadn't even heard his footsteps on the stairs, and Cedric had retreated without disturbing her.

"N-not... not an-anymore," she managed to say through chattering teeth.

Up close, Cedric could see that her lips and toes had turned blue. "Doesn't matter," he said grimly. "Let's get you out of here."

He'd deal with the question of who exactly she was later.

"Wh-what?" She stared at him, her expression somewhere between terrified and unbelieving.

"I'm not leaving you here. Come. We need to hurry."

On second thought, there was no way she'd be able to hurry. Looking at her, he doubted she'd manage to get up at all.

"Turn around, so I can look at your hands."

She shot him a wary glance, but then obeyed, pushing against the wall so she came to lie on her stomach. Cedric crouched, putting the cane on the floor next to him. Pulling her sleeve aside, he found her wrists rubbed raw under way too tight morlit bands.

"Are you a mage?" he asked while feeling for the lock.

"N... no."

Cedric hummed, displeased. Just a needless act of cruelty then. There was no way for him to open the connection without the matching key, and this one, he hadn't acquired.

"Sorry. I can't get them open," he said, letting go of her. "We have to go like this. Can you walk?"

She nodded, more desperate than determined. Cedric let his gaze wander over her trembling shape, resting on her bare foot. Like her face and her hands, it was covered in dried blood. He sighed. Leaving his cane on the floor, he stood up, only to bend down and grab her upper arms.

"I'm going to pull you up," he said, as if she hadn't noticed that on her own.

To her credit, she tried to help as best as she could, making almost no sound. It was obvious that she was in pain, trying to keep her weight off her bare foot and leaning against the wall. She was shivering, and her skin had been freezing cold even through the thin layer of her clothes. While he picked up his cane, Cedric cast out with his magic, finding the hallway as abandoned as before. He gestured for her to follow, watching her limp across the cell with growing concern.

He pondered for a moment, then decided to lock the door behind them. If people noticed she was missing, perhaps they might think she had been released or sentenced.

“Come.”

He put his arm around her shoulders, leading her along the hallway as quickly as he could; which was not as quickly as he would have liked, but still quicker than he had feared. At the far end of the hallway, he unlocked another cell. She only froze for a moment, before she allowed him to push her inside.

Cedric made sure to lock the door behind him, then crossed the cell in large steps. He didn’t like the thought of revealing one of his bigger secrets to what was basically a stranger – but he disliked the thought of leaving her to her fate even more. He tapped his cane against the wall in three certain spots, then watched as her eyes widened in wonder.

“Come,” he said once more, gesturing for her to come closer to the dark tunnel that had opened up.

She did so, after casting a wary glance back over her shoulder, towards the cell door. Next to the secret entrance, she stopped, staring into the darkness ahead.

“Go, but be careful,” Cedric said. “The ground is uneven and full of rubble.”

It was no problem for him, but for her, it was too dark, and she couldn’t even use her hands to hold onto the wall. Two steps into the tunnel, she paused, turning around to look at him, eyes wide in fear. It was the last thing he saw before he followed her, closing the secret door behind him and plunging the tunnel into pitch black darkness.

“It’s. So dark.” Her voice was still trembling, but a few deep breaths before she spoke told Cedric that she must have tried to suppress it. If she tried to hide her fear, that wasn’t working particularly well.

“It’s all right. I know the way.”

He hadn’t only memorized it, he could also feel it; the tons of earth and stone surrounding them, bent and twisted by his own magic to shape the tunnel many years ago. Water trickled a few steps ahead, making the ground slippery. Where she

leaned against the wall, a fleeting speck of warmth formed in his magical perception. Cedric approached it, putting his arm around her shoulder once more.

Now that the immediate danger of being discovered was over, they could afford to walk slowly. Feeling the ground ahead did only so much to help Cedric keep his balance; between loose rubble and slippery rocks, his soles and the tip of his cane had a hard time finding a good grip. As far as he could tell, she didn't fare any better.

They walked in grim silence, only broken by short directions when Cedric could feel an obstacle ahead. He long suspected that she was crying. Her breaths were uneven, occasionally hitching when a quiet sob left her lips. It couldn't be helped, though. They had to get out of the sewers before he could do *anything* to help her.

He had considered giving her his coat, but with her arms tied back, that might be more of a hindrance than help. It was already hard enough to keep a good grip on her as she stumbled through the tunnels.

"We're almost there," he tried to assure her.

If she had heard him at all, she didn't react. Another step, another stumble, then she screamed as her leg gave way under her. Cedric reacted quickly, dropping his cane to catch her before she could fall. Her arms under his hands were trembling so much, he automatically held her close for a moment, rubbing one hand over her back, trying to calm her. If he had to guess, he'd bet she had stepped onto a sharp rock with her bare foot. The missing shoe was an even bigger problem than her chained hands, and he cursed the fucking guards once more for leaving her like this.

He would have loved to carry her, but walking here without his cane was a particularly bad idea. If he fell and injured himself, they were fucked. He didn't have anything to protect her foot with, either. She'd just have to hold on a bit longer.

"We need to go on," he said.

While she struggled to keep standing, Cedric raised a small pillar of earth, delivering his dropped cane into his waiting hand. The strange noise made her flinch, but he didn't explain himself, only pressed her shoulder encouragingly while he let the earth settle back.

It truly wasn't that far anymore. A couple dozen more steps, a turn or two, then light started to flood the tunnels from above; falling through the cracks in drains and man-hole covers. Now that she was able to see where they were walking, she didn't stumble that often anymore, but her steps were still unsteady.

Luckily, it didn't take long for them to arrive at the foot of the stairs that led to his house. Getting her up those stairs was a different matter, ending with both of them out of breath, and what would surely become some bruises on her knees. Once they had made it up, she leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, while Cedric fished the key out of his pocket to unlock the door.

Leading her through the storage room and kitchen into the living room was less difficult. He stopped in front of the fireplace, in which a few embers still glowed under a pile of ashes. Whatever had kept her standing left her, and she slipped out of his grasp, collapsing on the floor. He might have been able to hold her, but he didn't know where else to bring her, so he merely held onto her arm until she was lying down.

Cedric walked around her, using the fire poker to shove the ashes aside, before he put some fresh wood onto the embers; some larger logs, as well as a handful of wood chippings, to rekindle the flames. She watched him from glassy eyes, shifting towards the fireplace the moment he took a step back. It was painful to watch her wriggle on the floor with her hands behind her back. He had to get those fucking shackles off, and for that, he needed Yvan.

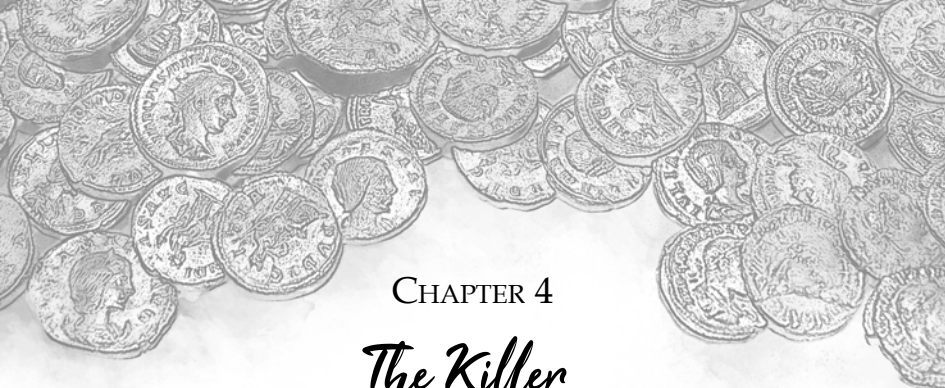
Cedric closed his fingers around the geode on his necklace and focused on his magic. It took him a moment to find the counterpart, to feel how it rested on warm skin, how warm it was itself. Yvan had to be at the forge—which was only logical this time of day. All Cedric needed was a small signal. He closed his eyes, guiding his magic to let the geode vibrate, then bounce. A few seconds passed, then he could feel warmth all around it. Yvan must be holding it. Cedric let it vibrate once more, before he let go of the connection.

It wasn't an emergency signal, but he was sure his husband would come home as soon as possible. And until then...

When Cedric opened his eyes, he was reminded how bad a state she was in. She had curled up in front of the fireplace as well as she could. The living room was decently warm, but she was still shivering from head to toe. Fresh blood trickled down her left wrist, and her tears had left smudgy streaks on her cheeks, mixing dried blood with dirt. She needed to get out of those filthy clothes, to warm up and rest.

Nothing of that was truly possible until they managed to get the restraints off. For now, all he could think of was grabbing a blanket from the sofa. She flinched when he started to pull it over her, but quickly calmed down. Cold as she was, the blanket wouldn't do much to help. For it to trap warmth, there must be warmth in the first place. But perhaps it would make her feel a bit safer; gods knew she could use it.

Cedric sighed as he sat down on the floor, a good distance away from her. While he waited for his husband to come home, he poked around in the fireplace, willing the flames to take over the wood more quickly.



CHAPTER 4

The Killen

Merridy stared at the fireplace, and the pitiful flames inside. They slowly started to lick up the wood, filling the air with what felt like blistering heat on her chilled skin. It let the feeling return to her limbs, which would have hurt under normal circumstances already. Now, covered in bruises and with her foot ruined from stumbling through the tunnels, it was excruciating. She had no more tears left to cry, but she couldn't stop shaking, or calm down her breaths, leaving her lips in soundless sobs.

It was all too much. She was too exhausted, in too much pain and too scared, making it impossible to form a single clear thought. She had been scared in her cell as well, perhaps even more, but this... this was a different kind of terror. She didn't dare to move her head, only cast a glance from the corner of her eye in the direction of the man who was sitting a few steps away from her, on the other side of the fireplace. He seemed to be fully focused on the fire, prodding the embers with an iron poker.

It wasn't that he looked dangerous. In fact, he looked very much ordinary. His shoulder length, light blonde hair was bound together in a ponytail, a bit brighter than his sun-

tanned skin. His piercing blue eyes were surrounded by little wrinkles. His beard was short and carefully trimmed, and he wore clothes plainer than any she had ever seen on him.

But she knew who he was. Cedric Harlow. The man who ruled Caldeia's underworld with an iron fist. Who was the last resort if one was desperate to get their hands on something, and willing to pay the price. Who was said to gather connections and debts like other people might collect useless knick-knacks. Who was known for making people vanish if they so much as looked at him wrong.

She didn't know why he had rescued her — if it was a rescue at all. He had recognized her, that much was certain. Merridy didn't know what Carl had done in the months since they had split up; since she had run away, really. He might have continued his foolish attempts to play with danger far too large for him to handle.

If Carl had crossed Cedric's path, he might have taken her as leverage. Perhaps he'd kill her the moment he realized she was of no use to him. Nothing this man did came without a price, Carl had said, and whatever the price for her life, Merridy was sure she wouldn't be able to pay it.

Despite the pain, Merridy focused on making no sound. As if he could forget she was here if only she was quiet enough. It didn't work. Her leg had started to cramp, and the attempt to move it sent a stabbing pain from her toes to her knee. She winced, which in turn made the shackles dig deeper into the raw skin on her wrists. Everything hurt so much, her breaths turned into desperate gasps for air.

The movement in the corner of her eye stopped, and Merridy whimpered. Her heart was racing, and her stomach turning, and by the gods, she didn't want to die. She just wanted to wake up in the broken shed she had made camp in and find it had all been a nightmare. She'd still be freezing, still starving, but free and not in the hands of a killer.

A killer who was looking at her, hot fire poker in hand.

"Don't worry. You're safe now," he said. "He'll be here soon, then we can get those things off you."

Cedric's words only made her sob. How could she be safe when she couldn't move, and everything hurt more with every second that passed? How could she not worry when she was bleeding onto his polished wooden floor and staining a quilt that must have cost more than she had ever owned in her life? And whoever this 'he' was, if he was a friend of Cedric, there was no reason for her to believe he wasn't a killer as well.

A moment later, she realized that 'he' was already here. A door opened and footsteps approached, then the two of them were talking in hushed voices. Too busy being scared to pay attention to what they said, Merridy only realized the second person had come closer when a shadow fell over her. She flinched, glancing up to find a mountain of a man looming over her. His shoulder length, light blonde hair was sweaty and unkempt, he wore a dirty, thick leather apron, and his arms looked as if he could snap her in half without much effort.

For now, all he did was crouch down in front of her.

"Hello. My name is Yvan," he said. "I'm gonna have to turn you onto your stomach, so I can get a good look at your hands, okay?"

Merridy trembled, her heart racing as if he had just told her he was going to rip her arms off instead. Her quiet whimper must have sounded enough like an agreement, though, or he had little patience. He pried the quilt off her shoulders and pulled it back. It hadn't done much to keep her warm, but without it, she felt even more vulnerable.

Yvan only pulled it down to her hips, then draped the loose half on the floor next to her. When he grabbed her shoulder to gently turn her, her chest came to rest on the quilt. It was

more comfortable than she would have thought, but not nearly enough to distract her from the agony in her shoulders and foot. With her cheek pressed against the floor, Merridy closed her eyes.

"Think you'll get them open?" Cedric's voice sounded from somewhere to the side.

"Please." Yvan's tone was too focused to sound truly annoyed. "The lock I can't open hasn't been forged yet."

Calloused fingers brushed the sore skin around the shackles as he tried to get a good grip on them. Faint clanking of metal sounded, the movement of some kind of tool vibrating ever so slightly in her bound hands. She wanted to scream every time he touched her fingers, but managed not to.

When the shackles finally separated, her first reflex was to pull her arms closer. It was a bad idea. Her shoulders locked up, leaving her curled against the quilt, clenching numb fingers and sobbing quietly.

"Slowly. Slowly."

Yvan put his hand between her shoulder blades, heavy and warm. Merridy screamed out of reflex, but it didn't hurt, at least not nearly as much as it should have. With his other hand, he took her left wrist, moving it slowly to the side, until it rested on the floor next to her. Then her right hand followed, until she lay relaxed for the first time in what must have been more than a day.

"I'm gonna take off the bands next. That might take a bit longer. Do you want to move before I start?"

Merridy almost choked on her whimpered 'no.' Her right arm was partially stuck under her, but the thought of moving was terrifying. As long as she didn't, the pain at least didn't get *worse*.

"All right. I'll start with your left hand, then."

This time, Merridy could have watched what he did, if only she had craned her neck a bit. She didn't. Instead, she

decided to close her eyes, listening to her hammering heart-beat and the quiet clanking of metal. There was no need for Yvan to be this gentle, but he took care to not move her hand more than necessary anyway. If he was a killer, at least he was a nice one.

"Damn. What did they do to you?"

Merridy's confusion about his question was short-lived. When he started to peel the metal band off her wrist, the lock finally open, it felt as if her skin was torn off as well. She whimpered and tried to pull away, but Yvan grabbed her arm to hold it in place.

"I'm sorry," he said as he removed the shackle and fresh blood ran down her wrist. Then, turned away from her, "Can you prepare some warm water? We need to get that cleaned before I can bandage those wounds."

Merridy shivered. Warm water would be nice. *Water* would be nice. The fire's heat only reminded her all the more how thirsty she was. More than thirsty. Her mouth and throat were so dry, it was painful, and she could feel how her body started to shut down. She'd do anything for a bit of water; anything but ask for it, apparently. It wasn't like she had much left to lose, yet no words left her lips. She didn't trust them. She *couldn't* trust them.

If she held out a few moments longer, perhaps she could get some before washing herself. It was all she could think of, even as Yvan reached for her right arm, pulling it out from under her. Her shoulder still hurt, but not as badly anymore; or it was drowned out by the burning ring of raw skin around her left wrist. Merridy finally managed to pull her left arm closer, pushing her hand to where she could see it. Moving her fingers worked, if sluggishly, but she couldn't feel them yet.

When Yvan pulled off the second shackle, she hugged the quilt tighter, squeezing eyes and lips shut in an attempt not to scream. Her whole body was trembling, the need for some

proper rest sitting deeply in her aching muscles and heavy eyelids.

"That's done, then," Yvan said.

Through half-lidded eyes, Merridy saw how Cedric took something from him—most likely the shackles. Morlit was expensive, and those two bands worth more than anything she had ever owned. More than her own life as well, probably, which wasn't hard, all things considered.

"I'll have to clean and bandage those wounds on your wrists, so they don't get infected," Yvan said after Cedric had retreated. "You should wash yourself before I do that, though, so you don't get the bandages wet right after. Think you'll manage?"

Merridy wanted to nod, but wasn't sure it would look like a nod, so she forced herself to whisper, "Yes."

She didn't know how, but she'd have to. There was no way—absolutely no way—she'd allow either of them to *wash* her. The thought alone made her skin crawl. Choking down a hysterical half-sob-half-laugh, Merridy pulled both her arms closer, trying to push herself up. It worked as well as she had expected, which was not at all. She sank back down after a moment, arms trembling and eyes burning.

"Hey. Take it slow. Here, let me help you."

The same strong hands that had been so careful in removing the shackles now reached for her arms. Yvan pulled her up, his movements slow and no less gentle, until she was sitting, clinging to the quilt wrapped around her legs and hip. For the first time, she managed to truly look around.

She was sitting in front of the fireplace in a spacious room; some kind of living room, perhaps even a salon. The furniture was mostly made from dark wood with ornate carvings: a table with four chairs, a large chest, shelves filled with books and showcases displaying various rocks behind glass. Even the feet of the sprawling sofa matched, though the rest of it

was covered in thick, purple cushions. A small crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, ridiculously fancy in a rather normal looking room like this, but no lights were ignited in it. Instead, the light came from the fireplace, and from a few glowing crystals scattered around the room, mounted to the walls or standing on the table.

Too late, Merridy realized that she had been staring. She quickly lowered her gaze, pulling the quilt tighter around herself. There was something she was supposed to do. She couldn't remember. Her head hurt—everything hurt, really—and her thoughts kept slipping away.

"I've put a tub of water in the laundry room," Cedric said, making her head snap up. "I've also put out some clothes that might fit you. Something that's less..."

He trailed off, but Merridy knew too well what he meant. Her clothes hadn't been in the best shape before her encounter with the guards; before being shoved and dragged around, before bleeding onto them, before lying around in filth and dirt. Now they were barely more than stinking rags. It wasn't her fault, but she was ashamed of it nevertheless.

Yvan got up and reached for her once more, pulling her up with him. The moment she was standing, she almost crumpled again. There was no way she'd be able to put any weight on her bare, mistreated foot. She had no choice but to cling to Yvan, who smiled kindly at her.

"The tub's in the washing room. I'll help you."

The washing room. Merridy's heart managed to beat even faster. People needed water in a room for washing, didn't they? She hobbled along next to Yvan, who led her into a room illuminated by a single crystal orb on the wall.

The room was sparsely furnished, with a few shelves along one of the walls, and some large, stacked tubs next to another. On a table in the middle of the room stood a smaller tub, and next to it lay a pile of fabric and a sponge.

Yvan led her there, then waited for her to let go of him and hold onto the table instead. When she was standing on her own, he said something, but Merridy didn't hear it. Her gaze was fixed on the tub in front of her, filled with water. Precious water, the surface rippling from how she had leaned upon the table.

Soapy water.

It was slightly cloudy, and clusters of bubbles had formed at the edges of the tub. Biting back a sob, Merridy didn't look as Yvan walked away. The door closed behind him, then she was alone. Her hand trembled on the table as she sank down onto the stool next to it, looking around. The hope she had held onto faded fast. There was no pump or sink she could see. Most houses had only one, if at all, and it didn't seem to be in this room.

She stared at the tub, the bubbles of soap treacherously small. She could smell it, some pungent, fruity scent that made her skin crawl. On any other day, she wouldn't even have considered washing herself with it, and now she was thinking about drinking it. Merridy reached for the water, cupping some of it in her hand. She had to try. Eyes closed and holding her breath, she raised her hand, telling herself that it would be fine.

It wasn't fine. The water was so terribly bitter, it made her stomach cramp the moment it touched her tongue. She tried to swallow it anyway, the relief of moisture on her lips so overwhelming, she needed more of it. It only took a second sip for her body to refuse. She tried desperately to keep it down, but it was a fight she could only lose. The convulsions made her hand slip off the table, and a moment later, she knelt on the floor, spitting out the water, and whatever else was still in her stomach after a day of hunger and thirst.

The pain in her knees made black spots dance in front of her eyes, but she couldn't move. Bent over, arms wrapped

around herself, she sobbed soundlessly, with no tears left to cry. She didn't want to believe he had done this on purpose, as some kind of cruel torture, but it was hard not to feel that way.

The thought alone was enough to bring the panic back. Frantically, Merridy looked around, searching for a way out. There was a window, but it was covered by a curtain. A part of her wanted to go there, figure out if it would be possible for her to escape. She didn't bother with it. Even *if* she'd make it to the window, and *if* she was on the ground floor so she could climb out, she'd never make it far. They'd find her again, and drag her back, and whatever awaited her then would be so much worse.

No, her best chance was to stay and do as she was told. Which included washing herself, thirst be damned, and then fixing the mess she had made.

Merridy pulled herself back onto the stool. Her gaze wandered back to the door, which was still safely closed. She had to get this over with.

Taking off her stained and ruined clothes was hard enough. Finding the courage to dip her arms into the water, submerging the already pulsing wounds in warm, soapy water, was even harder. She grabbed the sponge, taking a deep breath, and started to scrub.

It was torture to feel the water on her skin, knowing she couldn't drink it, and needing it so much. She was almost grateful for the pain in her battered and exhausted body, because it gave her a good excuse for the pathetic noises she made. Wincing and whimpering and sobbing quietly, she washed herself, even dunking her hair into the tub.

The smell of the soap still bothered her, but the smell of her *hair* bothered her more. It was matted and sticky, riddled with stalks of straw she couldn't even pick out, because her hands barely worked, her fingers still stiff and numb.

She tried to clean her foot as well, she really tried, but she couldn't. It was as if her body refused to let her touch the sliced open skin and flesh. Eventually, she had to give up, her hands shaking so much, she could barely hold the sponge at all anymore. It had to be enough.

Once more she wrung out the sponge, then she lowered herself to the floor, not finding a comfortable position, but at least not ending up on her knees. Cleaning the mess she had made didn't take half as long as hauling herself up onto the stool again. Her head was spinning by the time she had managed that, and she closed her eyes, trying to catch her breath.

When it didn't feel like the ground might open up and swallow her anymore, she dropped the sponge into the tub, before reaching for the pile of fabric next to it. Unfolding it, she discovered a knit jacket and some kind of dress; barely knee length, with short sleeves and an ugly, woven floral pattern, matching the ugly, olive color it was dyed in. That was all; no underwear, no pants.

Merridy's gaze flitted to the pile of her discarded clothes. She couldn't wear those again. Even if she would have wanted, they stank like mold and piss, and there was no way the men wouldn't notice that.

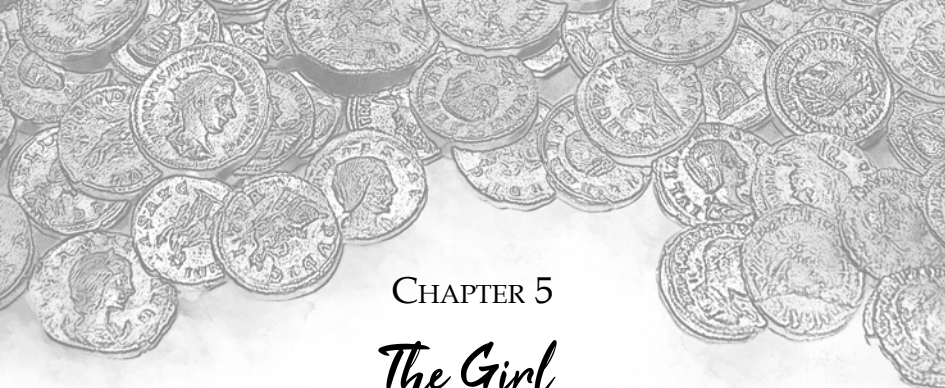
Her arms trembled as she pulled the dress over her head, tugging at it until it fell down, covering the dark bruises on her shoulder and side. It was fine, she told herself, brushing her hand over the slightly stiff fabric, not feeling the texture under her fingers. It was fine, she told herself, wriggling her arms into the sleeves of the jacket.

It was fine.

Then she sat there, shaking because it was *not* fine. She didn't know what they wanted from her, and she didn't want to know. All she wanted was to leave, to return to her hideout and cry herself to sleep. She was so, so tired. The temptation

to just curl up on the floor and pretend she was safe in here was strong, but she couldn't hide forever. Staring at the door, Merridy tried to steel herself for the painful steps ahead — and whatever might expect her once she returned to the living room.





CHAPTER 5

The Girl

Cedric glanced at the door to the washing room. She had been in there for a long time, hadn't she?

"She'll need time," Yvan said, as if he had read his thoughts. "She could barely stand. So stop pacing around, and tell me what the fuck happened."

He hadn't been pacing had he? Finding himself in front of the fireplace, where he had no reason to be, Cedric sighed. He had. While he started explaining how he had managed to stumble across the woman, he kept poking the fire, which really wasn't necessary anymore. He just needed something to do that wasn't staring at the door to the washing room.

He had barely finished his story – which might or might not have started at the very beginning, telling Yvan about what had led him into the palace in the first place – when said door to the washing room opened. She stepped out, clinging to the door frame at first, then pressing her palms onto the sideboard next to her, to keep herself standing.

She looked tired, and hurt, and so very scared. Her pale face was dotted with dark bruises, the skin around her wrists angry red, still seeping blood, and she obviously tried to keep her weight off her injured foot. Her gaze flitted from Cedric to

Yvan and back, as if she wanted to figure out who the bigger threat was; the guy with the bad reputation, or the one who looked like he could snap her neck without much effort.

"Please," she said, eventually deciding on looking at Cedric. Her words were a toneless whisper he had to all but read from her lips. "Please."

He would never know if she had wanted to kneel, or if it was merely her strength leaving her. Her trembling hands slipped off the sideboard and she sank to the floor. The moment her knees hit the wood, she sobbed, bent over and arms wrapped around herself.

"Please. Please. Some... some water."

Something inside Cedric broke at hearing those words. His fingers clenched around the fire poker, missing the familiar shape of his cane. He squeezed it for a moment, then let go of it, so it fell to the ground with a loud clatter.

"Yvan? Help her to the sofa, please, I'll get some water." Cedric's voice was firm and calm, not showing any of his inner turmoil. It was something he had perfected over the years, and he had seldom been as glad about it as he was now.

He enjoyed the doors his reputation opened for him, and a certain fear in the eyes of a prospective client who had thought themselves smarter than him. He certainly did not enjoy a young woman kneeling in front of him, shaking in terror and begging for water.

Needing the moment to calm down, he walked into the kitchen, where he leaned against the counter for three, four deep breaths before he opened one of the cupboards. A pitcher of water in one hand and an empty cup in the other, he then returned to the living room—only to find the woman sobbing and almost hysterical on the floor in front of the sofa.

When he stopped in front of her, she pressed herself against the cushions. Scratch almost; she *was* hysterical. Arms wrapped around herself, she was shaking so hard, he could

barely make out the words behind her stammered apologies. Not that there was much to make out, not when she mostly alternated 'I'm sorry' and 'please.'

Cedric looked around, trying to figure out the reason for her behavior. Nothing was broken, nothing missing. If the lines in the cushions on the sofa were any indication, she had been up there, then slid down. There were a few dark spots, most likely blood, but it didn't seem to be enough to —

Was that it? Was she so afraid because she had bled on his sofa?

He put down the pitcher and cup and lowered himself to one knee, propping his hand against the sofa.

"Hey. Look at me."

She did, but the way she flinched told him that he had been too stern, so he tried to calm his voice even more. "It's all right." Who could have guessed that trying to appear harmless was so fucking hard. "That's nothing that can't be cleaned. I brought you some water, so come sit up on the sofa."

She stared at him for a moment longer, then pushed her elbows against the sofa in an attempt to get up. Not reassured by his words, Cedric realized, merely following his orders. She held her trembling hands as far away from the cushions as possible, folding them in her lap once she had managed to sit.

Well; she had asked for water, so maybe that would help her calm down a little. "Here," he said, filling the cup and handing it to her.

She took it clumsily, wrapping both her palms around it. Cedric wondered what was wrong with her fingers. They weren't broken, were they? He watched as she lifted the cup, finding no obvious signs of that, no swelling or deformation.

His thoughts were interrupted when she started to cough. She didn't stop drinking, though, taking small sips between desperate gasps for air.

"Hey. Slow down," he said, concerned she would drop the cup with how much she was shaking.

She froze, her fingers visibly clenched around the cup, as if she feared he would take it away. Thinking about it, he had seen no sign of anything that could hold water in her cell. The lone bucket in a corner certainly served another purpose. She tried to suppress her coughs – with rather moderate success – but didn't lift the cup, merely staring at him.

"You can have as much as you want. Just take it slow, all right?"

When she didn't react, he nodded, as if he'd *allow* her to continue drinking. He hated that it worked. At least she drank slower this time. When the cup was empty, he didn't bother to ask if she needed more, he filled it again. Pitcher in hand, he watched her lift the cup. A watered down drop of blood left a faint trail where it ran down her arm.

"Can you tell me when you were arrested?"

"Yesterday morning," she said between sips. Her voice was rough; most likely still from her coughing fit.

It was late afternoon. That meant she had spent more than a full day restrained like that, and, by the looks of it, without any water. If the slightly different coloration of her bruises was any indication, she must also have been abused more than once. The thought that despite all she seemed more afraid of him than of what he had saved her from made his blood boil. He would really have liked to know what exactly she had heard about him.

"What for?" he asked instead.

"Stealing."

Cedric hummed. It didn't surprise him. She had looked like skin and bones under her dirty, threadbare clothes. Still, he didn't think she could have been living on the streets for too long. Those who made it for years out there grew harder than that, by necessity. She might have lost her home or family

only recently. A part of him wanted to ask, but he was reasonably sure that wouldn't end too well.

Noticing her look at the pitcher, he instead filled her cup a third time. He tried not to wonder how likely it was that *she* would make it out there. It wasn't his problem. He got her out of her cell, and once he had fixed her up, he'd send her on her way. Of course, first he had to make sure she wouldn't tell anyone about the secret tunnel. That probably wouldn't be too hard, he thought grimly. It would hardly be possible to intimidate her any more than she already was.

"Sorry that took so long."

Cedric turned toward the voice, to watch Yvan enter the room, carrying a pile of fabric and a bowl. He set everything onto the table, then sat down on the floor in front of the sofa.

"I'm gonna take care of your wounds now," he explained. "I know about your foot, and your wrists. Is there anything else I should know about?"

She shook her head, lips pressed together.

"Are you sure? I saw you favor your side as you sat down."

She wrapped her arm protectively around her side, digging her fingers into her dress. "It's just bruised," she whispered.

The way she winced at her own touch told Cedric that this must be where she was injured. To take a look at that, she'd have to lift her dress, which — Fuck, he hadn't put out any underwear for her. How could he; he didn't *have* any underwear that would fit her.

"It's all right," he said quickly, not sure if Yvan would come to the same conclusion. "Just let us know if there's anything you need."

Despite her nod, he had little hope she actually would. Cedric decided to let her be. There was nothing they could do about bruises, and her dress showed no sign of bleeding wounds. Her foot was a different story. Yvan had directed

her to shuffle back on the sofa, so she could lean against the cushions and he could take a look at the sole.

"That doesn't look good," he said. "I'll have to clean it. I'm sorry, but it will hurt."

Most of the blood had dried, but a few drops still found their way to gather at her heel. Cedric had paid no attention to the floor, but as he now craned his neck to look past Yvan, he saw the red footprints she had left on the floorboards. The anger he felt had nothing to do with the effort it would take to clean that up, and everything to do with the way the fucking guards had treated her. He should —

Her scream almost made him drop the pitcher he was still holding. Cedric hurriedly put it down, then grabbed her arms, to stop her from trying to wriggle away from Yvan.

"Calm down," he said, which had exactly zero effect.

She screamed again—a wail that seemed to pierce his eardrums, until it got interrupted by a choked sob. Well, that was fucking loud. There was a good chance it was audible from the street, and the last thing he needed was a guard knocking on *his* door to investigate. He grabbed one of the rags, twisted it into a roll and held it out to her.

"Here. Bite down on this."

When she didn't react, only staring at him with wide eyes, he nudged her lips with the fabric.

"Open your mouth."

She obeyed, choking down a sob as he pushed the roll between her teeth. Her breathing had picked up, and her eyes were as wide and panicked as they had been when he had found her sitting on the floor. Cedric kept his hands on her arms, to hold her still while Yvan did whatever it was he was doing. There wasn't much Cedric could see, at least not until Yvan lowered the bloody rag to wash it out in the bowl. Blood was running down her foot, which looked like it had been sliced open multiple times.

Her next scream was muffled, and much more quiet. For some reason, it still hurt just as much though; just his heart, rather than his ears. Well, fuck. Before Cedric knew what he was doing, he held her closer, pressing her against his chest, arms wrapped around her. He could feel her shake in his grip, but not struggle against it.

"It's going to be okay," he said, and it was the softest he had spoken all day. "I know this is bad, but if it gets infected, it will be much worse."

On second thought, those words might not have been the best choice. She whimpered, pressing her face against his chest. Cedric helplessly stroked her back, deciding to just shut the fuck up. He tried his best to ignore her breathless sobs, and her instinctive attempts to get away every time Yvan touched her foot, and the way her hands grabbed his shirt, holding onto him.

By the time Yvan was done, she seemed to be completely exhausted. Her eyes were red and glassy, the tears on her cheeks long dried. Cedric took the rolled up fabric from her mouth, using it to wipe away the saliva that had run down her chin.

"It's over. You can rest now," he said, brushing his thumb over her cheek.

She looked at him, tired and unbelieving. Then, as if something inside her had finally snapped, she crumpled. Cedric caught her and held her, watching silently how Yvan reached for her hands, to take care of her wrists. Whether asleep or merely exhausted, she didn't stir once while he cleaned the wounds and bandaged them. They were much less severe than the ones on her foot; skin merely rubbed raw, not cut deeply.

When all was done, Cedric gently lifted her and leaned her back against the cushions, making sure her head was propped up and her hands folded in her lap. If she hadn't been asleep

before, she definitely was now.

Yvan got up, grabbing the dirty rags and the bowl with the bloody water. Cedric followed him into the kitchen, stopping on his way to pick up the quilt from where it lay in front of the fireplace. There were some bloodstains on it now, he noticed with dismay. Folding it, he leaned against the door frame, watching Yvan clean the bowl and put it upside down to dry.

"What are you gonna do with her?" Yvan asked over his shoulder while soaking the rags in the sink.

Yeah. That was an excellent question. "Fuck," Cedric said under his breath. His plan of getting rid of her as quickly as possible definitely wouldn't work out. She needed time to heal, a place to rest and a few good meals if she should be able to at least stand on her own feet again.

"Really?" Yvan turned around, leaning back against the sink. He seemed to be done with cleaning up for now. "Didn't think she's your type."

"That's not funny," Cedric snapped. He was too angry about this whole fucking mess he had burdened himself with. "If I had known this would cause me so much trouble, I would —" He snapped his mouth shut without finishing his sentence. No matter what, there was *no way* he would have left her there.

Still, having her here, especially today, was such a nuisance. "We have two, three hours at most before the first guests arrive," he said, running his hand through his hair. "We need to put her somewhere safe, clean up and start preparing."

Luckily, there wasn't much to prepare for a get-together that consisted mostly of expensive alcohol, gambling and the occasional snack. Still, he had to change, wipe up all the blood, and prepare the salon — and perhaps punch a wall or two to get rid of his pent up anger.

"The bedroom?" Yvan asked.

"I'm not giving up my bed," Cedric replied, earning himself a dark look. "And it's too close to the salon anyway. It will be way too loud. Let's put her in the study. It's the furthest away from all the commotion."

That solution seemed to be acceptable, for Yvan merely nodded. "You can put that one down already," he said, nodding towards the folded quilt, "and I'll go grab some more blankets."

Cedric did as he was told, walking up the stairs and down the hallway, to enter the room furthest away from the livelier parts of the house. Despite it not being evening yet, it was dark inside. He brushed his finger over the glowing crystal mounted next to the door, bathing the room in a warm, golden light. There was no point in opening the curtains, just to close them again in a few minutes.

The room wasn't large, and it had been weeks since the last time he had entered it. Mostly, he used it to store paperwork, while he preferred to do it in the living room, in front of a warm fire and with a good glass of rum in hand. A large cabinet on the left hand wall held said paperwork, while to his right a bunch of crates and boxes were piled up. Occasionally, he had to acquire actual antiques to sell in his very legit shop, which was not at all a disguise for his other business. Unfortunately, the process of assessing and cataloging them was about the least exciting thing he could think of.

After pushing the chair under the table in front of the window, he placed the quilt on the floor next to the cabinet on the wall. He could fold it three times and still have more than enough room for her. When Yvan entered, arms full with pillows and blankets, Cedric took them from him.

"I'll take care of that. You can get her."

Yvan nodded, and Cedric got to work, placing two more blankets on top of the quilt. The warmest one, made from thick wool, he kept for last, putting it at the foot of the makeshift

bed. With the pillow added, it looked decent enough, allowing him to push down the guilt of letting her sleep on the floor.

Footsteps made him turn around, frowning as he watched his husband carry her into the room. She looked so fucking tiny in his arms. Granted, everyone would look small compared to him. Not everyone would look as pale and as lifeless, though.

Yvan laid her down on the bed, and Cedric pulled the blanket over her, making sure it was tucked in tight. When he got up, he could have sworn he saw the hint of a smile on his husband's face.

"I hope she'll be a bit less... terrified when she wakes up," Cedric said while walking towards the door. He touched the glowing crystal, extinguishing it. "I'll have to talk to her about a few things."

"About keeping your secrets?"

"That, too." Cedric pulled the door closed behind him, slowly, so as not to make any noise. "But I also want to ask her what she's heard about me." He sighed. "She's terrified. Of me. Probably because of what her ex boyfriend Carl—you remember Carl?" When Yvan nodded, Cedric continued, "What he told her about me. I might have laid it on a bit thick with him. That guy was insufferable."

Allowing him into his circle of confidants had never been an option, but he just hadn't given up. At least not until several months ago, when he had vanished completely. Now, Cedric wondered if his disappearance had anything to do with her ending up on the streets. Another thing he might ask her, if he got the chance.

"You're coming?"

Yvan's question made Cedric's head snap up. He hadn't even realized he had stopped right outside the door. In a few hours, his house would be swarming with guests. He didn't

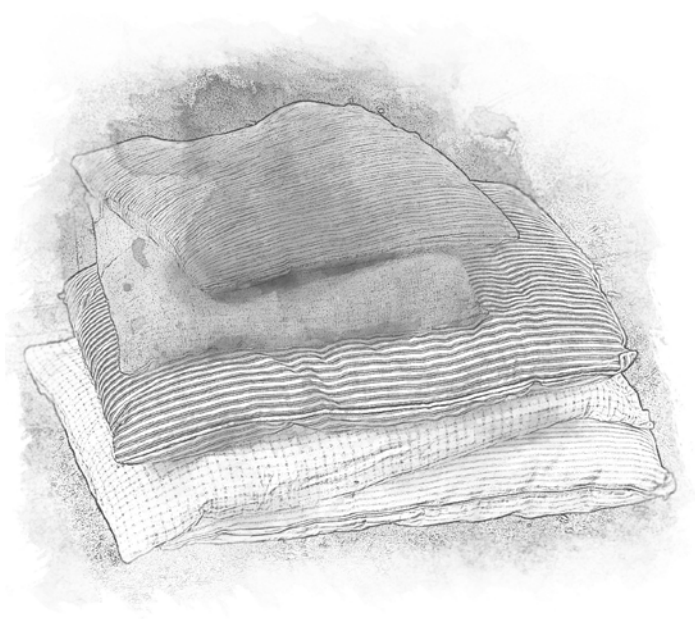
like the thought of leaving her alone like this, completely vulnerable should someone stumble upon her. It was unlikely someone would be brazen enough to snoop around—but then, that one time he could remember her attending one of his parties, *she* had snooped around.

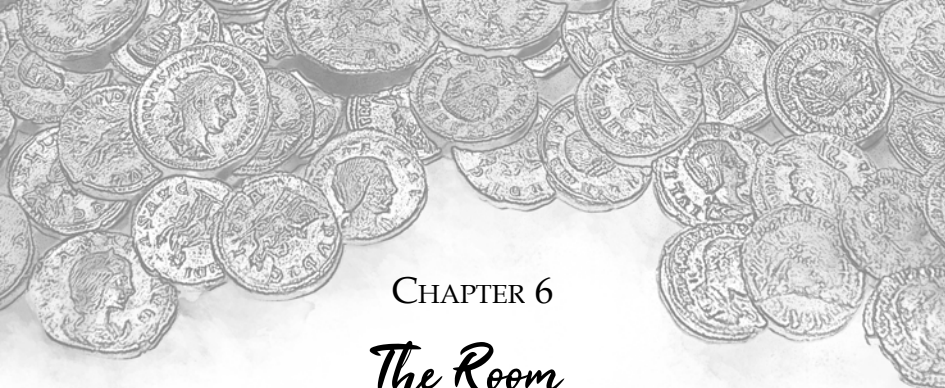
Cedric turned the key to the study room, pulled it out and slipped it into his pocket. “Coming,” he said, walking down the hallway. He’d make sure to check in on her every once in a while.

Going down the stairs, he was limping visibly. Now that she was taken care of, he felt the strain of walking through the tunnels and carrying her with him. He was glad when he had made it back into the living room, where he grabbed his favorite cane from his stand. Twirling it in his hand, he watched the amethyst patterns spin, like he did so often. Just that today, it didn’t do much to calm his nerves. The weight of the key seemed to be like lead in his pocket.

“Can you clean up the blood?” Yvan shouted from the kitchen. “I’ll start with the food.”

Cedric sighed. It was going to be a fucking long evening.





CHAPTER 6

The Room

Merridy awoke in pitch black darkness. The lingering memory of terror made her heart beat up to her throat before she remembered what had happened. She sat up hastily, slamming into something, then sinking back, clutching her head.

Her head hurt more than it should have from the impact. Her fingers hurt. Her shoulders hurt. Everything hurt. Moving her leg made white hot pain erupt along her sole.

She froze, afraid to make the pain worse, afraid to bump into anything else. The darkness was disorienting. There was always some light if one slept behind broken wooden boards in a lively part of the city. In fact, the night in the dungeon was the only time she could remember where it had been truly dark, and that memory did nothing to calm her nerves.

She wasn't in the dungeon anymore, that much she could tell. More carefully this time, she reached out, until her fingertips bumped into something. The sensation made her wince. It still didn't feel right, like patches of numbness on her skin, but it allowed her to feel for the thing she had found.

Long. Thin. Upright. Smooth, not cold. Wooden. Meeting a solid slab made from the same, or at least a similar material. A chair, probably.

She moved on, found another leg of the same chair, then a thicker and much longer one. This must be the table. She felt over the floor next, finding herself sitting on layers of fabric; a pile of blankets? Next to her was – if hinges and slits were any indication – a closed cabinet of some sorts.

For all she could tell, she was in an ordinary room. The realization could have been reassuring, if she hadn't known whose house this room must belong to. Cedric Harlow, who had freed her, and brought her to safety. Who had offered her clean clothes and a chance to wash herself – she could still smell that disgusting soap in her hair. Who had held her, while his husband had tended to her wounds.

The latter had most likely been a mere coincidence while holding her down so Yvan could clean her foot. She had tried to hold still, but it had hurt so much. It still hurt. Merridy clutched her thickly bandaged foot, whimpering quietly. She didn't know what Cedric wanted from her; if he had planned to tell her, she must have lost consciousness before he had gotten a chance to.

And now she was in some strange, dark room, waiting for him to return. For him to realize that there was nothing she could offer him. Merridy braced her hands against the blankets she was sitting on, pushing herself to her knees. If she found a window or door, she might be able to get away before it came to that.

She started to crawl along the cabinet so she wouldn't lose her orientation. As her hair fell into her face, she could smell the soap in it. The memory of the taste made her stomach turn. She breathed through her mouth, trying to calm down. Her knees hurt almost as much as her foot, and after a few moments, she wanted nothing more than to return to the blankets and curl up. She didn't. She had to get out.

Her searching fingers found the end of the cabinet, a bit of open space, and a wall. She decided to follow the wall, away

from the cabinet. Her movements were slower now, pausing every so often to sink to the side, taking the weight off her knees.

Just when she thought she couldn't go on, her fingers found a small slit in the wall. Hope gave her new energy, and she raised her hands along the slit until her fingers brushed something metal. It must be the hinges of a door!

Merridy's hands trembled as she followed the outline until she reached the other side of the door. Ignoring the pain in her knees, she stretched until she found the handle, closing her fingers around it. She braced herself, pulled – and nothing happened. A frustrated scream died in her throat as she sank to the floor, wrapping her arms around herself. Of course the door was locked.

Her heart was hammering in her chest as she tried again, just to make *sure*. But even as she dragged on the handle with all her weight, the door didn't budge. She let go, flinching as the handle snapped back with an audible thunk. If only no one had heard it, would come looking for her. The time she was assumed to be asleep might be all the time she'd have to find a way out.

A window. If she was lucky, there would be a window. She had no way to tell if she was in a cellar of some sorts, which would be bad; or a higher floor, which would be just as bad. There was only one way to find out, though.

Merridy continued to crawl along the wall, not bothering to search until she had reached the next corner. Continuing on, she stretched after each painful step. There was nothing, and nothing, and then she bumped into something with her shoulder. It was too low, too far away from the wall to be a windowsill; too solid and rough and rectangular to be any kind of furniture she could think of.

She might have been able to figure out what it was, if only she had allowed herself to think about it, if only her breaths

weren't coming quicker and quicker with each passing second. She needed to find a way out! It was all she could think of, to get out of this room, before Cedric returned and *killed* her.

But now this damn thing was between her and the wall, and she had to stand up to keep searching for a window. By the gods, she didn't think she would be able to walk. She tried not to think about what that would mean for her escape even if she found a window. Instead, she pulled herself up, stretched to feel for the wall, sank down when she found nothing and continued to crawl, only to repeat the process after half a step.

The thing next to her became higher; too high to reach for the wall while merely kneeling. She grit her teeth and reached for the edge of the thing, carefully testing whether it held her. Perhaps if she kept her weight off her injured foot it wouldn't be so bad.

Merridy barely managed to keep standing, feeling along the wall, finding nothing again. When she put her palm on the thing to take some more weight off her foot, sudden pain made her knees buckle.

Out of reflex, Merridy tried to find something to hold on to. Her fingers dug into something soft; something that started to slip when she automatically grabbed it. She lost her balance, falling backwards and pulling whatever it was down with her. It landed on top of her and all around her; some kind of fabric, perhaps a pile of clothes.

She scrambled out from under it, losing the fight against her tears at the burning pain in her hand. She was bleeding, she was sure of it. When she pulled her hand to her chest, she could feel the drops run down her arm, but she had no way to find out how bad it was.

With the tears came the despair, and the utter exhaustion. She'd never find a window. Even if she did, she'd never

manage to climb out. And even if she managed, she wouldn't be able to run away. She was trapped, and everything she tried only made things worse.

Merridy pressed herself against the wooden thing at her back, arms wrapped around her knees. Blood dripped onto the bare skin of her legs and seeped into the bandage at her wrist, leaving it cold and slick. It was disgusting, and it made her skin crawl.

She tried to ignore it, but it was impossible not to feel it; just like it was impossible not to smell the pervasive scent of the soap, or to stop her body from shaking. It was all too much. The pain, and the darkness, and the blood, and the room she couldn't get out of, and the hair she couldn't get away from.

The one thing she could get rid of was the blood soaked bandage. She pulled at it, sobbing quietly, her movements panicked, not getting it off fast enough. Her rough attempt probably reopened the wound on her wrist, but it didn't matter — all that mattered was getting it *off*.

The moment it came loose, she threw it to the ground, then crawled away from it. The surface at her back gave way to open air, and she fell over backwards. Her shoulders slammed against the wall first, dampening the impact as her head followed. A pained groan escaped her lips, turning into a sob. Before she knew what she was doing, she smashed her hand against the wooden thing. The impact burned in her injured palm, fueling her desperate fury.

If not for this goddamn whatever-the-fuck-it-was, she could have kept searching for a window, wouldn't have injured herself. She hit it again and again, letting out all her fear and anger. Each impact sent a small wave of pain through her arm and shoulder, but not enough to make her *stop*.

It didn't take long for her short burst of adrenaline to fade, leaving her exhausted and shaking and unable to prevent her

tears from falling. Of course, her hand hurt so much more now. Pressing it against her chest, she let her shoulders drop. All she wanted to do was curl up somewhere and sleep. The blankets she had awoken on were probably right across the room, but she was shaking so much, she doubted she'd make it there.

Just when she had decided to try it, if only she could figure out how to move without collapsing, she heard a key turning inside the lock. She froze.

"No, no, no," she whispered, pressing herself against the wall.

The opening door brought a bit of light from the hallway in front of it—not much, just enough to make out some outlines. Before her eyes had adjusted to it, a brighter light flared up, making her squeeze her eyes shut. She dug her fingers into her knees, trying her best to make no sound.

A man stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. "What... What happened?" he asked. She was sure it was Cedric's voice. "Is that..." He walked towards her, paused, and something rustled. "That's blood. What the..."

Obviously not waiting for an answer, he walked past her, followed by a scratching noise on wood. When he approached her again, his footsteps stopped right in front of her. Pretending she was safe as long as she didn't look at him obviously didn't work, so she finally dared to open her eyes and looked up. She wished she hadn't.

Of course it was Cedric. In his left hand, next to his cane, he held a piece of linen; once pristine white, now sprinkled with blood. In his right hand, he held a knife. It was strange, a completely surreal part of her thought while she couldn't take her eyes off the blade. In all the stories, she had never heard of him killing someone with such mundane methods.

"Please, please don't kill me," she whispered, curling up as if that would do anything to protect her. "Please. I'm sorry."

I'm sorry." For ruining his things with her blood. For trying to get away. For being in the wrong place at the wrong time and causing him this much trouble. "I'm sorry, just... don't kill me, please."

The following silence was anything but reassuring. She flinched when he moved, burying her face in her arms, sure every moment now she'd feel her skin split under cold metal. He didn't attack her, though, or even touch her. Instead, he sat down in front of her with a sigh. Merridy didn't dare to look up.

"Why do you think I want to kill you?" he asked.

That question was about the last thing she had expected. It pulled her out of her spiraling thoughts as she tried to find a *reason*. She couldn't. There were a million things on her mind, but none she could put into words. He was a killer; that was what he *did*.

"I don't know," she eventually mumbled, because he was still waiting for an answer. "I don't know."

"Okay."

There was a long pause, telling Merridy that it was most certainly not okay.

"I'm *not* going to kill you. And I would appreciate it if you could stop trying to kill yourself." Despite his words, he picked up the knife — only to use it to cut a long strip of fabric off the linen on his lap. "Give me your hand, you're bleeding all over the place."

Merridy obeyed, holding out her blood dripping hand. Instead of reaching for it, Cedric sighed and cut another few strips out of the linen. When he was done, he wiped as much blood as he could off her hand, before he put a folded piece of fabric on the wound. A fresh bandage quickly followed, wrapped around her palm and secured around her wrist.

"That's better," Cedric said once he was done. He looked from her hand to the pile of fabric next to him, lying in front

of a stack of crates. "Now what exactly were you trying to do here?"

At his question, Merridy froze again. Making him think she had snooped around in his belongings was bad. Admitting she had tried to escape wasn't much better. She couldn't come up with a single safe explanation for why he had found her like that, and the more she tried, the quicker her breaths became.

"Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just wondering what the fuck happened."

His harsh tone did nothing to calm her down. "I don't know. I don't know, I'm sorry," she whispered, pressing her hand against her chest once more. The tightly wrapped bandage helped to dull the pain.

"You've said that before." Cedric's tone was cool as he looked her up and down. Merridy wished she knew what he saw. "What's your name?" he asked.

Merridy stared at him. He didn't even know her name. Of course he didn't; she was insignificant. But he had recognized her as Carl's girlfriend, which brought her first panicked thoughts back: what if her ex had crossed his path and she was here as leverage?

"Merri – Merridy," she whispered.

"Merridy. I can imagine you've heard some rumors about me." He paused, perhaps to give her a chance to confirm. She absolutely had, and she absolutely would not. "I can't claim all of them are false, but I don't kill people unless they give me a reason to. And I have no reason to kill you. I don't even know you."

"Then why did you save me? What do you *want* from me?"

The moment the question had left her lips, she wanted to curl up again. How did she dare to demand answers from him?

"I don't..." Cedric sighed a clearly frustrated sigh. "Listen. For you it's obviously a rather big deal, but for me it really

wasn't. I had the key, so I opened the door. That's all. The way you were treated is despicable, and I'm not going to let that happen if I can help it."

He let his gaze wander over the mess she had made. "Would have thought twice about it if I had known how much of a nuisance it would be," he muttered, gathering the scattered pieces of fabric and starting to fold them.

"I can leave," Merridy whispered, tears in her eyes. "I'll leave. Please."

She knew it wasn't true. She would barely make it one step out of the door before simply collapsing. Cedric had probably come to the same conclusion. The expression on his face turned to pity.

"You're..." He gestured to her bloodstained hands. "I hadn't anticipated this, but now that you're here, I'm not going to throw you out. It's been a long day. Your foot... *You* need some rest. I'm gonna clean this up, and then I'll return to my guests, and I hope you can find some sleep without taking the whole room apart."

Merridy couldn't decide if his words were an offer or an order. She was still afraid, and she still wanted to get away, but she was also so very tired. Trapped or not, the pile of blankets had been the most comfortable place she had slept in for a while.

Cedric stopped waiting for her to reply and got up, his movements slow and a bit stiff. For a moment, she saw more than a killer. She saw a man. A man who wasn't exactly the kind and caring type, but not dangerous either. He steadied himself with one hand on the crates, holding the other out to her.

"Can you give me the sheets?"

Merridy hurried to pick up the top one, holding it out to him. While he placed it on the crates, she reached for the next sheet. The moment she lifted it, something fell out of it, tumbling to the floor. After handing Cedric the sheet, she reached

for the object. She picked it up, a small, crudely sewn bag resembling a floppy pillow, intending to hand it to him. Half-way to raising her hand, she froze.

Lavender.

The thing smelled of lavender. Instantly, new tears welled in her eyes. She pulled the bag closer to her face, not caring how pathetic this might look. She could barely remember the last time she had smelled lavender—a few blooms taken from some rich guy’s garden at the height of summer. They had long dried and crumbled, leaving nothing but an aching memory.

Merridy flinched when Cedric cleared his throat, her fingers trembling around the bag. It wasn’t hers to take. She should hand it to him. If only her body would obey her will.

“It’s filled with lavender. Against moths,” he said.

Merridy nodded, as if she didn’t know that. As if she hadn’t watched her mother sew dozens of those, and fill them anew each year. As if she hadn’t stolen one of those to use as a pillow for her wool doll; the same doll that was now stuck in some soggy bag in a broken shed in some back alley, together with the rest of her meager belongings.

“You can keep it,” Cedric added, his tone as cold and indifferent as before. “Doesn’t belong here anyway. Now please, hand me the rest.”

Merridy nodded again, putting the bag in her lap and reaching for the next folded sheet. There were no other hidden surprises, and the moment she had handed Cedric the last one, she picked up his cane as well. It was pretty. She couldn’t help but trace one of the purple bands inlaid into the polished wood.

He took it from her, straightening up. “Thanks,” he said, nodding towards her bed. “Need help getting there?”

Merridy followed his gaze. The aspect of crawling back had become much worse now that her hand hurt almost as much

as her knees. Getting up seemed just as impossible.

"I don't know," she whispered, because 'no' would have been a lie, but she couldn't admit it.

Cedric only hummed, offering her his right hand. "Come."

She didn't have the strength anymore to refuse, to worry what each small act of kindness might cost her. Holding the lavender bag in her bandaged right hand, she took Cedric's hand with her left, allowing him to pull her up.

He put his arm around her shoulder, steadying her while she hobbled across the room. At her bed, he helped her lower herself onto the blankets, not letting go until she was sitting safely. While Merridy figured out what the best possible position for her mistreated limbs would be, he nudged the wool blanket closer with the tip of his cane.

"Will you be all right?" he asked. Merridy could have sworn there had been an edge to his voice, something other than the indifference and slight frustration he had shown her so far. Perhaps she had imagined it.

Pulling the blanket closer, she nodded. She had been pathetic enough for him to have some pity, and was insignificant enough for him to want nothing from her. Now she just had to make sure to do what he said, to not draw his anger to herself after all, until she could leave. She could work with that.

"I'm leaving the light on this time, but I will lock the door again," Cedric said when it was obvious she wouldn't reply. "There's a lot of people here tonight, and I don't want any of them to find you."

A moment later, the light started to fade, until it was dim enough so she could only make out some general shapes in the room. It was a familiar almost-darkness; one that wouldn't keep her from finding rest, but would allow her to orient herself when she woke up. The door opening didn't allow much more light in; it was just as dark outside in the hallway.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Had she even thanked him before? For saving her, for taking care of her wounds, for letting her stay? For the lavender bag she now held close to her face, breathing in the oh so familiar scent? It even drowned out the smell of the remnants of the horrible soap in her hair.

If she managed to forget her terror for a moment, this was the nicest anyone had been to her in... she didn’t want to think about it. “Thank you,” she repeated sniffing, feeling how her tears welled up again. She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. Perhaps she could hold it together, for once, until she was alone.

There was a long moment of silence, only broken by slow footsteps and the tapping of Cedric’s cane on the floor. “You’re welcome,” he said quietly as he stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him. The sound of the key turning inside the lock wasn’t nearly as threatening as it should have been.

Perhaps she was trapped, but at least for now she was safe. Merridy hugged her blanket and the little bag, hoping the memories of lavender fields and home and family would carry over to her dreams.



CHAPTER 7

The Guest

Cedric's hand trembled around the handle of the cane as he walked down the hall. It was the anger, he told himself, and perhaps the rum he had enjoyed before his card game had been interrupted by one of his guests claiming he had heard rats upstairs.

A fine rat she was, that girl. It had been hard enough to contain his fury in front of her, and it didn't seem like he had done a good job of it. He was furious at the guards, for treating her like this, at this Carl, for dragging her into this, and at the whole fucking city, for leaving its people to die on the streets.

In front of the bathroom he paused, looking at his fingers, and the blood that had dried on them. Dry rags could only do so much to fix this, so he opened the door, stepping inside. He leaned the cane against the sink, noticing with dismay that the golden handle sported a few blood smears as well.

Scrubbing his hands first, he stared into the mirror, wondering what it was that she had seen in him to be this afraid. Bright blue eyes and a well groomed beard and hair, showing the first streaks of gray in the dark blonde. His light brown coat over a fine, dark shirt only told a knowing eye

how expensive his clothes had been. He always took care to look... well, perhaps not quite ordinary. A slightly sophisticated attire and some eccentric habits were well suited for a man nearing his fifties, splitting his devotion between his husband and his antiquities.

After inspecting his nails and finding them free of blood, Cedric reached for his cane. Scrubbing the handle, he huffed quietly. No, it certainly hadn't been his appearance that had scared her this much. It probably didn't help that he had no patience to speak of, and no idea how to handle this kind of situation. The key weighed heavily in his pocket. He hated that he had locked her in again, but he would hate it even more if anyone would disturb her. All it would take was one drunken gambler, tired of losing and keen on finding the alleged rats that had caused such a ruckus.

When Cedric returned to the salon, he found that another round of cards had just ended. His abandoned hand was nowhere to be seen. The men placed their cards down, to be shuffled for the next round, while one of them gathered the coins piled in the middle of the table.

"What took you so long?" the man sitting next to the empty chair asked. "Did the rats put up a fight?"

"No rats," Cedric said.

"Is that... blood?" One of the others was staring at Cedric. "There... on your..."

Cedric followed his gaze. That was most definitely blood on his coat. He raised his head, a dangerous smile on his lips. "No rats," he repeated, in a tone that more than implied, *not anymore*.

He took his place at the table, casting a quick glance at the clock on one of the shelves. It would be an hour or two at least before it was fashionable to end this party. When he met Yvan's gaze, showing thinly veiled concern, he nodded and smiled, raising his glass. Might as well make the best of it.

As it turned out, the best wasn't very good. Cedric spent the last hour losing one game after another, which offered him an adequate excuse to let the evening come to an end. Few people were willing to risk dealing with him in a sour mood, and they didn't need to know his mood wasn't sour because of a few rounds of cards.

He didn't care about the coins he had lost. And he didn't care — much — about the guest who had stumbled outside half an hour ago, nudging a vase in the process, shattering it on the floor. It had been ugly anyway.

It was the look of sheer panic in the woman's eyes, believing he would *kill* her, he couldn't get out of his mind. He didn't particularly mind that kind of fear in the eyes of a traitor, when killing someone who would have sold him out. But this, this had been unsettling. Wrong.

"So. What happened?" Yvan asked the moment the door closed behind the last guest.

Cedric shrugged, gathering half of the used glasses to bring them into the kitchen. "She woke up and panicked," he said, wondering if his deliberately calm tone would fool his husband. Probably not. "Hurt herself on one of the crates while trying to find... I don't know. A light, or a way out, I guess."

He put the glasses down on the counter, taking his time to arrange them neatly. "Once we settled that I was *not* going to kill her, I took care of her wound, then told her to go back to sleep." He really had done just that, hadn't he? Fuck.

"Was it bad?" Yvan asked. He didn't hide his concern.

Cedric started to shake his head, then ended the gesture in a shrug. "Don't think so. Bled a lot, but that's the thing with cuts on your hand, isn't it? Might be worth checking tomorrow, but not waking her up." There was probably nothing to worry about. He looked into the direction of the salon. He should get the rest of the glasses, and put away the cards and bottles.

"Go check on her," Yvan said, having read the thoughts Cedric hadn't allowed himself to admit. "I'll finish here."

With a smile, Cedric closed the distance between them, to press a quick kiss on his husband's lips. "Thank you." He really didn't know how he deserved a man as perfect as Yvan.

"You're useless in the kitchen anyway!" Yvan called after him, making Cedric smile again.

That wasn't completely wrong. Still, even he would manage to grab a bunch of dirty dishes. He passed the salon and walked up the stairs, swapping the cane to his right hand, so he could lean heavily on the railing with his left. He would not climb down before the morning, he decided, cleaning up be damned, even if she was fine.

After fishing the key out of his pocket, he opened the door to the study as slowly and quietly as he could. The girl—the woman, he had to keep reminding himself—didn't stir; not when he took a step inside, not when he touched the crystal to let it glow brighter.

She seemed to sleep peacefully, with her arms wrapped around the little lavender pillow and her legs pulled close, making herself as small as possible. It made her look scared and vulnerable, even in her sleep.

Tomorrow, he'd have to *talk* to her. That, and get her some things, because he was sure she wouldn't ask for anything, even if prompted. She needed better clothes than the ugly dress he had found in his stash, and a few other items as well, if she was to stay.

And there was no way he would send her away; not in this state. His words to her might have been ruder than necessary, but it was true: saving her really hadn't been a big deal for him. Neither was letting her stay. He didn't need this room, didn't care about the money.

If she even wanted to stay, that was. He would have to work on his charm if he didn't want her to run—or hobble—off first

thing in the morning. Perhaps he should start by not being a creep and watching her sleep.

Cedric dimmed the light again and retreated, pulling the door closed, but not locking it again. There was no more reason to. He left the key in the lock, making his way towards the bedroom, with only a short stop in the bathroom beforehand.

By the time Yvan came upstairs, Cedric was already lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. When his husband entered the room, Cedric lowered his gaze, smiling as he watched him undress.

"She's fine?" Yvan asked as he slipped under the covers.

Cedric nodded, humming an affirmation. Well, fine was probably something else, but at least she wasn't bleeding out. As soon as Yvan had settled down, Cedric turned toward him, breathing in the faint and familiar smell of the forge. It made him relax. Wrapping his arm around Yvan, he decided to postpone all those worries until the morning.

It had truly been one fucking long day.

When Cedric awoke, he found himself alone in bed, legs tangled in the blanket, arms sprawled out. The empty spot next to him was cold already, a fact that elicited a sigh as Cedric ran a hand across the abandoned pillow. It was not a surprise, though, seeing as the sun had risen a while ago. The room was bathed in the dim light tinted by the thick layers of fabric in front of the window.

The curtains were studded with clear crystals, breaking the light of whatever sunray found its way through the layers of fabric. Cedric watched the colorful specks dance across the wall. All the gemstones decoratively attached to objects in his house probably helped his eccentric reputation. Few people knew of their use.

He propped himself up, focused his magic on the crystals,

and the curtain slid to the side. The sunlight streaming into the room made him squeeze his eyes shut, but at least he was awake now. Staying in bed was less fun alone, so he rolled over to sit up, planting his feet firmly on the floor.

He decided against yesterday's clothes, grabbing a plain black sweater instead. Plain as far as he was concerned – with a subtle pattern, and made from wool that only cost half a fortune. As soon as he was dressed, he left the bedroom, cane in hand. At the top of the stairs he paused, looking down the hallway.

The door to the study was closed. He hesitated only for a moment, then continued on his way down the stairs. He would check in on her *after* a cup of coffee. Coffee, and some breakfast perhaps. A persistent pounding at the back of his head told him that he had enjoyed a bit too much alcohol the previous night.

Not that he had truly enjoyed it – or any part of that evening, for that matter. With a heavy sigh, he sat down at the table. The cup of coffee Yvan put down in front of him lifted his spirits almost as much as the smile he flashed him. He closed his hands around the cup, taking a deep breath.

"Breakfast?"

Cedric looked from the spotless counter to the pot on the stove as he nodded. For how fucking long had Yvan been up already? Long enough to clean up after last night's party, cook breakfast and cut a giant bowl of mixed fruit, evidently.

"So what are you gonna do today?" Yvan asked as he sat down with two bowls of porridge, sliding one across the table towards Cedric.

"Hm."

Eyes half closed, he sipped his coffee while he watched Yvan scoop some spoons full of fruit into the porridge bowls.

"I'll get her some new clothes first. That thing... dress or whatever it's supposed to be, is horrible. I guess it's better

than nothing, but I can't even remember why I had something like that."

"I think it was wrapped around a vase you bought," Yvan said, chuckling slightly. His tone turned serious as he asked, "So you're gonna let her stay?"

Cedric stabbed his spoon into the porridge. "Yeah. If she wants to." He pushed around slices of apple and preserved cherries as he added, "She was so afraid of me. Thought I was going to kill her."

He started eating, staring at the table in front of him. The bad taste the memory had left in his mouth was quickly chased away by the fruits' sweetness.

"You said she was Carl's girlfriend?"

Cedric nodded, eating another spoonful and feeling how his headache slowly faded.

"You *did* tell him you killed the first guy who ever crossed you by burying him and his family alive. And how you made sure their bodies would never be found."

Well, yeah. He had done that. Cedric stretched his legs, overly aware of where some of his toes were missing. Perhaps mentioning that this asshole's 'family' had consisted only of his wife, who had very much been a part of the attempt to kill him and swindle his parents out of their silver mine, would have taken the edge out of the threat.

"And if I remember it right, one night you claimed you once flayed someone alive with coarse sand. Slowly stripping off layer after layer of skin until they died."

"I said that?"

Cedric remembered the drunken bet. It had been a goddamn rabbit, already dead at that point, and it had become their dinner while on the road. The whole thing had been a fucking mess, but at least he had won; 'I bet you're too squeamish to skin it' — 'And I bet I can skin it without touching it.'

"And one time —"

"Yeah, I get it," Cedric interrupted him. "I was annoyed. I know rumors spread easily, but I wouldn't have thought he'd tell his girlfriend, of all people. I mean, who the fuck does that."

So this Carl had told her what a horrible person Cedric was, then dragged her with him to meet him. What a fucking asshole.

"Just talk to her. Tell her the stories were exaggerated. Let her see who you really are."

"You mean an eccentric old grump?" Cedric huffed.

Yvan laughed. "Better than a sadistic killer." He was done eating, so he took his empty bowl and put it into the sink to rinse it out. "We both know you could pull off most of what those rumors claim," he said, "but I also know you don't do that without a reason. You should probably explain to her that it takes a bit more than a slight annoyance to—"

Wet bowl in hand, he made a throat cutting gesture.

"Or, you know..." Yvan lowered the bowl and placed his other hand flat on top of it, earning himself an eye roll.

Cedric didn't particularly enjoy killing. It was just that he enjoyed getting stabbed in the back even less.

"Don't look at me like that." Yvan crossed the kitchen to place a kiss on Cedric's cheek. "My eccentric old grump."

There was no way for Cedric to keep his grumpy facade up as he watched his husband straighten up and reach for a fresh, larger bowl. Moments later, it was filled with a generous serving of porridge, topped with the remaining fruits.

"You're gonna bring it to her, or should I?" Yvan asked while fishing a spoon out of a drawer, to stick it into the bowl.

"I'll do it."

"All right. Then I'll head to the forge. I'm expecting a delivery this morning, but I will be back before noon to prepare lunch."

"Wait!" Cedric put the spoon down and pushed his chair back to get up. "I have a favor to ask of you. Give me a second, I need to get something."

Leaving the cane leaning against the table, he made his way to the living room, and to the rack that held his other canes. He looked them over for a moment, before settling on one, pulling it out. It was plain, caramel colored wood with a curved grip. He had bought it in a pinch when his had broken while away from home, but it had been a bit too short, so he had never used it afterwards.

"Can you shorten it, so it fits her?"

"I'm not a carpenter," Yvan pointed out.

Cedric flashed him a grin. "I know. But you're good with hard—"

"Another word, and we'll see what's sturdier, the cane or your thick skull." He snatched the cane from Cedric's hand, studying it. "This much?" he asked, showing the length he was going to cut off. "And a new metal tip?"

"Yes, please."

"Should be no problem. I'll bring it back at lunch."

Cedric walked through one of the livelier streets of the market district, scanning the stores he passed. He couldn't very well visit his usual tailor to get clothes for her. Even if he hadn't minded the expense, fine fabric would get her nowhere on the streets. No, he needed something plain and sturdy.

It didn't take him too long to find a promising store. Luckily, his expansive explanation of 'I need some clothes for a young woman' was enough for the tailor to present him his options. Erring on the side of caution, Cedric decided to pick clothes that would probably be too large for her rather than too small. With a pair of pants, two skirts, several shirts, socks and underwear in his backpack, he left the store, looking around once more.

It was a beautiful day, even though the sun didn't do much to warm the air. He strolled along leisurely, pausing now and then to look at some wares, and once to buy a bag of candied nuts. When he came across a store selling all kinds of toiletries, the pastel colors, painted flowers on the signs and dried herbs in the windows told him this one targeted a different range of customers than the store he usually visited.

Cedric entered, returning the merchant's friendly greeting, but declining his offer for help. He wanted to look around in peace first. The girl's hair had been quite a mess, he recalled, so he picked up a comb and brush. Not that he didn't have any at home, but he wasn't too keen on sharing. He grabbed some toothbrushes and cleaning powder next. When he reached for a jar of balm, to keep her skin elastic while her wounds healed, his gaze fell on a table displaying various bars of soap. The purple ones caught his attention; lavender, he assumed.

He couldn't be sure it was truly the smell she had liked so much about this silly little dried-out lavender bag, but it was worth a try. A few copper coins for the chance to show her some goodwill.

By the time Cedric had purchased everything from his list, it was almost noon. His other plans would have to wait until after lunch, then. He arrived home just after Yvan, who was still taking off his coat.

"Hey. I'm gonna start cooking. The cane's over there," he said, pointing to the coffee table in the living room.

Cedric went to pick it up, weighing it in his hand. Yvan had done an excellent job; not that he had expected any less.

"I'm upstairs," he called, taking the cane with him.

In front of the study he paused, realizing that she would have had plenty of time to sneak — no, to walk out. For a moment, worry flared up; imagining her alone on the streets like that, injured and with barely any clothes to speak of. He

knocked softly on the door, but had no patience to wait for a reply.

Slowly pushing the door open, he found the curtains still closed, tinting the light in the room dark orange. The bowl and cup on the floor were where he had left them, but empty. And the girl was sitting on the makeshift bed, the blanket pulled up to her chest, watching him with wary eyes. Meridy was her name, he recalled. He really needed to stop thinking of her as just 'the girl.'

"Hey," he said. "I brought you something."

There was no reaction to his words, other than a barely visible flinch when he stepped fully into the room. Perhaps he should have started with 'How are you?' Or, he thought humorlessly, with 'I'm not going to kill you.' Too late for that now. He leaned both canes against the stacked crates, so he had his hands free to let the backpack slide off his shoulders.

"Here. It's for you." He only approached her as far as necessary to hand her the backpack, then stepped back towards the crates. Remembering that she must have cut herself there somewhere, he checked the edge carefully before he dared to lean against it.

"Go on." He gestured toward the backpack she was holding. "You can open it."

She did so hesitatingly. Watching her pull out all the things he had gotten her and look at them with awe was... It was a bit nice, and a bit unsettling. No one should look at a bunch of clean clothes as if they were a miracle.

When she found the soap, she froze. Her hand around it started to tremble, and she lifted it to her face, breathing in slowly. She wasn't going to cry over a bar of soap, was she? Cedric cleared his throat.

"If you put it all back, you can take it to the bathroom easier. And here." He grabbed the cane Yvan had altered and brought it over to her. Perhaps some kind of crutches would

have been better to keep the weight fully off her injured leg, but besides the fact that he didn't have any, it was unlikely putting weight on her injured hand instead would be much better.

She took the cane just as hesitatingly as she had accepted the backpack, but the look on her face was less wary now.

"I'll help you up."

He offered her his hand, and when she reached for it, he grabbed her and pulled her up. As soon as he was sure she was standing safely, Cedric let go of her. He fetched his cane that was still leaned against a crate, and flipped it around to pick up the backpack with the handle.

"Let's go," he said, flinging the pack over his shoulder. "Do you need help?"

She shook her head. Her steps were wobbly at first, trying to find a way that allowed her to keep most of her weight off her foot, but she made it. By the time she had reached the door, she was slowly getting the hang of it, standing up straight, but bracing her right forearm against the wall for balance.

Before leaving the room, Cedric turned around. He focused his magic on the pebbles of garnet that were all but invisible against the dark red fabric of the curtains. They slid open, and light flooded the room, making it look much friendlier – and much dustier – than before.

Back in the hallway, he found Merridy standing in front of the bathroom, casting him yet another uncertain glance. He quickly caught up, opening the door for her when he reached her.

"Go on," he said, taking the backpack off. "Here. Take your time, but when you're done, come downstairs. Lunch is almost ready." Already taking a step back, he thought of something else. "There's bandages under the sink. You'll soak that one if you don't take it off," he said, nodding at her right

hand, “and you shouldn’t put the dirty ones back on. Think you’ll manage?”

There were a million questions in her gaze, but she only nodded and asked none of them. Cedric smiled encouragingly—at least he hoped it turned out to be a smile, not a grimace.

“Thank you,” she whispered before the door closed behind her.

Cedric sighed deeply as he turned around to walk back down to help Yvan in the kitchen. It didn’t take long to set the table, and the huge pot of stew on the stove didn’t need much attention, so they sat down, talking quietly about this and that. When footsteps sounded, accompanied by the familiar sound of a cane on the wooden stairs, they both looked up.

Merridy paused in the doorway to the kitchen, as if she wasn’t sure she was truly welcome to enter. Wearing the new clothes, she didn’t look quite as small anymore. The beige shirt was indeed a bit too loose, but the dark brown pants seemed to be a good fit. Her hair was slightly damp, and a few dark spots were visible on her shoulders, where the fabric was wet.

She entered slowly, the tapping of the cane the only sound as she moved. Cedric hadn’t gotten her any shoes. There would be time for that later. Without knowing her size, that would have been a careless expense, and with her foot bandaged like that it would be a few days before she could even think of wearing them.

“Have a seat,” Yvan said, gesturing to one of the empty chairs at the kitchen table. He got up and started to fill their plates, putting one in front of her first. He pointed to the basket in the middle of the table. “Feel free to take some bread as well.”

Merridy nodded wordlessly and picked up the spoon. She obviously tried to appear relaxed, but her grip on the spoon

was so firm, her knuckles turned white. Either she was nervous, or she wasn't used to holding it in her left. Perhaps both. The fingers of her right hand played with a loose end of the bandage, and her gaze was rigidly fixed on her bowl, as if it was the most captivating thing she had ever seen.

Staring at her was certainly an excellent way to break the ice, so Cedric tore his gaze off her and returned to the conversation her appearance had interrupted.

"You think it's enough for a dagger?" he asked Yvan. "I always wanted one of those."

"What for? You don't even like to touch that stuff. Besides, it's illegal."

Cedric grinned. "Perhaps that's the reason."

His husband wasn't wrong, though. He hated the touch of morlit. That was why he fished a handkerchief out of his pocket before he reached for the wooden box on the table, flipping the lid open.

Inside, resting on a cushion of black velvet, were the two shackles Yvan had taken off Merridy's wrists. Careful not to touch it with his bare skin, Cedric picked one of them up with the handkerchief, inspecting it.

When he looked up, he found that Merridy was staring at him; or rather, staring at the shackle he was holding. Ah fuck, that wasn't very sensitive of him, was it? At least he had cleaned them before putting them away, so there was no more blood on the metal. He bit down an excuse, because he didn't apologize for shit like that, and lowered his hand to put the shackle back.

"May I... may I see?" she asked quietly.

Slightly surprised, Cedric nodded, sliding the box toward her. The way she reached for the second metal band without hesitation told him that she truly was no mage—or at least not a very skilled one. Not that he had doubted her words, but one could never be too careful.

"How did you get these open?" she asked, brushing her finger over the tiny keyhole.

Yvan put his spoon down, so he could tap on the shackle with his finger. "Well you see, those locks... wait, do you know how locks work? There's different kinds. This one actually combines the most common ones, using pins... You know what! I'll show you after lunch, all right? I have some larger ones using the same mechanic somewhere, so you can see what's going on."

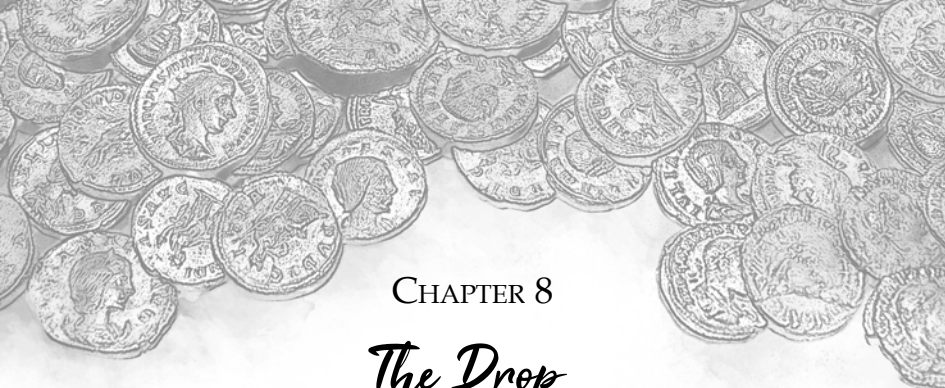
He took the metal band from her, peering into the hole, as if he could see the mechanism behind the lock.

"It's all about the right tools, and knowing how to identify which to use, and..."

While Cedric tuned out the monologue, Merridy had stopped eating and was listening to Yvan's every word. For the first time she seemed relaxed, her posture no longer tense. The enthusiasm Yvan showed at having someone interested in his craft was heartwarming. Even though he mostly worked on ornate metalwork for fences and doors and the like, he sure loved the intricate art of locksmithing.

Cedric barely suppressed a chuckle, placing the second shackle back in the box and picking up his spoon instead. If only he had known that extensive explanations of pins and bolts and cylinders were all it took to take away her worries. Perhaps the coming days wouldn't be such a nuisance after all.





CHAPTER 8

The Drop

It was a beautiful winter day. The sky was blue without a cloud in sight, and the air was cold and crystal clear. A bit too cold to sit on a park bench and read, yet that was what Cedric was doing. What he had been doing for almost a week now, returning each morning to this idyllic spot, overlooking the busy pathways between the inner city and the palace district.

His gloved hands flipped the page of the heavy, leather bound and gold embossed volume on his lap. It was old, and worth a fortune; copied by hand, some pages even sporting illustrations. The content, however, was less exciting. Some religious nonsense he had no patience for.

Instead of focusing on the words, he let his thoughts wander, keeping a loose grip on his magic as he did so. Countless feet were plodding along the sandy paths, a steady rhythm at the back of his mind. Sand was a strange thing to reach out to or to control. Not one solid energy, like a rock or gemstone, but thousands, millions of grains, always in motion. Focusing on them for too long left him restless.

After an adequate amount of time, Cedric flipped to the next page, without having read a single word. In the distance, the

bells tolled, telling him that it would soon be time. It hadn't been hard to get a copy of the guards' roster, and to figure out which son of a *mok* had been on duty the day he had found Merridy. Learning his daily routine had been trivial as well.

The fucker always took the same path, at the same time. Always stopped at the same stall, buying himself either breakfast, or lunch for later. A married couple ran the little business of fried dough and sausages, alternating each day who was manning the stand. On the days it was the woman's turn, this asshole was twice as rude, twice as arrogant and twice as condescending as usual.

Using his uniform to bully others into showing him respect he didn't deserve was one of the many small details sealing his imminent fate. It hadn't surprised Cedric in the slightest to learn that apparently, he was also beating his own wife.

Cedric looked up, a serene smile on his face, obviously enjoying the sun. His gloved hand rested on the open book, so the slight breeze wouldn't make the pages flutter. As he let his gaze wander, he found the person he had been waiting for. The man was wearing the guards' uniform, a warm coat loosely draped over it, and followed his usual path with large, confident steps.

Cedric didn't allow any hint of recognition onto his features. In fact, he didn't look directly at his target at all. Instead, he looked at the empty flower beds further down the path, wondering what the gardeners might plant there come spring, and admired the trees behind them—poplars, if his memory served him right. He closed his eyes for a moment, his face turned towards the sun, as he reached out with his magic, tracing the man's steps.

The motion in which he lowered his gaze back to his book was lazy and calm. It showed no hint of the effort it cost him to scan the surrounding area for any kind of movement. The last two days, the man hadn't been alone when he had passed

Cedric. Today, it seemed like he would be. The disturbance his footsteps caused was isolated, a single trail of ripples in Cedric's perception. He didn't look up, deeply engrossed in his book, slowly flipping the page again. The next one showed a drawing, clean lines of black ink on the yellowed parchment. Vandaya, the goddess of fire, knowledge and revenge. How fitting.

There was no warning sound, no rumbling of the earth. One moment, the man was walking, the next the ground gave way under him. A sinkhole, people would find. A natural cavern that had always been there, the ceiling weakened from countless years of rain, and countless people walking over it, day after day.

The hole in the ground spread quickly, but not too far. When it came to a shuddering halt, spilling out a small cloud of dust, single clumps of dirt and grass continued to tumble down into the unknown depths. It was only four, maybe five steps in diameter.

People screamed. People *ran*. The merchant woman—poor thing, she was too far away to be in any danger, but she didn't know that—abandoned her stall, running for the park's exit with the part of the crowd that had decided to flee. Others stood paralyzed, staring at the spectacle, not daring to go closer.

Cedric raised his head slowly, putting his gloved hand back on the page before he lifted his gaze from it. The ruckus had obviously disturbed his concentration, so he allowed himself a slight scowl as he looked at the gaping hole in the ground. His magic encircled it, making sure it would spread no further, would not endanger anyone else.

The man was writhing on the ground, four steps below the surface of the earth. If he screamed or called for help, his voice didn't carry this far. The warmth of his body pressed against the icy floor, making it easy for Cedric to pinpoint

where he was without having to see him. Smaller flickers of warmth moved across the hard packed earth, perhaps the man's hands, trying to find anything to grab, to pull himself up.

The ground shuddered again, and a part of the ceiling that had held so far came crashing down. The movement below stopped, warmth seeping into rocks and debris piled over the now motionless body. More people started to run, and Cedric finally got up.

He carefully closed the book, making sure not to crease the pages, and put it in the bag hanging at his side. Then he picked up his cane, twisting it in his hand as he looked around. The sinkhole blocked his way back into the inner city. He could have walked around it, but it had rained the night before, and the grass was still wet. His shoes were definitely too expensive to mistreat them in such a way.

When he turned his head to the other side, he found that the remaining people had crowded together. They were talking, and pointing, and someone called for help. Still, no one dared to approach the hole.

No one but Cedric. Slowly and carefully, he set one foot in front of the other, pausing after each step. He had to make sure the ground would hold, didn't he? Someone called out to him, but he didn't turn around or acknowledge it in any other way. He allowed his feet to carry him almost to the edge of the hole. It looked indeed quite dangerous, as if cut straight into the ground with a knife.

He loved a view such as this, seeing with his own eyes what he could usually only touch with his magic. Layer upon layer of earth, never meant to see the light of day. Protruding rocks, pale, broken roots, dark streaks of clay and the jagged edges of slate. He let his perception brush over them as he lowered his gaze. The view at the bottom of the hole was charming in its own way.

A body was splayed there, the lower half buried under a heap of rubble. Crimson rivulets had found their way across the ground, pooling under broken limbs. The man's chest still rose, but weakly, blood foaming at his mouth with every breath. A shame; the falling rocks must have crushed a rib or two.

A faint shudder rippled the ground, starting at the opposite side of the sinkhole. It wouldn't reach Cedric, he wouldn't push it far enough for that, but it was a more than adequate reason to retreat. Someone called out to him again, shouting at him to *hurry*, but he couldn't very well hurry, limp and cane and all. Luckily, the ground calmed down again, and he made it unscathed to the group of onlookers.

"That was reckless, man," someone scolded him.

Cedric shrugged, a small, sheepish smile on his lips. A bit of reckless curiosity wasn't a privilege of the youth. And indeed, he was taking a risk—by lingering here. Yvan would berate him for playing with fire. Someone might recognize him. Someone who knew about his earth magic. The extent of those powers was one of his better guarded secrets, though, and the few who knew would not betray him like that.

"He's still alive," Cedric said, putting an appropriate amount of concern and discomposure into his voice. "I hope help arrives quickly."

Cedric could have killed him easily. He didn't necessarily want his death, but accepted it as a possibility without much regret. If the man would survive his injuries, he'd be out of commission for some time, perhaps permanently. There couldn't be much left of some of his bones. In any case, he would surely lose his position, and therefore the power he used to abuse others. In a few days, Cedric would ask one of his contacts in the palace for information about the outcome.

Only a few minutes passed until a group of guards arrived, accompanied by three royal mages. Earth mages, Cedric

supposed, and perhaps a healer. They spread out, the mages assessing the situation, while the guards started to usher the remaining people out of the park.

Cedric let himself be guided toward the exit leading to the palace district. He apologized for his slow pace and thanked the guard next to him for his patience. Then he stepped aside, merely listening as the highest ranking one asked what had happened.

Multiple people volunteered to tell the story, so Cedric remained quiet. He listened for a bit, to a retelling of how the ground had opened up to swallow the poor, unsuspecting man. After a while, he started to tap his fingers on the handle of his cane, then his right foot on the ground. It was a shame someone had come to harm, but he had places to be, and him staying here would benefit no one.

Someone else beat him to asking if they were free to go. As soon as the guard confirmed it, most of the group dissipated. Mumbled words reached Cedric's ears: a tragedy, someone said, while another chimed in that they had walked the very same path minutes before, that it could have been *them*.

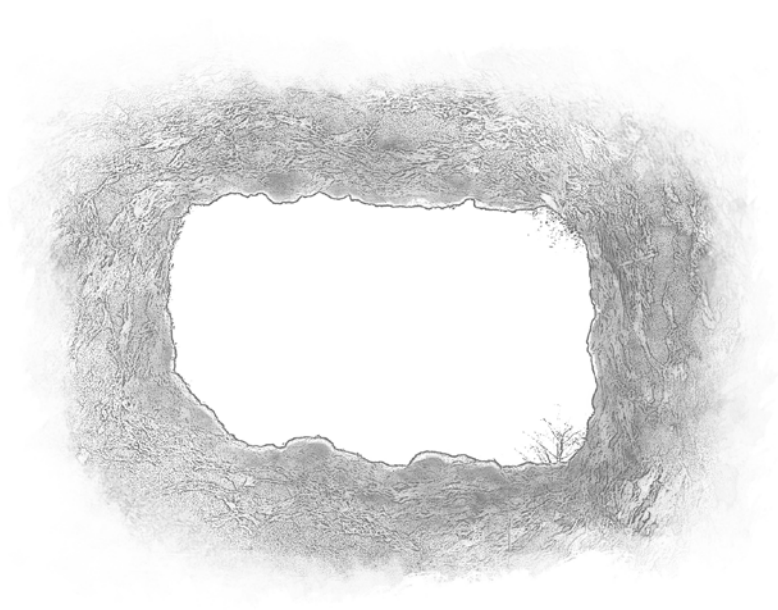
On all of the faces he saw concern, sincere or not. He wondered if they would still be as concerned if they knew what kind of person that man was. He wondered what Merridy would think if she knew what he had done.

He wouldn't tell her. She had slowly started to warm up to him, to no longer flinch every time he addressed her, or whenever she — gods beware — asked for something. Proving to her that he could be a killer would most likely be counter-productive, no matter his motives. Not that he had killed the man; not yet.

She didn't seem to be one for revenge anyway, and he wouldn't want her to feel guilty for it. It wasn't her who had done something wrong. Honestly, of all the people involved, she was the only one who *hadn't* done anything wrong.

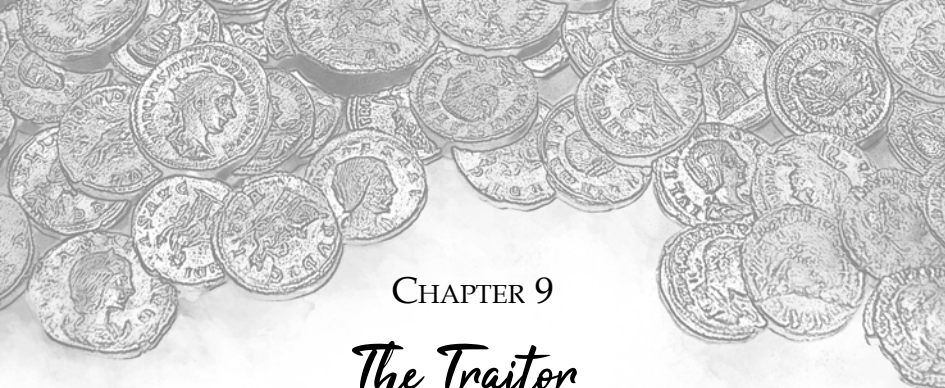
Cedric sighed, finally turning his back towards the park. The way back home would take almost twice as long now, taking the long route around. Cedric didn't mind it much. The sun warmed his face, and his fine goat-wool coat and soft leather gloves kept out the cold. He hummed quietly as he started to walk.

It was truly a beautiful winter day.



Part 2

Fall, Again



CHAPTER 9

The Traitor

Cedric rolled a few pieces of rock between his fingers, while his gaze wandered through the small room. At first glance, the devastation wasn't even visible. Some books piled on the floor next to a half empty shelf, blankets thrown off the sofa, a cup fallen over with spilled tea. But he knew Colette's house, knew how she had always kept it just as painstakingly tidy as she had kept his books. A single pillowcase out of place would have been cause for worry – this was a sign of a fight.

He lowered his gaze to the objects in his hand. One half of the geode was intact, rough grays surrounding shimmering white. The other half was broken into three pieces, which he had found beneath the kitchen table.

"Nothing."

Looking up to the source of the voice, he saw Adrien standing in the doorway. He hadn't heard him descend the stairs from the attic; stairs that were a bit too steep for Cedric's liking.

The kid was nervous. Not a kid; probably mid twenties, a young man lost in a city that had too many mouths to feed and too few people who cared. Right now, he looked as if he expected for Cedric to punish him for the bad news. His

freckled forehead was wrinkled with worry and he kept pushing the same lock of strawberry-blonde hair out of his face.

"Thank you." Cedric raised his hand, holding out the broken pieces of stone to Adrien. "Could you bring those to Yvan, please? He's at the forge."

It would tell his husband what was going on — or *that* something was going on, more likely, since not even Cedric himself had figured out what exactly had happened. But whatever it was, it had been serious enough for Colette to send him the most urgent warning before disappearing. Yvan might be in danger, too.

Adrien nodded, but didn't move yet.

"You may leave," Cedric said, gripping the handle of his cane so tightly, the wood dug into his palm.

The kid nodded again, all but falling over his feet as he squeezed past Cedric and left the house. Faintly, Cedric wondered if it was his reputation, or if he looked half as grim as he felt. He walked towards the door, the tapping of his cane overly loud in the eerie quiet of the house.

There was one place he had to check, and he had to check it on his own. A dead drop location, out of use for over a decade now, ever since Colette had retired. If whatever had happened hadn't been totally unexpected, perhaps she had left him a note.

"Jean? Are you sure?"

Yvan's voice was full of doubt—the kind of doubt that spoke of an unwillingness to believe something that was all too believable. Cedric handed him the letter, at first glance nothing but a weathered recipe for blueberry muffins. Colette had always had a hang of putting the dramatic into the mundane. It was probably unwise to bake said muffins for three and a half hours, though.

"He's trying to get rid of me and take over the business." Playing with his cane, to stop himself from grabbing the letter right back, Cedric continued, "That means getting rid of you as well."

He recalled an image of the man. Unremarkable features and build, short dark hair, dark eyes, pale skin that spoke of spending most of his time indoors. Somewhere in his early thirties or late twenties; ambitious, ruthless.

And, apparently, a fucking fool.

"What are you gonna do?" Yvan asked.

"I'll find out if it's true. Stay here. Keep the doors closed and the windows barred." He swallowed down the nervousness about leaving his husband alone. "I'm not sure who I can trust."

"Wouldn't it be better if I come with you then?" Yvan handed the letter back. "One less loyalty you have to doubt."

With Yvan at his side, he wouldn't need much more support. Perhaps he should bring another mage though, like Laurent. One of his oldest friends, and one of the very few Cedric was sure were not involved in whatever this was.

"Are you sure? You know what I'll have to do if it's true."

"I know. But when it's us or them..." Yvan leaned in, placing a quick, tender kiss on his lips. "I'll pick us a thousand times over."

"Where is she?"

Jean glared at Cedric. The man's feet were buried up to the ankles in the hard packed dirt of the backyard of his house. He yelped when he sunk in a bit deeper, the dirt closing in around his lower legs now, but his hateful glance didn't waver.

"Where?" Cedric asked again.

Jean's admission of guilt had been a mere formality after Cedric had found the documents in his house. A collection of

meticulously taken notes about Cedric's connections, the location of dead drops he should never have known about, and a shockingly complete roster of Cedric's confidants. Colette's name had been last on the list, and he assumed that Jean's research had alerted her to what was going on.

There had been no trace of Colette herself though, and no clue as to if Jean had been working on his own.

"Fuck you," he snarled, trying to tear his legs free. He was not successful.

"She has nothing to do with the business anymore." Cedric's voice was certainly calmer than he felt. "She's just a nice old lady, living a nice, peaceful life.

When Jean didn't reply, Cedric reached for the earth. Pushing, squeezing. Closing it around the man's legs, tighter and tighter, until something *cracked*. Jean wavered, sweat beading on his forehead as the color slowly drained from his face. His breaths were visibly labored, but he managed to not make a sound.

"Where is she?"

Jean spat out in front of Cedric. "Well now she's a dead old lady." His voice was trembling from the pain he must be in. "I made sure you'll never find what's left of her."

Cedric didn't often allow his anger to take over. He couldn't afford for it to guide his actions when there were people who relied on him. Right now, it wouldn't make a difference. Colette was dead; because someone had tried to get rid of him, because she had tried to warn him. Killing this piece of shit wouldn't bring her back, but Cedric was not above revenge.

He raised his hand, pointing the handle of his cane towards the ground. The earth shifted and rippled, dragging Jean down. The man's curses turned into screams as he sank up to his thighs, his hips. Cedric squeezed his hand around the handle and the earth around Jean's legs. His screams turned

into sobs as his knee was crushed, and into hiccuping gasps when the second one followed.

Hands tried to find anything to hold onto, but the ground swam away from them, burying them, not letting them go again. Jean's torso sank deeper, dragged down, squeezed to suffocate the man's screams. Then his head was gone as well, and a moment later the earth lay still again, seemingly undisturbed.

Cedric reached out to the soil itself, feeling where it was, feeling where it *wasn't*, and how it shifted as nails dug desperately into it. He wondered if Jean was screaming; if he was, he was too far down for it to be audible above ground. Cedric had made sure to leave his legs trapped, but enough room around his upper body for him to struggle and fight and feel the terror of realizing he would suffocate.

His death would be a slow one.

"You," Cedric suddenly said, turning around, walking towards Adrien. The kid was pale as a sheet. "You vouched for him. Got anything to say about that?"

Despite all his show about punishing the bondsman for the crime of the one they had vouched for, he didn't like it and wasn't unwilling to listen to reason. Only twice had he had to make true of his threats so far. He hoped it wouldn't have to come to a third time now.

"Well?" he probed, his patience running thin.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I should have said something but he promised—" Adrien snapped his mouth shut, tearing weakly against Yvan's hand on his arm. "It wasn't *my* idea," he blurted out, the fear in his eyes betraying the resolute sound he had tried to give his voice.

Cedric grit his teeth. He hadn't expected him to be in on it. Perhaps not truly a part of it, but aware enough. How long had Adrien looked him in the eyes, knowing that Jean was planning his murder? Digging through Colette's house,

knowing very well that she was dead? Lying right to his fucking face, despite seeing how worried he had been about his friend?

As Cedric nodded in Yvan's direction, he let go of Adrien. His attempt to run was short-lived; the ground rippled, making him stumble and fall. It crashed over him like a wave, suffocating his pleading scream with a cloud of dust, turning it into a cough. Adrien was swallowed quickly, and dead a few seconds later, crushed by tons of soil and stone.

Despite the anger still burning in him, Cedric didn't want to make him suffer. For a moment, he traced the blood, seeping into the earth beneath his feet. Too warm, too thick, not connected to anything, neither surface, nor underground stream. It was wrong. It wouldn't stay wrong for long, the earth would take what he had offered.

When Cedric looked up, Laurent and Yvan were watching him with indifferent expressions, as if he hadn't just killed two men. It was slightly reassuring, to know that they were on his side – and still fucking unsettling. He raised his voice.

"Sweep his house. If there was anyone else involved, I want to know." He took a deep breath, meeting Yvan's gaze. "No word to anyone. If anyone gets nervous, I also want to know."

Yvan nodded. Cedric was so infinitely grateful to have him at his side, no matter what. He smiled sadly at the understanding in Yvan's gaze as he added, "I'll go tell Colette's daughter."



CHAPTER 10

The Coin

Heavy rain pattered on the decrepit wooden panels above where Merridy was sitting on the ground. It had been raining for days. The wood was soaked, the puddles outside so large, there was barely space left to walk in between. Not that she wanted to leave the shed and walk out there. There was no point to it.

In weather such as this, the marketplaces were all but abandoned, the merchants grumpy and watchful. The inns saw fewer patrons than usual, and no one left their home unless they absolutely had to. There was no work for her to find, no chance for her to steal any food. It didn't look like it would let up anytime soon, either. Dark clouds filled the sky, and heavy wind tore at the barred door.

Merridy reached into her pocket, to fish out the last meager copper coin. It would get her what, a loaf of bread if she found a baker nice enough to give her the previous day's goods for a discount? She spun the coin between her fingers, pondering if it was worth it; to walk through the rain, to get soaked to the bone, knowing there was no way for her to dry herself. To spend it now, knowing that tomorrow, the hunger would be worse.

Somewhere behind her, the rain had found its way through a crack in the wood and was now steadily dripping down. To avoid the small rivulet of water on the ground, she had hoisted her belongings up on top of the furniture stored here. Garden benches and chairs, as well as the occasional table. No one would go into this shed before the next spring, which was why she had decided to make camp here.

It was better than being out in the open, but not by much. Everything was damp. Her hair, pressed cold against her neck and hanging limply in front of her face. Her socks and shoes, leaving her toes freezing. The ratty blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders, to ward off the worst of the cold. Worst of all, it was barely even winter yet. She wasn't sure how she was going to survive once the rain would be replaced by snow and the nights became freezing cold.

Last winter, she had only survived because of Cedric. He had let her stay with him until her foot had fully healed, which had taken weeks. The pile of blankets on the floor of his study had been better than every place she had slept in since. Yvan had apologized for it, but she had seen no reason for it; it had been warm, and dry, and safe.

It wasn't only the sleeping place they had offered her. Cedric had let her join their meals, and allowed her to read most of his books. Yvan had taught her much about locks — more precisely how to pick them — and had let her help in the kitchen.

It could have felt like home, if not for the knowledge that she didn't belong there. She had been a mere intruder, unable to offer anything worthwhile in return for their generosity. One morning, Cedric had pointed out that the weather was finally getting warmer, and she had taken it as her cue to leave. She had returned to her life on the streets, finding her bundle hidden where she had left it, a few things blackened by mildew, or sporting holes bitten by rats now. Not

that she had owned much in the first place; the clothes and other things Cedric had gotten her were her most valuable belongings now, save for a few objects she kept for purely sentimental reasons.

But if she was honest, it was not the memory of a dry sleeping place that made her chest ache, and neither the thought of a warm, hearty stew that brought tears to her eyes. It was a relaxed evening in front of the fireplace, with quiet conversations and sweet tea. It was a card game escalating into mock insults, and a lockpick sliding into place. It was all of it, in a way she couldn't put into words.

She missed it. She missed *them*. Less so in the summer months, when she had been busy with odd jobs here and there, keeping herself afloat. But when she sat alone in whatever hideout she had currently chosen, with nothing but wind and weather and distant voices as company, she was so incredibly lonely. The day she had said goodbye, Yvan had hugged her and told her that she was always welcome to visit. So why, by the Seven, had she never done so? What was she afraid of? Was there anything left for her to lose?

Her life was all she had left—as hopeless and pathetic as it was—and she believed Cedric that he didn't want to kill her. It had been hard to get over her fear, to believe that most of the rumors had been just that: rumors. Most, but not all. She had seen him angry once or twice, and had no doubt that this anger of his could be devastating.

Merridy threw the copper coin up in the air, watching it spin and fall, catching it before it hit the ground. She would have to leave soon anyway, to find something to eat one way or another. The thought of attempting to steal it twisted her stomach. She couldn't risk getting caught, to be sent back to the dungeon.

So why not pay them a visit, to find out if Yvan had really meant it? If there was one place in this world where she was

welcome? She felt guilty just thinking about knocking on Cedric's door just because she *needed* something, but her stomach was so empty, it was painful. Even if he sent her away, she wouldn't have lost much, only another shred of hope.

With this resolution in mind, Merridy got up. The movement left her dizzy, making her cling to a stack of chairs until her world stopped spinning. When she was sure that her legs would carry her, she pulled the blanket off her shoulders, folding it and placing it on top of the chairs. Pushing the door open just far enough so she could squeeze through the crack, she left her shelter, hurrying out of the garden.

A few steps in, she was soaked to her underwear. Water flooded her shoes, leaving her socks disgustingly wet, squelching with every step she took. Wrapping her arms around herself, she tried to walk as fast as she could. She hated it. She hated the rain. She hated the cold. She hated the slick cobblestones under her feet. She hated every house she passed, and the warm glow of candles behind cozy curtains. She hated this whole city, for the hope it had once given her.

By the time she had reached Cedric's house, she had run out of energy to hate things. All that was left was her exhaustion, joining her hunger in sapping the strength from her limbs. She stumbled onto the porch and spent a couple of freezing minutes just staring at the door. It wasn't courage that made her eventually raise her hand, to knock against the wood; it was sheer despair.

Seconds passed, and nothing happened. What if he wasn't home? The thought that she might have come here in vain made tears well up in her eyes; she didn't think she'd have the strength to walk all the way back. Not with her clothes dripping water, and her hands shaking and teeth chattering.

Just when she thought she had truly come all the way for nothing, the door finally opened. There was no light in the

short hallway, so Cedric's face was bathed in shadows as he looked at her, his expression unreadable.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

His tone wasn't quite hostile, but there was an edge to it that made Merridy's skin crawl. Whatever words she had prepared on her way here died on her tongue, and she could only stare up at him quietly.

When she didn't reply, he pushed the door fully open before turning his back on her. "Come in," he said, already walking back into the living room.

Merridy hurriedly did as she was told. She shook the sleeves of her jacket, trying to shake off as much water as possible. Then she stepped out of her thin canvas shoes, shoving them to the side. Her socks were just as wet, but at least that way she wouldn't drag any mud inside.

In the doorway to the living room she froze. It was just like she remembered it. The dark furniture, making the room seem smaller than it was. The sprawling sofa she had spent countless evenings on, with the low coffee table in front of it. The fireplace, housing a pile of logs and glowing embers. It was warm inside, so wonderfully warm. Even in her soaked clothes she could feel how her frozen muscles slowly relaxed.

"Don't just stand there." Cedric still didn't look at her. He wasn't using his cane, but his steps were heavy and slow as he walked across the room, to sit down in his armchair. "Grab a blanket before you freeze to death."

Merridy numbly stumbled over to the sofa, picking up the woolen blanket and wrapping it around herself before she sat down. She didn't dare to lean back, staying at the edge of the seat, her feet firmly on the floor. For a moment, the old fear came crawling back. What was she doing here? He was *dangerous*—and he was clearly in a bad mood.

"So. What do you want?"

She had tried so hard to convince herself that what she had planned to ask for wasn't unreasonable. Talking to someone who didn't consider her vermin, barely worth the time it took to tell her to fuck off. Spending a few hours inside, until she could remember what it felt like to be warm. Staying for dinner, if she was lucky, and if Yvan would have her. Forgetting for a while that this was all life had in store for her; the cold and the loneliness, and trying to make it through the next day, somehow.

Perhaps it was unreasonable.

She closed her eyes, trying to keep her breaths under control and her tears at bay. Cedric owed her nothing. It was *her* who owed *him*, more than she could ever repay. And now, once again, she stood here asking for something without having to offer anything in return.

Merridy tried to swallow the lump in her throat, to find anything to say; anything that would allow her to leave, if not with her hope, then at least with her pride intact.

"I..."

She broke off before she could tell him that it had been a mistake, beg him to let her go. It would surely hurt his feelings, perhaps even make him angry. She didn't know what would be worse.

The sudden shifting of weight on the sofa made her eyes snap open. She hadn't heard Cedric get up, but now he sat next to her, way too close for comfort. His eyes gleamed, a shimmer of green dancing over the piercing blue.

"Did someone hurt you?"

She heard the words, but they made no sense. Her hands started to tremble, so she dug them deeper into the blanket. She couldn't figure out how to reply, *what* to reply, staring at the swirling magic in his eyes. He was furious, and she couldn't convince her body to believe that it wasn't *her* his fury was directed at.

"Merridy." He started to reach out for her, but let his hand drop before he touched her. His gaze never once left her face. "Did. Someone. Hurt you?"

She managed to shake her head, but not to hold back her tears any longer. His face turned all blurry, but she still thought she saw relief on it.

"Then what is it? Talk to me, godsdammit. I can't read thoughts."

How could she explain her feelings to him? How pathetic was it, to admit she had been so lonely, she had returned to the only people who had shown her a bit of kindness. That all she wanted was to sit here while the feeling slowly returned to her toes. That she needed a bit of comfort even more than she needed food right now.

"I missed you," she managed to choke out.

"What?"

Cedric stared at her, but she didn't have it in her to repeat her words. She lowered her gaze to her hands, the fingers stiff from the cold, clutching the blanket.

After a moment of silence, Cedric got up, quickly crossing the room. He messed with something, but Merridy didn't have the energy to find out what he was doing. She pulled one leg up, put her chin on her knee and looked into the fire.

When Cedric returned to the sofa, he threw a bunch of clothes next to her.

"Here. You look like a drowned rat."

"Asshole." Merridy bit her lip. Insulting him should make her worry much more than asking him for help. For some reason, it didn't.

"Nuisance."

He turned to walk away from her, only to pause in the doorway to the kitchen, looking back over his shoulder.

"I'm gonna finish making my coffee. Change, and hang your clothes up to dry."

Then he was gone, and Merridy left alone with the clothes. She started to pull them apart, finding a long, flowing skirt and a wide sweater. The skirt was sewed together from patches of autumn-colored fabric, and the sweater knitted from dark red wool. Both had obviously seen lots of use, with frayed edges and thinning spots, but were clean.

The moment she managed to strip off her wet clothes and slip into the sweater, she could barely suppress a delighted sigh. The wool was warm and soft and dry, and possibly the most wonderful thing she had ever felt on her skin. She quickly put on the skirt next, finding that it was so long, she had to take care not to step on the hem as she walked. She hopped on one leg, then the other, pulling off her socks as well. Her underwear would unfortunately stay damp, but it was a small discomfort compared to before.

She grabbed her clothes and brought them closer to the fireplace, where she spread them out on the floor. Then she went back to the sofa, to sit down—properly this time, with her bare feet pulled up and tucked under the blanket she wrapped around herself once more.

In the kitchen, Cedric cleared his throat overly loud. “My coffee is very ready,” he announced. “Are you done yet?”

“Yes. Yes! Of course.” She hadn’t considered he might actually be waiting for her to finish dressing herself. “Sorry.”

He returned to the living room, a cup in each hand. One of them he placed on the coffee table in front of Merridy, before retreating into his armchair.

Merridy reached out from under the blanket to pick up the cup. It was blessedly warm, and she closed both her hands around it. She really didn’t like coffee much. During the weeks she had spent here, she had learned to drown out the bitter taste by adding a ludicrous amount of sugar.

When she finally took a careful sip, she found that the brew inside the cup was just as sweet as she had always taken it.

It was this little gesture, knowing that he remembered, that he *cared*, that made her tears well up again. This time, Cedric didn't comment on it, merely drinking his coffee in silence.

Halfway through the cup, Merridy's stomach started to rumble. She lowered her gaze, staring at the ground and feeling her cheeks burn. Perhaps she was lucky and Cedric hadn't noticed it. At least he didn't say anything, but he did get up and left the room. When he returned, he put down a filled plate in front of her; haphazardly cut slices of bread, so uneven Yvan would have made fun of them, a small block of cheese, and an apple, quartered, the core cut out.

"Help yourself," Cedric said, settling down on his armchair once more and picking his cup of coffee back up.

Her hunger won against whatever reservations Merridy might have had. She shuffled to the edge of her seat, reaching for a piece of bread, a mumbled 'thank you' on her lips. Cedric only hummed in reply, a deep rumbling sound that was so achingly familiar. His expression was stern, dark even, but he didn't look at her.

She wanted to take it slow, she really wanted to, but the moment she tasted Yvan's fresh, crispy bread, she couldn't contain herself. She broke a piece of cheese off, stuffing it into her mouth so quickly, she was glad she had still some coffee left to wash the food down before she could choke on it. After catching her breath, she at least managed to chew properly, though she still ate as quickly as she could.

"Where have you been? What have you been doing all those months?" Cedric asked once the cheese and most of the bread were gone.

Merridy shrugged, a piece of apple in her hand. "Whatever I could to survive," she said, taking a bite. It was sweet and crisp, and almost made her cry again.

Obviously not content with her answer, Cedric gave her a pointed look, prompting her to continue.

"I made camp in some rich guy's garden shed," she said, trying to keep her tone neutral. It was hard when she thought about the worn wooden panels and the barren ground of damp earth. "I'll be good there until spring, when the gardeners pull out their benches and flower pots." Her voice broke as she added, "Probably." Then she would have to leave again, would have to find a new spot, but at least it wouldn't be as cold anymore.

"Been earning money wherever I could," she continued after taking a deep breath. "Helping to set up a market stall, or scratching moss off a wall, or... anything really. It's... a lot of it is luck. If I can find something, that is. Weather like this isn't helping."

The plate was empty now, as was the cup. Needing something else to hold onto, she buried her hands in the blanket once more, making herself small.

"Mhm," Cedric said. He picked up her plate and stacked the two cups on top of it. "I'll do the dishes, so Yvan won't rip my head off when he comes home, and then we'll talk."

Merridy barely managed to suppress a bitter laugh. Talk? As opposed to what they had been doing so far? She didn't want to talk. She didn't know what to say anyway, and she didn't want to think about her bleak life or her just as bleak future. Allowing herself a moment of respite before the inevitable, she sank deeper into the blanket, leaning against the armrest. For the first time in days, maybe weeks, her body was no longer tense. She closed her eyes, giving in to the illusion that this could be real, not merely a fleeting moment.

When Merridy opened her eyes, the light in the living room had grown dim. The fire had burnt down, and the curtains were closed, no hint of brightness behind them. Her heart started to hammer in her chest as she struggled to sit up, freeing herself from the blanket her limbs were tangled in. She

had fallen asleep. Cedric had wanted to talk to her, and she had just *fallen asleep*.

She looked around frantically, but she was alone in the room. There was no light in the kitchen, either. She didn't know what to do. Half a year ago, she would have gone looking for Cedric, expecting to find him in the salon or somewhere upstairs. Did she still have the right to wander around his house?

She sat up, wrapping the blanket around herself once more and staring into the glowing embers. If not for the worry sitting like a stone in the pit of her stomach, she could have been content. Warm, rested, not hungry, and for once not afraid someone might discover her.

"Hey. You're awake."

Merridy flinched. She hadn't heard him enter the room, too lost in her thoughts. Deeming a reply unnecessary, she merely watched Cedric as he approached the sofa, then sat down on the other end. He looked her up and down.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Merridy nodded mutely. The underlying aggression she had sensed earlier seemed to be gone, but she couldn't pinpoint his mood. It made her nervous, but not scared, so it could probably be worse.

"Need anything else?"

This time, she shook her head.

"Mhm." Cedric leaned back, his gaze lost somewhere between the sofa and the cabinets in the back.

Perhaps this was his way to tell her that it was time to leave. She *should* leave. She didn't want to. Even though she couldn't see the world outside through the closed curtains, she could still hear the heavy rain. Now, after sunset, it would be so much colder out there.

"Can you write?" Cedric suddenly asked. When she didn't reply, only giving him a confused look, he added, "I know

you can read, so I would guess so, but you know..." He raised his left hand, gesturing as if he was holding a pen. "A handwriting more legible than chicken scratch?"

Merridy swallowed. "It's all right. I guess." She didn't know what he was getting at.

"Follow me."

He got up, and even though he still wasn't using his cane, his steps had become lighter. Merridy followed him up the stairs and into the study, the one room that was even more familiar to her than the living room.

There was still a pile of crates stacked against the right hand wall. The largest one was the same as it had been months ago, but the others had changed. Cedric pushed one of them aside, lifted another off the pile, and finally pulled a medium sized one forward with a strained groan.

"Can you help me with that one?"

Merridy hurried to his side, reaching for the other end of the crate. Together, they managed to lift it and put it on the floor. Whatever was in there, it was incredibly heavy. Cedric took a step back and reached behind himself to grab a crow-bar, which he used to pry the lid off the crate.

"This crate," he said as the lid clattered to the floor, "is filled with all kinds of coins. I got them for cheap—for their material value, that is—after their owner died, and his brother didn't want to deal with it. Most of them are probably not worth more than the metal they are made of, but the thing with collections like those is: Sometimes, there's treasures among the rubble. Certain collectors are willing to pay a lot of money for some coins. The older and rarer, the better."

During his explanation, he had reached into the crate, pulling out a single silver coin. It was tarnished, almost completely black. He held it out to Merridy, and she took it carefully. That sure was interesting, but she didn't understand why he had brought her here, or what he was getting at.

"I have quite a few books on that topic," he said, gesturing at one of the shelves at her back, "but to be honest, there's little that's more boring than trying to figure out which shit-face found themselves important enough to immortalize their ugly visage on some pieces of metal. So here's my offer: You help me catalog those things, and I'll pay you for it."

He couldn't be serious. Merridy stared at the crate, in which she couldn't see much more than the top layer of dusty cloth, hiding the coins Cedric was talking about. There must be thousands of them in there!

"But that would take—"

"Quite a while," Cedric interrupted her. "I am aware. Of course, while you'd be busy with that, you could stay here. It's getting dark early, and I wouldn't want you to walk back each day after nightfall."

Something about his expression was hard as he spoke, but Merridy had no chance to dwell on it, for he continued, "We already know it's no trouble for Yvan to feed you as well, so you can just join us for our meals."

Merridy could only nod, too stunned by what he was offering her.

"I'd pay you once per week, and if you manage to find anything worthwhile in that pile of junk, I will make sure it will be in your favor. What do you say?"

She couldn't believe it. "... yes?" she said, still wondering if there was a catch somewhere.

Cedric smiled, one of his rare, genuine smiles. "It's a deal, then." He reached for her hand, and it was so unlike him, she didn't know how to react. "You can start tomorrow. Tonight, we'll set up your bed, and tell Yvan that he'll have someone again who can tolerate his bean stew."

When she made no attempt to move or reply, Cedric's smile slowly faded.

"Merridy?"

The concern in his voice was what broke the spell. She looked from her hand in his up to him, fighting against the tears burning in her eyes. She forced herself to smile and nod, because she didn't think she'd manage to get a single word out right now.

Cedric sighed. "Come here." He pulled her towards him, and into an awkward hug. "You should have come sooner," he said, so quietly, she wasn't sure if she hadn't just imagined it.

Merridy closed her eyes and leaned her head against his chest, allowing herself to believe that it was true. That she was welcome here. That she was going to have a roof over her head, and food each day, and actually a chance to earn both. That she would get to sit in front of the fireplace again, a book in her lap, and to help Yvan in the kitchen.

That, at least for a few weeks, her life would be all right.



CHAPTER 11

The Friend

“So, how’s business?” Laurent asked.

Cedric leaned back in his chair, picking up his glass of rum. It was the second one, and the evening was still young, so he was taking it slow. Instead of drinking, he shrugged, watching the golden liquid slosh around.

“Not much going on,” he said.

A few weeks had passed since Colette’s death. Even though the threat had been buried with Jean, Cedric had decided to stay low for the time being. Not that there was much to do, anyway. There never was in winter, when people either stayed at home, or fled into warmer climes.

For the time being, he focused on his other business; the *legal* one. Laurent might actually be interested in details. The interest of the others in his trade waxed and waned depending on how much they wanted to suck up to him.

“Been busy in the shop instead,” he said, taking a sip after all. “Apparently this year, there’s a run on a certain kind of antique clock. You know, the kind that was made fifty years ago, before the nyvi started to share some of their technologies.”

Laurent nodded. “I’ve heard of them being mentioned in some... poem? Play? I don’t know what exactly. It’s a hot

topic amongst the ladies.” He wriggled his eyebrows, stroking a hand over his bound back dreadlocks in an exaggerated fashion. “Hey, got one of those clocks left?”

Cedric laughed and swatted Laurent’s arm. “Sorry. All out. But I got my hands on some rare raqharian coins. With the rising tension in the west, those might soon be worth a fortune.”

It was, in fact, Merridy who had identified the coins. He had gotten the idea in a pinch, desperate to find a way to let her stay that would allow both of them to keep their pride. He would never have expected her to do this good of a job, though. She spent hours cleaning and researching every single one of those coins, nose stuck in his books until late at night. Each coin was then put into a paper envelope, and the origin, year, approximate value and references used to find said information neatly written on the back.

The raqharian coins weren’t the only rare ones she had discovered so far, and Cedric had to admit that not only had he gotten an excellent deal with this stock, he had gotten an even better deal with *her*. Letting her work for him still left a bitter taste in his mouth, considering how well it had ended for Colette. But he couldn’t have let her go back on the streets; he didn’t think she would survive the winter out there.

“Where’s your cute little shadow today?” one of the other men asked.

Cedric raised his head, not liking the man’s tone. He dug around in his memory, to find the drawer he had stored this guy’s name in. Marc. The friend of a friend, and judging by his uncivilized behavior so far, not welcome here for much longer.

“What do you mean?”

Marc gestured with his almost empty glass – the third one, if Cedric remembered right. “The little girlie that was following you around last time,” he said, slightly slurring his

words. "Wouldn't have thought you'd manage to get one that young. Is she even of age? Can't blame you for wanting to try another hole for once, though."

He laughed as if he had made a grand joke. No one else did.

"Does your husband know? Does he watch? Oh, is that why she looks like a boy?" He cupped his hands in front of his chest, imitating breasts, and spilling a few drops of his drink in the process. "I could never see the appeal in that. I need a real woman. No offense, man."

It had become dead quiet in the salon. Even the man shuffling the cards had frozen mid-motion, staring at Marc. Cedric was staring as well, but at the glass in his hand, the rum inside rippling as his fingers trembled.

"Out."

It was the only word he managed to say without losing his temper; without screaming, without reaching out with his magic, to grab one of his many gems and fling it straight through that asshole's skull.

Yvan would hate blood on his carpet.

"Get. Out."

"Come on, man!" Marc's voice was higher pitched now, laced with the righteous indignation of a drunk asshole who truly couldn't see anything wrong with what he had said. "Can't you take a— hey!"

Laurent had gotten up and grabbed Marc's arm, to pull him off the chair. The glass clattered to the floor, spilling the rest of its contents, but not breaking.

"Let go of me!"

Marc's struggle was in vain as Laurent dragged him out of the salon. He alternated pleas and curses, which were soon swallowed by the wall separating the room and the hallway.

"Let's play." Cedric grabbed the abandoned cards, starting over with shuffling them. It was probably unnecessary,

but he needed to keep his hands busy with something that wasn't ripping out Marc's throat. "Or does anyone else have something to say?"

No one said a word. Most of them didn't even look at him. Laurent returned to his spot, pouring himself a glass of alcohol, but only taking a small sip. His expression was dark, his eyes gleaming orange.

Cedric dealt and picked up his own hand. As he stared into the cards, the numbers and symbols all blurred together. Outside the salon, he could hear how the door to the street opened and closed.

Good riddance.

He had just thrown a few coins into the middle of the table to conclude the first round when he heard something else. A voice, so quiet it was only the *feeling* of knowing it that made his hair stand on edge. Cedric lowered his cards, indecisive. Then something shattered, and someone screamed, and he jumped up.

When Cedric reached the hallway, the door to the street was wide open. Marc was still there, *inside*, clutching his face. Blood dripped down between his fingers as he alternated curses and pained groans.

"Didn't I tell you to get out?" Cedric almost growled the words, what little was left of his patience fading fast.

"Your stupid whore broke my nose!" Marc shouted, pointing at the door. A pile of ceramic shards lay at his feet.

Merridy. And just like that, Cedric's restraint was gone. He grabbed Marc's hand, slamming it against the dresser at his back. The sickening crunch of his wrist was almost drowned out by his scream.

"What have you done to her?" Cedric asked. "What!"

"Nothing. Nothing!" For the first time, there was true panic in Marc's eyes. "She attacked... She attacked *me*. Help. Someone, help me!"

Cedric didn't need to look around to know that no one would be helping Marc. Shadows in the corner of his eye told him that the others had come to watch, though.

"Sure she did." Cedric pressed down harder on the broken wrist, while he raised his other hand to grab the man's throat. "What. Have you. Done to her?"

"Nothing! Nothingnothingnothing, let me..." Marc wheezed as Cedric squeezed his throat. He tried to swat his hand away, but between the alcohol and his injuries, he didn't have the strength. "Nothing, we just talked. Please!"

"Then what did you *say* to her?"

"I... I said..." Every hint of confidence was gone from Marc's posture. There was pure terror in his eyes. "Said it's... it's her own fault for wearing... wearing that she got— oh gods, please let go, please please." When Cedric didn't let go, only shook him by the neck, he sobbed. "That she— That she got attacked."

Attacked.

"Fuck," Cedric said. "Fuck!"

The second curse was a shout, accompanying his fist as he let go of Marc's throat, to punch him in the stomach.

While Marc's legs started to crumple, Cedric smashed his hand against the dresser a second time, breaking the arm as well. If Marc's previous behavior was any indication, he had probably phrased it in an even ruder way. This fucking piece of shit.

Cedric was tempted to shove him out of the house, into his backyard, to let the earth swallow him. But Merridy was somewhere out there, scared and possibly hurt, and he didn't have time to deal with this asshole. He had to find her.

"If I ever see you again, I'll kill you." No fancy threats this time, no made up stories about a hundred different ways he could use the earth to kill. He'd cut his fucking throat, if he had to.

Without waiting for a reply, Cedric started to walk. Someone followed him. He whirled around, ready to defend himself, but it was only Laurent. Laurent, and some other guy. Wendel, Cedric found the name in yet another drawer in his mind.

"We'll help you find her," Laurent said.

He was holding a cane, which he handed to Cedric the moment he had caught up. It wasn't one of the prettier ones; he must have grabbed the first one he had found.

Cedric nodded. He was thankful for the gesture, and thankful for the offer, but too agitated to put any of it into words.

"Don't call for her," he said instead. "If she's scared, she might hide from you."

Or from him. Not knowing what kind of state she was in, he wasn't sure if *he* could dare to call for her. Fuck. She had come to his house for help, only to be hurt again.

So he didn't call for her. Instead, he tried to see the world like she might see it, searching for anything telling him where she might have run. Anywhere that might look safe enough for her so she could have gone there to hide.

It was fucking hard, because *nothing* was safe out here. It was too dark, too cold. They were in one of the better parts of town, but the sidewalks were covered in muddy slush, and fresh snow had started to fall. He had to find her, or she would freeze to death.

"Cedric!" someone shouted. It wasn't Laurent, so it must be Wendel.

Cedric started to run into the direction of the voice, his cane slipping over the slick ground. He didn't slow down, though, despite knowing very well how risky it was. Twice he came close to falling, but he managed to catch himself at the last moment. When he arrived where Wendel was waiting for him, he leaned heavily against a house wall, trying to catch his breath.

Laurent had reached them as well, standing next to Wendel. They were whispering, but Cedric couldn't make out their expressions in the dark. When he cast them a sharp glance, Laurent pointed into the side street next to him. Fingers firmly wrapped around the handle of his cane, Cedric took a careful step inside.

There she was, sitting on the ground in the corner between a wall and a pile of empty crates. With her arms wrapped around her knees and her head ducked deep between her shoulders, she made herself as small as possible; and then somehow even smaller when he stopped in front of her.

Cedric turned to look back over his shoulder, a lump in his throat.

"I got this," he said. "Go back and make sure he's gone when we return."

The two of them nodded and retreated, leaving Cedric alone with the terrified young woman. Despite his words, he had absolutely no idea what to do. He wished Yvan was here, but his husband was out of town for a few days.

"Merridy..."

She winced as he called her name, but didn't look up. Cedric tried to see if she was injured, but between what little light found its way into the street and her cowering posture, it was hopeless. There was no blood he could see, so that was probably good.

Her shirt was torn, and her coat — she must have been wearing one in that weather, right? — nowhere to be seen. That was less good, even if he ignored the implications. It was way too cold for that.

Without thinking, he leaned his cane against the wall and took off his own coat. It wasn't made for weather like this, but it was better than nothing. He dropped it rather helplessly on top of her, not daring to get closer than absolutely necessary. It still made her flinch.

She wasn't only afraid; she was afraid of *him*.

Cedric fought down the annoyance at this realization. This wasn't about him. He took a step back, to put a bit of distance between himself and Merridy, before lowering himself to the ground. The bottom of his pants got instantly soaked, making him grimace. He could think of a million better things to do than to sit in filth like this, but he needed to rest his leg.

Propping his cane across his lap, he absentmindedly traced the wood before he remembered that this was the wrong one; that there would be no amethyst inlays for his fingertips to find.

While he waited for her to calm down, he tried to calm down as well. His anger wasn't directed at her, but that wouldn't matter much if he scared her with it. Gods knew she was scared enough already. He needed to know what had happened. He needed to know if she was *hurt*.

Cedric wiggled his toes, unpleasantly aware of how stiff they had become. He hated the cold. Had hated it ever since... No, he shouldn't think of that, either. Leaning his head back against the wall, he turned it slightly to the side, so he could watch her. Huddled under his coat, she was still shivering, occasionally shaking with a quiet sob. More snow had started to drift down, settling on her ruffled hair.

"Merridy," he said when he couldn't stand the wait any longer. "What happened?"

Silence answered him. Cedric waited. Just when he thought she wouldn't reply anymore, she started to speak.

"I was... on, on my way t-to get some, some f-food," she said. Her teeth were chattering so hard, it was difficult to make out the words. "S-someone attacked me. He, he w-wanted... it ha-happens, right?" Her bitter laugh turned into another sob, stealing her breath. "I g-got... away. When I... when I c-came back. He said... said it's m-my own fault. For... for dressing... like..."

She broke off, and her hand vanished under the coat she had wrapped around herself. The collar of what was left of her shirt moved as she probably tugged on the fabric. It was ridiculous. From what Cedric had seen, it was a plain, ordinary shirt. Not that it mattered. She could be dancing naked down the street and it wouldn't give anyone the right to —

"I hit him. With a... a vase," she said. It was a mere whisper, pulling Cedric out of his thoughts. He watched helplessly as she pressed herself into the corner between house and crates, stammering, "I'm sorry, I'm, I'm sorry. Please. Please, I'm s-sorry." She squeezed her eyes shut as if she expected him to hit her or something.

"What for?" he asked, trying his best to keep his voice calm. She hadn't been this terrified since the day he had saved her from the dungeon. He wouldn't have expected how much it hurt to see her like this.

"He, he... he's... y-your friend."

"Merridy. That guy isn't my friend." Cedric waited for her to open her eyes, shooting him an uncertain glance, before he continued, "*No one* who talks to you like that is my friend. Do you understand?"

He could see from the look on her face that she didn't. She might have understood his words, but she didn't believe them, not really. He extended his arm in her direction, not moving otherwise.

A few minutes passed before she dared to shuffle towards him. When she was close enough, he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her even closer. He could feel how much she was shaking. She must be freezing.

She didn't resist as he wrapped his other arm around her as well, tugging the coat back into place, then holding her. There wasn't much warmth he could share like this.

"You might have broken his nose, but I broke a few more bones of his." Perhaps his admission of violence wasn't the

best idea to try and calm her down, but Cedric didn't know what the fuck else he should do. "And I would do it again. If anyone ever talks to you that way, or tries to hurt you, I will make sure he regrets it."

Strangely enough, she didn't seem too bothered by his words. After a moment, she relaxed against him, sniffing quietly.

"But... but why?" she whispered.

"Because *you* are my friend. Little nuisance."

The last word had just slipped out. Cedric watched her with concern, hoping that she wouldn't misunderstand what had come to be a silly nickname. He didn't mind her living with him, and neither did Yvan. Sure, there were a few benefits of having the house to themselves both of them missed, but they would survive a few months of keeping certain activities to their bedroom.

"Now can we go home? Please?" Cedric cleared his throat, blaming the way his voice had cracked on the cold. He really fucking hated the cold. His fingers had started to turn numb as well, and his right leg ached with a pain that was usually no more than a long buried memory.

Merridy nodded and scrambled to her feet, with way more grace than him. Cedric had to cling to the wall to get up, leaning heavily on his cane. As soon as he was standing, she was at his side, wrapping one arm around his back. He wasn't quite sure if she wanted to steady him, or hug him, or find some warmth, or... whatever, perhaps a bit of it all.

He put his arm around her in return, trying his best to ignore the numbness of his toes, and how it left him out of balance. They walked in silence, thick snowflakes flurrying around them.

His house finally coming into view, the door slightly ajar, was the best thing Cedric had seen in a while. A relieved sigh left his lips as he entered, letting go of Merridy, so he could

close the door properly. His fingers were so cold, the metal handle felt almost hot to his touch, and the warm air prickled on his face. Someone had cleaned up the shards on the floor.

"Let's get changed," he said, closing up to her and pointing in the direction of the stairs.

Merridy nodded and started to walk. As they passed the salon, Cedric saw Laurent sitting alone at the table. The others were all gone, and the table was empty, except for the pile of playing cards, neatly stacked in the middle of it.

When Laurent spotted them, he got up, which in return made Merridy shrink back behind Cedric. Cedric positioned himself so he was between her and Laurent as he shook the man's hand, to thank him for his help.

"I'm sorry the evening ended this way," Laurent said. "If it helps... no one else thinks that way."

Cedric nodded, lips pressed together into a thin line. He didn't plan on discussing what else Marc had said about Merridy in front of her.

"Thank you. Keep me updated, all right?"

Laurent nodded, then left. Cedric looked after him until the door had closed behind him. Few of his acquaintances he considered his true friends, but Laurent was one of them.

"Let's go," he said, tearing his gaze off the door and looking at Merridy instead.

She nodded shyly. Still wrapped in his coat, she looked way smaller than she was. They climbed the stairs together, then Cedric stepped into his bedroom to change out of the wet clothes, while Merridy walked down the hallway to the study.

By the time Cedric left his bedroom, wearing a soft sweater and thick pants made out of wool, she hadn't yet emerged.

Instead of standing around uselessly to wait for her, he climbed down the stairs, entering the living room. The first thing he did was to exchange his cane, brushing his fingers

over the familiar ornaments as he picked up his usual one. Then he put a few fresh logs into the fireplace, stoking the flames and warming his fingers at the same time.

Once the fire was burning brightly, Cedric entered the kitchen, where he filled the kettle. He hummed quietly, trying to fight down the unease, and wishing once more Yvan were here.

He had to search for a while until he had found everything he needed — who in their right mind put the honey next to the spices? — but he was still long done by the time he heard the living room door open.

Cedric left the kitchen, two cups in hand, to find Merridy standing in front of the sofa. She had changed into the loosest clothes she had been able to find. The sleeves of her dark blue sweater reached down over her wrists. When he came closer, she sat down, hands folded in her lap.

“Here,” he said, handing her a cup. “Careful, it’s hot.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Cedric sat down on the sofa as well. He wasn’t sure this was a good idea, but it was harder to reach the coffee table from his armchair, and his cup was so hot, he had to put it down after a few sips.

“Didn’t know you could make tea,” Merridy said, clinging to her cup.

“Don’t tell Yvan.” Cedric winked. “Next thing you know, he’ll have me help with cooking and stuff.”

His words made Merridy laugh. It was a short, quiet laugh, but a laugh. It warmed Cedric’s heart. She put the cup down, fidgeting with her sleeves.

“Can I... Can I give you a hug?” she asked without looking at him.

“Of...” Cedric had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could try again. “Of course.”

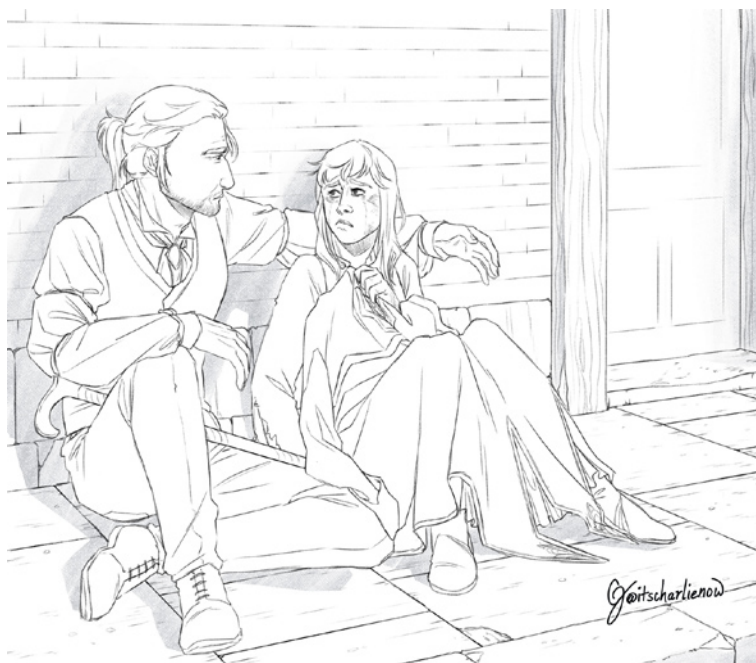
He sat up straight, not daring to move as she came closer. Awkwardly, she put her hands on his shoulders. Only when

she sank against him did he dare to return the gesture, slowly raising his arms to put them around her ever so carefully. She smelled slightly of lavender. That explained what had taken her so long. She must not only have changed her clothes, but washed herself as well.

They sat like this for a while. For the first time since Marc had opened his mouth, Cedric felt his anger fade. It didn't matter. This asshole didn't matter, and his words didn't matter. If he would try anything else, Cedric would kill him, easy as that.

The only thing that *did* matter was Merridy. Cedric reached behind him, to grab the blanket that was lying there, so he could pull it around her shoulders. She snuggled into it, leaning partially against him, and partially against the cushions at the back of the sofa. Her eyes were half closed, her gaze lost somewhere between him and the fireplace. She must be exhausted. Cedric would let her rest a bit, before he would continue his expedition in the kitchen, trying to find something to eat as well.

She was going to be fine. He would make sure of it.





CHAPTER 12

The Plan

Merridy sat in an armchair much too large for her, with three small coins on the armrest and a pile of books spread around her. She was absorbed in the book on her lap, occasionally raising her head to look at one of the coins, searching for another detail she might have missed.

She had been at this for hours. The cup of tea on the small table next to her was forgotten and cold. Cedric had told her again and again that she didn't have to be *that* thorough, that it was no problem if she couldn't identify some of the coins. He had made it more than clear that her results already exceeded his expectations, but at this point, it was a matter of pride. She wouldn't let a tiny little copper man with eyebrows almost as large as his goatee get the better of her.

Eyebrows. Merridy snapped the book shut, wincing at the sound. She cast a cautious glance across the room, but no one paid her any attention. Good. She grabbed another book, scanning the table of contents at the front. She had read a mention of eyebrows somewhere, some weeks back.

Soon, she was absorbed in the new book, skimming page over page about minor nobles in the west. A row of ancestry portraits drawn in sketchy lines showed a striking

resemblance to the face on the coin. The same eyebrows, as well as similar facial hair on at least half of the men. With renewed vigor, she soaked up the descriptions next to the portraits, until...

"Gotcha!"

Lord Richard Joffridus Lowis the Third, who had minted his own coins after taking over the two neighboring counties and claiming independence from the kingdom of Raqhar. Most of the coins had been melted down again two years later, when the king of Raqhar had razed the newly founded monarchy, mounting Richard's head on a spear and putting an end to his line of heritage.

Realizing how loud she had been, Merridy quickly pressed her lips together, looking up. This time, she met someone's gaze. Laurent raised his glass in her direction, a wide smile on his lips, before he resumed his conversation.

Merridy knew most of Cedric's regular guests by name now, but Laurent was the only one she occasionally talked to. She returned his smile, even if he couldn't see it anymore. Then she grabbed the remaining coins, so she wouldn't drop them as she leaned over the armrest to reach the table.

She opened the inkwell, dipped the quill into it and started to write her findings onto an envelope. After blowing air on the ink to help it dry faster, she slipped the coin into the envelope and sealed it. Staring at the envelope, she hesitated, then added another symbol, a little star in the upper right corner. She didn't know much about coins, but this one must be pretty rare.

There were two more coins to go, but it was late already and she didn't want to see another book about dusty old monarchs and nobles for a couple of hours. Instead, she took a moment to enjoy her victory by watching the men.

It was something she often did; watching them. Cedric had moved the armchair for her several weeks ago, when the

winter had been at its height and the salon had often been the warmest room in the house. Now, with spring just around the corner, it wasn't strictly necessary anymore, but she still preferred to spend her evenings in the salon.

There was something cozy about sitting here, engrossed in her work, while Cedric met with friends and clients. She enjoyed listening to them laugh and talk, watching them play cards and occasionally other games. Sometimes, when Laurent was the only guest, she joined as well, at least for a few rounds.

Today's meeting was of the business kind, though, that much was obvious. Merridy didn't know the two men sitting at the table. Their skin tone was somewhere between Cedric's light and Laurent's brown complexion, their wavy, shoulder length hair dark brown. They had similar features, and a similar demeanor, making them brothers, or maybe cousins, she assumed.

It was the second meeting she had been present for, but for the first time, she started to actually pay attention to what was said.

"... library in the second story," one of the men said, pointing to something on the table. "We need a plan."

"No one's arguing about the need for a plan," the other man said. "Your plan is just stupid and won't work."

"Mhm." Cedric pulled whatever it was closer to himself. "No basement, and only a rat would make it through the connection to the sewers." He traced a few lines on what Merridy now assumed to be a map of some kind. "The windows here, here and here are all barred, which leaves the kitchen. But that's on the wrong side of the house."

"I've checked out the servants," Laurent chimed in. "They've all been employed for at least a decade, with few changes in personnel. If we want to get in through them, it'll be a lengthy process."

"Whatever it takes," the first man said. "It's a matter of honor at this point."

How honorable was it, stealing something? Not that Merridy cared much. Most of Cedric's clients were wealthy; they could steal jeweled trinkets from each other all day long for all she cared. She didn't know all the details of what Cedric earned his money with. Sometimes, it seemed to be a mere game to him. Him against the law, using every tool at his disposal—his knowledge, his contacts, his magic—to get what he wanted. It wasn't hard for Merridy to decide who she sided with. Where the law would have left her to freeze and starve, he had taken her in and saved her.

She reached to the side, grabbing the blanket that was lying on the floor, to pull it over her legs. The armchair was large enough for her to sit comfortably, legs tucked under the blanket and head leaned against the backrest. She closed her eyes, burying her hands in the blanket as well.

"Do you think a chaos mage could get in through the kitchen?" Laurent asked.

"Possibly." Cedric sighed. "But the only one I ever trusted was Vincent, and he left Caldeia two years ago."

Merridy barely paid attention to what was said anymore, letting her thoughts drift instead. To think that she was sitting here, warm and safe and comfortable, able to do whatever she wanted with the rest of the evening. Without having to worry about the next day, or the next meal. She wished she could pay Cedric back somehow. Sure, she cataloged those silly coins for him, and sure, some of them seemed to be worth a fortune. But he paid her for it, more than this work was worth, probably. Anyone could compare a few drawings and lines of text, it just took some time.

Merridy sighed, snuggling deeper into the blanket. If only she was a chaos mage. Then she could turn invisible, walk straight in and get the object Cedric's clients wanted.

"Hey. Little nuisance."

Merridy opened her eyes to see Cedric standing over her. When she blinked and looked around, she found that the table was abandoned. Her questioning gaze made Cedric chuckle.

"They left a while ago. Yvan is back, and dinner is almost ready."

Now that he mentioned it, she could smell the delicious aroma of roasted onions. It made her stomach rumble and she sat up straight, freeing herself from the blanket.

"Did you find a solution?" she asked as Cedric offered her his hand, to help her up.

His gaze turned the slightest bit darker. "No. This is harder than I would have thought. There doesn't seem to be a way into the house, at least not for me. Laurent thinks it might be possible by gaining access to one of the services they use—if they use any, like landscaping. But if we do that, it'll take forever."

Cedric started to walk towards the kitchen, Merridy close behind him. "But none of that now," he said, gesturing vaguely with his right. "That's my problem, not yours. Did *you* have any luck today?"

"Oh, yeah! I found only one, but I think it's very rare." Realizing how excited she had sounded Merridy felt heat flush her cheeks. "I mean... probably," she mumbled. "I'll show you after dinner, if you want."

Cedric paused in the doorway to the kitchen. "You haven't been wrong yet, have you? You're good at this."

Merridy could have sworn her cheeks grew even hotter, glad that Cedric turned around to enter the kitchen, so he wouldn't notice. She hadn't been wrong *yet*, that much was true, but Cedric's trust in her still made her uncomfortable. She would be wrong at some point, she was sure of it. She just hoped he wouldn't be too angry with her then.

The moment she stepped inside the kitchen, Yvan called out to her.

"Merridy! Just in time for my famous roast potatoes."

Seeing him standing in front of the stove, a wide smile on his lips and wearing a pink apron, Merridy couldn't help but smile herself. The apron was decorated with frills and sported the snout and ears of a piglet at the chest. Yvan had told her it had been a gift from Cedric some years ago, meant as a joke. Unfortunately for his husband, Yvan had decided to wear it while cooking ever since.

"Can one of you open the jar and drain the vegetables?" Yvan asked, pointing to the counter and a cloth covered preserving jar. "The other can start setting the table."

While Cedric walked over to the counter, Merridy started opening cupboards and drawers, grabbing a set of dishes and cutlery. It had only been a few weeks, but she felt like she had been living here forever. Everything was so familiar. The way Yvan sorted the knives and spoons, where he kept the regular plates and the fine ones, which spatula he used for cooking and which for baking.

Her finger brushed over a dark stain on the table, shaped like a crescent moon. It was more than selfish, but a part of her hoped it would take a long time for her to get through the crate of coins.

"Beets? Really?" Cedric drained the pickled vegetables and filled them into a bowl. "Might as well eat a piece of dirt."

"You're the one who took twenty jars as payment." Yvan's tone didn't sound sorry in the slightest. "There's still seven left."

"It was her late husband's ring, and she didn't have any money," Cedric grumbled, sitting down.

Merridy peered into the bowl. Next to the dark red slices of beet were bright orange cubes of carrot and pale sticks of either cucumber or zucchini. She resisted the urge to grab a

piece. Instead, she sat down on her chair as Yvan brought the large iron frying pan over to the table, putting it down on a nicely carved block of wood.

He took off the apron before sitting down, and a few moments later, the three of them sat in front of a steaming serving of roast potatoes each. They were crispy on the outside and soft within, having soaked up the flavor of several onions and the occasional strip of bacon.

"Want some?" Yvan had served Cedric and himself from the bowl and was now holding up another spoon full of vegetables.

Merridy hastily shoved her potatoes aside, to free space on half of her plate. Yvan took it as an invitation, setting the vegetables down, then raising the spoon, a questioning look on his face.

"That's enough, thank you," she said. She barely resisted the urge to apologize at the same time. She really liked pickles; she just couldn't stand the thought of the salty vinegar soaking her potatoes. One had to be sacrificed though, the least crispy piece, being shoved in the way of a trickle of brine making its way across the plate.

She could have asked for a smaller bowl for herself, but the last thing she needed was to be made fun of for having the eating habits of a three year old.

"So, how did today go?" Yvan asked.

Merridy listened half-heartedly as Cedric told him about the meeting. Some of it she had already heard earlier, and some of it she didn't understand, so she didn't pay too much attention. The potatoes were as excellent as ever, almost sweet from the amount of onions in the dish. It made her appreciate the pickled vegetables even more.

When Merridy noticed how Cedric had piled his slices of beets at the edge of his plate, she grinned. Her grin turned into a smile as Yvan kissed him on the cheek, before spearing

the pile of beets with his fork. Even if she would never be able to find a love such as this, watching the two of them warmed her heart.

It was all she had ever wanted; finding somewhere, *someone* where she belonged. By now, she was reasonably sure that the price for it would be too high. Still, a girl could dream, right?

She was still lost in thought when Cedric lightly poked her arm. "We'll just put you into an apron, hand you a feather duster, and tell them you're the new maid," he said.

Merridy looked up from her empty plate, not sure if he was serious. The amused glimmer in his eyes told her he wasn't.

"If I could, I would help you," she said. She was serious.

"That was a joke. I'd never drag you into this. Into any of this. Listen..." Suddenly, he looked so very serious. "Being associated with me might one day put a target on your back, in the eyes of the law, or of someone who wishes me ill. The less you know, the less you are involved, the better. As it is, you're already too close to me."

She knew, shortly before she had returned, something bad had happened. One of his confidants had betrayed him, and one of his friends had been killed. Some things he had told her, some she had pieced together from overheard conversations. Claiming that it didn't scare her at all would have been a lie.

"Are you saying I should leave?"

"No! No... Unless... Do you want to leave? Because I'm not—" He broke off when Merridy shook her head energetically. "I just want you to be safe," he said with a sigh.

"I've been safer with you than anywhere else since I arrived in this city."

Which was ridiculous when she remembered how scared she had been the day he had rescued her. That was before she had seen through his standoffish behavior, finding a man

beneath who could be quick-tempered at times, but wasn't the monster Carl had made her believe he was.

Right now, that man was staring at her, an uninterpretable look on his face.

Yvan cleared his throat. "What do you think about a round of cards? Or that new game Laurent brought a few weeks ago. Why don't you set it up?"

Merridy could recognize a pretense if she saw one.

"Sure," she said, standing up. "Thanks for the dinner, Yvan, it was as wonderful as always."

As soon as she was halfway through the living room, she could hear subdued voices behind her. She didn't try to listen. Instead, she walked back into the salon, where she opened a few drawers and doors, looking for said game.

Once she had found it, she brought it over to the table. Maps and drawings were still spread there. Merridy started to pick them up, then paused. On top of the pile was the layout of a house; a large house, every room carefully labeled. *Kitchen*, she read, and *Servants' Quarters*.

She lifted the parchment, revealing another one beneath. This one showed the first floor, and the one she found when she lifted it as well the second.

Having forgotten all about the game, Merridy studied the layouts. The library was almost directly above the kitchen, which opened into the backyard. Merridy put the three plans next to each other, comparing them. Now she saw the things Cedric had mentioned; no basement, barred windows, the only entrance through the kitchen where—according to a scribbled note—at least one person watched over the hearth the whole night.

But what about the upper floors?

Her fingers traced the letters spelling out the rooms as she counted the windows, trying to memorize them. The first two from the corner at the back of the house belonged to a study

room, followed by three for the library, and another two for some unlabeled room, with the scribbled words *Guest Room?* next to it.

Perhaps it wasn't possible. If it were, Cedric would surely have thought of it. She might just not have been listening when the men had talked about it.

Still, something called to her. She couldn't *remember* them talking about it at all. How hard could it be, to enter the house through one of the windows in the upper floors? Many of the houses she had seen in the rich parts of the city sported ornaments that would make it as easy as climbing up a ladder.

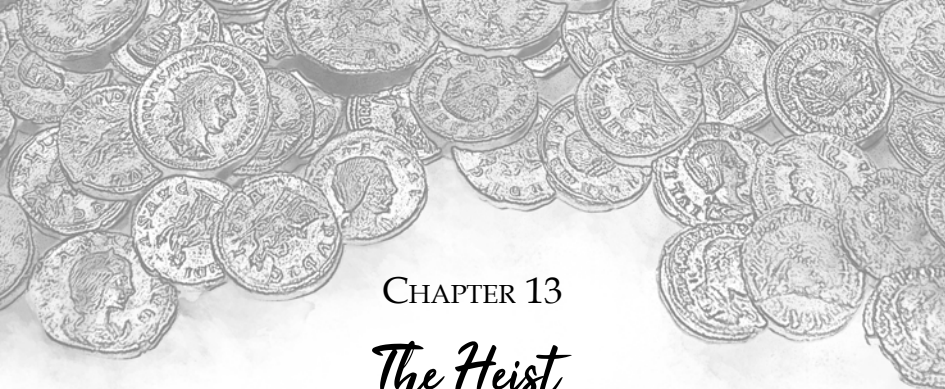
"Merridy? What about some snacks? I still have some raspberry cookies," Yvan's voice sounded from the kitchen.

"Sounds great!" Merridy called back.

Hastily, she grabbed the parchments strewn across the table. Not knowing where Cedric kept them, she brought them over to a sideboard, making sure they were neatly stacked, and the top one was face down.

When the two men entered the room, she was almost done setting up the board game. Yvan held out a plate of cookies for her; raspberry and chocolate, the rest of the batch he had made for their anniversary some weeks prior. She grabbed one, a grin on her lips, which turned into a delighted hum as she bit into the cookie.

Being here, happy and safe and *welcome*, was worth every risk so far, and a few more. Tomorrow morning, she would take a long walk and look at the house herself.



CHAPTER 13

The Heist

Merridy barely dared to breathe as she reached for the object in the velvet-padded wooden box. It was a globe, about the size of a very large apple, carved out of pure crystal. The continents were made of gold, each with a small, embedded gemstone for the corresponding native nation.

It seemed ridiculous now that Cedric's clients had said it wasn't the material value they were interested in. It was by far the most valuable thing she had ever held in her hands.

And by far the most trouble she would ever get into if she got caught.

Carefully, she slid the globe into the bag she had slung around her shoulders. It pressed heavily against her side, the priceless object cushioned by scraps of fabric. Just as carefully, she closed the lid of the wooden box, then the door of the cabinet she had found it in.

The glowing crystal attached to her ring barely emitted enough light to see the outlines of the objects surrounding her. She couldn't risk for the shimmer to be noticed outside of the windows, or through the cracks of a door.

To leave the same way she had entered – and the only way she knew would be safe to do so – she had to make her way

back to the hallway. Cowering behind the door, she listened, scanning the crack beneath the door for any hint of a light. Everything was quiet and dark.

To keep it dark, she touched the crystal on her ring, extinguishing it. Feeling for the door, pressing down the handle as slowly as she could, she made no sound. It took her a minute or two to finally open the door far enough for her to be able to squeeze through, and just as long to close it again.

The hallway was as dark as the room had been, with no light to speak of. She felt the wall at her side more than she saw it as she crept forward, her fingers trailing along, searching for the next door frame. She skipped the first one she found, pausing at the second. Another round of listening, peering beneath the wood and slowly daring to open the door followed, then she was out of the hallway and allowed herself a deep breath.

She had almost made it now.

Tapping the crystal to bring the light back showed her the way to the window that was her exit. Merridy moved slowly towards it, careful not to bump into things or stumble over them. A few steps before she reached the window, she extinguished the crystal again. The sky was overcast this night, the only light coming through the window that of a city asleep in the quietest hours. It was enough for her to find the latch, to open it, and to swing herself onto the windowsill.

She peered down, memorizing the whitened wall, broken by ornate carvings painted in gaudy colors; colors she could only remember from when she had scouted the place during the day, dull and dark now in the night.

Clinging to the windowsill, she lowered herself, finding a hold for her feet that allowed her to take one hand off to close the window. A thin thread made it possible for her to lift the latch, to put it back into place. When she was done, she tugged at it, tearing it off so she could drop it. The longer it

would take them to figure out what had happened, how she had gotten in, the better.

The descent was harder than climbing up had been, with the globe pressing against her side, and unable to see where she could find a foothold. This was the most dangerous part; she knew against the whitened wall she'd be easy to spot, should anyone pass by. She didn't dare to hurry though. A fall from a second story window might not be fatal, but being found with broken bones in the garden of the person she had just robbed would be.

She had almost reached the ground when a dog barked.

Merridy froze. Clinging to the wall, she listened, holding on so tightly one of her fingernails broke. The dog barked again. The sound was muffled, probably coming from the other side of the building, where the servants' entrance was. If the dog was off the leash, it would take it mere seconds to reach her, though.

"Stop chasing damn hedgehogs every night, you stupid mutt!" someone shouted. It was a quiet shout, as far as that was possible, probably in an attempt to not wake everyone up. A servant, most likely, for no noble would be awake at this hour to let their dog out.

A few seconds passed, filled with some indistinct rustling noises and another shout.

"Come back here. Fifi! Back, now!" A few curses followed, but the voice wasn't any closer as it shouted again, "Don't think I'll pull all the quills out again if you bite another one."

Merridy let go of the wall. The fall was less than two meters, but the impact still sent a jolt of pain through her legs and her left ankle. She didn't pause, gritting her teeth and limping towards the fence. She had picked black clothes, easy to spot against the bright exterior of the house, but allowing her to melt into the shadows the moment she left it behind.

She hurried across the garden, praying that her leg wouldn't

give in as each step made new pain shoot up her ankle. The zig-zag path she followed was half remembered, half guessed from what little she was able to see. Ducking behind neatly trimmed hedges and exotic low trees, she managed to stay as invisible as possible.

She had almost reached the fence when the dog caught up. It was a small one, a breed more meant for company than for any real work like hunting or herding. Still, even a small dog's bite hurt. Teeth dug into her left leg, the bite softened by the thick fabric of her pants. She shook her leg, trying to get the dog off, but it didn't let go.

Putting her weight on her bitten leg brought tears to her eyes. The ankle was throbbing with pain, barely holding her weight, but it allowed her to kick at the dog.

It let go with a pained whine, but she didn't think she'd hurt it badly. She wasn't steady enough on her feet like this to have put any real force behind the kick.

"Don't say I didn't warn you!" the servant shouted again. The voice was close now; too close.

Merridy hobbled towards the fence, clinging to it as she craned her neck, trying to see if she was at the right spot. She needed to climb where she had thrown an old blanket over the barbed wire on top, or she would slice herself to shreds.

Something growled behind her, and she didn't have time to make sure. She started to climb, gritting her teeth once more against the stabbing pain in her left leg and ankle. It had been hard enough to scale the thing on her way in, the distance between the silvery metal bars too small for her feet to fit in. Her fingers ached from how much of her weight they had to hold every time she lifted her right foot.

The dog barked beneath her, but she was already out of reach. It wouldn't take long for the servant to come looking for it, though. Their voice was coming closer as they alternated calling the dog's name and cursing it out.

Reaching the top of the fence, Merridy realized that it had been the wrong spot. There was no blanket to be seen, and it was impossible for the wind to have blown it away. It had been too thoroughly pinned on the barbs protruding from the wire on top of the fence; barbs that now rose in front of her eyes as she pulled herself higher, desperately looking around.

There was no other way.

It was pure desperation that lent her the strength to heave herself across the top of the fence. The sturdy linen fabric of her pants resisted the barbs as it had resisted the dog's teeth. Her sweater was less useful. Thin, black wool gave way, allowing the metal to cut into her skin. She tried to be quiet, but couldn't suppress a pained whimper as the barbs lacerated her stomach and her arms. Blood welled up, hot at first, then cool where it ran down.

She had to grab something to hold onto, and the barbs dug into her palm. Still, getting caught would be worse, so much worse. She willed herself to move, to push herself over the fence, tearing open more skin. Merridy bit her sleeve to keep herself from screaming as the metal twisted in her wounds. The terror of what would await her in the dungeon if she got caught kept her going, made her tear one leg free, then the other, while she held on with trembling arms.

Slowly lowering herself, she managed to find her foothold again, to grab plain metal instead of the wire on top. She had to feel her way forward, tears blurring what little she had been able to see in the dark.

Then, suddenly, she was stuck. A pressure around her neck held her in place, making her panic spike, her hammering heartbeat pulsing against what was holding her. She froze, trying to think. Her fingers protested as she pulled herself up, paralyzed by the fear of falling and strangling herself.

The bag. The godforsaken bag.

Putting all her weight on her right leg, she clung to the fence with her left arm, using her right to try and get the bag free. It was stuck between the lines of barbed wire, her attempt to dislodge it shredding whatever was left of her sleeve. Blood ran down her arm, reaching her elbow, then her shoulder.

Every time she tugged on the bag, the twisted strap squeezed her throat, cutting off the air. Tears of frustration welled in her eyes while her panic grew and her movements became erratic.

The moment she managed to get the bag free, the resistance vanished. She leaned back, taking a deep, shuddering breath to make sure she was truly free. Her leg was trembling now, her fingers so cramped, she could barely move them. There was no way she'd be able to climb down like that.

She let go.

The fall was about as high as the previous one, but this time she landed sideways on soft, high grass. The impact drove the air out of her lungs. It was her luck that her bag had shifted, or landing on the globe might have shattered her ribs. As it was, it only slammed into her stomach, probably causing a bruise that would soon join the others.

She dragged her aching body across the ground to a shrub not too far from her, willing herself to make no sound. Hiding behind low hanging branches, she curled up, her bleeding arms pressed against her body. She was shaking so much, she had to clench her jaw to stop her teeth from chattering.

Movement on the other side of the fence brought the warm, golden glow of a candle or lantern.

"Let me see your nose," the servant said.

The dog whined.

"Well, that happens if you chase hedgehogs. Come, we'll get you a piece of sausage. But don't tell the lady."

Footsteps faded, then everything was quiet save for her own frantic breaths. Feeling the weight of the globe against

her bruised side, Merridy wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry.

She had made it. She had actually made it. She had managed to steal the thing Cedric and his clients had wanted so badly, without a clue of how to acquire it. Now she just had to make it back.

Merridy slowly lowered her hands, trying to relax her still trembling arms. She had to tap the crystal on her ring three times for it to work, and when it started to glow, there were dark spots on it where she had smeared her blood.

Studying her arms, seeing all the blood, she felt slightly nauseous. Still, she was lucky. The wounds didn't seem to be particularly deep. Most of them had already stopped bleeding, and the few remaining ones didn't seem to be dangerous, even if the burning let tears well up in her eyes and a sob rise in her throat. She tried to stay quiet, but allowed herself a moment to cry, to get used to the pain.

Blood ran down her stomach as well, the shredded remains of her sweater already soaked with it. Once she had calmed down a bit, she pushed them aside, trying to see anything in the dim magic light. She was more than grateful that she had taken the time to wrap her breasts before her heist, leaving half of her torso unscathed.

She closed her eyes, clutching the bag, a small, breathless laugh on her lips.

She'd make it back.

But first, she would have to wait for her legs to stop shaking.





CHAPTER 14

The Return

Merridy leaned against the branches of the bush, trying to calm down enough so she could get up. Blood ran down her side, leaving a cold trail on her skin until it seeped into the fabric. There was nothing she could do about her injuries, so she let the remains of her sweater settle back on her stomach.

Eventually, she couldn't wait any longer. She wasn't quite sure how late it was—the bells didn't toll the hours of the night, to not disturb sleeping citizens—but she had entered the house far after midnight. She had to make it back to Cedric's before dawn, lest someone would see her and notice her desolate condition.

Her limbs were barely able to support her, shaking from exhaustion and pain alike. She pulled herself to her feet, clinging to the sturdiest branches of the bush for a moment, trying to catch her breath. Standing up straight had never been this hard. Everything in her screamed to curl up, but she only shifted the bag, to make sure the globe wouldn't come to rest against any of her injuries.

The first step was the hardest. The next one came easier already. The momentum kept her going, putting one foot in

front of the other, focused on nothing but the next step. The way hadn't seemed that far when she had taken daily walks around the area, scouting out the house; neither had it when she had set out for her heist after sunset. Now, walking back on unsteady legs, each step a struggle against weakness and rising nausea, it seemed impossibly far.

The damp fabric of her sweater slowly sapped the warmth from her body, and the fading adrenaline left her aware just how much everything hurt. She grit her teeth and forced herself to walk on, even as exhaustion started to take over every clear thought, leaving her knees weak and her hands shaking. One of them she clamped around the bag, while she used the other to steady herself against the walls of the houses she passed. Somewhere in the distance a shutter slammed closed, and much closer to her, someone shouted.

Merridy froze, suddenly aware for the first time that she might not be alone. What if someone would see her, *had seen* her? What if she led someone directly to Cedric, with the proof of the crime she had committed right there in her bag? Heart beating up to her throat, she looked around.

The night, normally a welcome ally, was suffocating. Anything could loom in the deep shadows, anyone could be watching her. With every step she took, the feeling of being followed grew stronger. It was only an echo of her unfounded fear, she tried to tell herself, there was no one around.

It didn't work. Every fiber of her being wanted to run, to find a place to hide, and with every passing second, it became harder to fight the urge. She couldn't run, not in her condition; but she *could* hide.

Merridy slipped into the side alley opening up next to her. It was a more affluent neighborhood, each house sporting a narrow front yard, framed with fences or decorative walls. One of those walls was low enough for her to climb over, the windows in the house behind shuttered and dark.

She ducked low, crossing the distance between the street and the few marble steps leading up to a raised main door. In the shadow beneath the stairs, she made herself as small as possible. Her heartbeat hammered in her ears, making it hard to listen for any sign of pursuers. All she could see from her spot was a part of the front yard and a small strip of the street behind the wall.

Minutes passed. Endless, dark, excruciating minutes. There was no sound other than the distant call of a bird, and no movement save for a lone scrap of fabric dancing in a sudden breeze, a flicker of pale white in the night.

Still, she kept waiting, arms wrapped around herself. Her sweater was cold and wet, sticking to her skin. She knew it had to be blood, and the thought scared her. She didn't dare to find out if she was still bleeding, but she feared she was.

Merridy leaned her head against the back side of the stairs in front of her, utterly exhausted. The touch of the marble was cool against her skin. If she rested a moment, perhaps she could gather some strength for the path ahead.

A dull, throbbing pain in her head brought Merridy back to awareness. She flinched, luckily not enough to hit the stairs in front of her a second time; slipping off and slamming against the stone must be what had woken her up in the first place. She raised her hand to rub her forehead, wincing as the movement caused the rest of the pain to flare up once more. There didn't seem to be a spot on her body that wasn't bruised or torn.

She didn't want to move, but she had to. How long had she been dozing off for? How late was it? She clamped her fingers around the edge of the stairs, dragging herself up. The warm trickle down her stomach made her whimper quietly. Had she been bleeding all this time, or had the movement reopened her wounds? It didn't matter. Neither was good, if she was honest.

Looking up, she found that the sky was still dark, no hint of approaching dawn above the roofs of Caldeia. But for how much longer? She had to get back to the one place in this god-forsaken city she knew she would be safe.

The rest had given her no new strength. On the contrary, she barely managed to climb back over the wall, all but collapsing onto the street on the other side. She was freezing to the core, leaving her already aching muscles stiff and tense. Each step was agony, each breath a fight against the quiet whimpers trying to escape her lips. The world was a blur of shadows and cobblestones, calling her forward, and forward, and forward.

She raised her head, and she didn't know where she was. Too tired to think, and knowing that she'd never get up again if she stopped now, she kept walking. Cobblestones turned into coarse sand littered with long dead leaves. The shadows retreated, only to return looming over her, rustling in the breeze.

Step after stumbling step, Merridy moved on. Roots protruded from the ground, more than once almost succeeding in making her fall. One time, she caught herself at the last moment, but slammed her arm against a tree trunk in the process. It started to bleed again, if it had ever truly stopped.

Afraid to leave a trail of blood behind, she pressed her arm against her stomach, the strap of the bag wrapped around her wrist to keep the globe from bouncing against her hip with every step. Her pulse fluttered in her wounds and pounded in her head, while her heart hammered in her chest. The rhythm was unsettling, just like her breaths were too shallow and too quick.

Merridy blindly stumbled along what could have been a path, bracing herself against any tree she passed, scraping her skin on their rough bark. Until there were no more trees and the cobblestones returned. A part of her was aware that

she must have crossed the park near Cedric's house. If that was true, it wasn't that far anymore. She was almost there. Almost.

Merridy blinked against the darkness trying to claim her vision. Somehow, the world felt dull. Flat. Out of focus. Clinging to a wall with trembling hands, it took her way too long to find the familiar house at the corner, showing her the way. She stumbled on, barely lifting her feet. Each step felt like it would be the last, like she could go no further, and yet each one was followed by another. It wasn't that far anymore, she told herself, over and over again.

It wasn't that far anymore.

Finally, she reached the right street. Had it been day, she would have been able to see Cedric's house already. As it was, she kept her gaze rigidly on the ground, to not stumble and fall on those last few dozen steps. When she eventually raised her head, to check how far she had come, she could see light behind the thick curtains of his living room windows. It didn't matter that there shouldn't have been light at this hour, the promise of warmth and safety drew her closer.

Climbing up onto the porch cost her all of her remaining strength, bruising her shins when she missed the stairs three times in a row. Merridy leaned against the wall next to the door, willing her stiff fingers to let go of the bag so she could raise her hand to knock. There was no way she'd get the door open by herself; she hadn't taken her key with her, too afraid to carry anything on her that would link her back to Cedric in case she was caught, and her hands were shaking too much to even consider picking the lock instead.

While she waited, her gaze fell on the wind chimes next to the door. She focused on them, desperate to distract herself from the pain, from how nauseous she felt, and from the overwhelming urge to sink to the ground and never get up again. The chimes consisted of a bunch of irregular shaped

glass shards, suspended on threads so thin, she couldn't see them in the darkness. At night, the colors were muted, barely discernible, but Merridy knew each shard by shape, remembered the way they sparkled in the sunlight. She recalled them all, one by one: The red one with the jagged edges. The purple one, shaped like a drop. The golden one, long and thin. The green one. The blue one. The orange one.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the realization trickled in that she was home. That she had made it.

Not quite as planned, not unscathed, but she had *made* it. She had gotten the globe. Cedric wouldn't be thrilled about the state she was in, but he would surely take care of her, if only to stop her from bleeding all over his house. Merridy allowed herself to close her eyes and slump against the wall, fingers grappling weakly at the door frame to keep her from collapsing. She had to hold out just a moment longer, then she'd be able to rest. Just. A moment.

The sound of the door opening reached her subdued, as if her ears were under water. She raised her head, and her world started spinning, a wave of heat rushing against the bitter cold holding her captive. Words. Words that didn't make sense. Angry. Shocked. Worried. It was fine, she wanted to say, but the reassurance didn't find its way from her thoughts to her lips.

She should get inside. Away from the street. The moment she loosened her grip on the door frame, her knees gave way under her. She braced herself for the impact, but she didn't fall. Cedric caught her. A grip, painful around her bleeding arm. Fabric, soft under her flushed cheeks. An arm, wrapped around her, holding her. She let go of everything that had kept her upright, sinking against him.

Everything would be all right.



CHAPTER 15

The Healer

Four in the morning. Four in the fucking morning, and Meridy still wasn't back. Cedric sat at the table in the living room, an untouched glass of alcohol in front of him. In those last hours, his mood had changed back and forth; from annoyance that she hadn't told him she was going out, over fear that something might have happened to her, to anger that instead of sleeping, he sat here worrying about nothing.

He didn't know how often she sneaked out. The only reason he had checked on her today was a late visit of Laurent. Knowing that she often retreated to read for an hour or two before bed, Cedric had planned to ask her if she wanted to join them for a quick round of cards. But instead of finding her with her nose stuck in a book or asleep, he hadn't found her at all. The study room—her room, for the time being—had been abandoned, her bed untouched.

Cedric had spent the hours before that in the living room, so he was sure she hadn't left through the front door. To reach the kitchen, and the hidden entrance to the sewers, she would have had to cross the living room as well. Which meant that she must have left the house climbing out of a window of all things! Why the fuck hadn't she just told him

she wanted to go out, instead of sneaking out like that? Did she think he would forbid her to do so? She wasn't a prisoner, godsdammit.

And what if she hadn't left on her own?

Cedric raised his head, meeting Laurent's gaze, who looked just as grim as Cedric felt. There was nothing either of them could do. No point in raising an alarm if she had merely sneaked out to... what? Spend the night somewhere else? With someone? She didn't seem like the type to do that.

Yvan had agreed with that assessment, before he had gone to bed. He had been worried as well, but one of them had to be awake in the morning, and it was generally advisable for that to be the one who worked with fire and glowing metal.

"What if she—" Laurent started, but Cedric shushed him with a quick gesture.

Hadn't there been a noise?

He leaned forward on his chair, hand already reaching for his cane. There it was again. A knocking sound, so quiet, he wasn't sure if he had just imagined it. Even if he *had* imagined it, getting up to check was a welcome distraction from staring holes into the polished wood of his dinner table.

He crossed the distance to the front door, bracing himself on his cane with his left so he could pull it open with his right. Someone stood outside, leaning against the door frame. Cedric blinked, trying to convince himself that what he saw was real, not merely his imagination showing him what he wanted to see so much. Four in the morning, and she came home as if nothing had fucking happened.

"Do you have any—" Cedric's annoyance only lasted for a moment. Something was clearly wrong. "Merridy? What's..."

She raised her head. Her gaze was glassy, unfocused; she didn't seem to see him at all. When she let go of the door frame, she wavered.

Cedric grabbed her arm, to keep her from toppling over. The fabric under his fingers was cool, somehow damp. He didn't get a chance to wonder about it, for her legs gave way under her. He dropped his cane so he could catch her, lowering himself to one knee as she slumped against him. There didn't seem to be any strength left in her; he couldn't even tell if she was still conscious. When he raised his hand, to get a better grip on her, his fingers came back red.

Fuck fuck fuck.

"What happened?"

She didn't reply. Her head lolled against Cedric's chest, and he held her closer, feeling how she trembled. He looked up to find that Laurent had appeared behind him. The man took one look at the scene, then hurried past Cedric, vanishing into the night. A part of Cedric was aware that it was necessary to check if there was danger around, but he still wished Laurent could have helped him instead.

Whatever. He could do this. With one arm still around Merridy's shoulders, he pushed the other under her knees, picking her up. Cedric wasn't particularly strong, but she was so fucking small. Still, his ankle did not enjoy the additional weight.

He ignored the pain, taking small, careful steps, carrying her into the living room. Running out of strength, he set her down on the sofa a bit more roughly than he had planned, but she didn't stir.

"Merridy..."

Fuck, where should he start?

Cedric sat down on the floor next to the sofa, taking all weight off his right leg. His sweater was stained with blood, as were his hands. He had to figure out how badly she was hurt. In the light of the living room's glowing crystals, the black fabric of her sweater was glistening. As he tried to lift it at the hem, he realized that it was all but shredded. Carefully,

he pulled a few scraps of fabric off, revealing the bloody mess beneath.

The sound of the front door closing made Cedric whirl around, but it was only Laurent coming back. He brought the discarded cane with him, leaning it against the far end of the sofa.

"Didn't find anything. If she was dropped off by someone, they didn't wait for you to come to the door."

Laurent crouched down next to him, looking at Merridy, but making no attempt to touch her. "Any idea what happened?" he asked, his gaze lingering on the shredded fabric on her arm.

"I don't know." Cedric pushed some of the shreds aside, revealing the torn, bloody skin beneath. "I don't even know what kind of weapon or creature could cause such injuries."

Laurent nodded curtly. "I'll wake up Yvan, then I'll go find a healer."

He got up and started for the stairs without hesitation. Cedric was glad at least one of them was able to keep a clear head, because it was harder and harder for him to keep his composure. What had she gotten into? What if it was *his* fault? If someone wanted to get back at *him*, just like Jean when he had killed Colette?

He reached for Merridy's hand, trying to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat. What else could have happened? She never left the house, didn't know anyone. How would someone like her have made any enemies?

Hasty footsteps came down the stairs, pulling Cedric out of his spiraling thoughts.

"What happened?" Yvan asked, trying to fix his shirt, which he must have put on the wrong way in his haste. Laurent hurried past him, towards the front door.

"I don't know." Cedric cleared his throat, hating how unsteady his voice had sounded. "She couldn't... She's not

conscious. There's a lot of blood, and I... I don't know what to do."

Helpless. He felt helpless. All his magic, all his might, and there was nothing he could do to fix this. He hated it. Yvan crouched down next to him, and Cedric shuffled to the side, to give him more room.

"Mhm. Hm." The noises Yvan made as he touched her forehead and felt for her pulse at her wrist weren't exactly reassuring. "She must have lost a lot of blood."

He got up, grabbing one of the cushions and shoving it under her legs, so they were slightly elevated. While he was at it, he ran his hand along her pants, finding them intact. The only blood on them was where it must have soaked into her waistband.

Yvan put his hand on Cedric's shoulder. "Try to get her shirt off, find out if she's still bleeding. The faster the healer can get to work, the better. I'll prepare some water."

Cedric nodded, taking a deep breath while Yvan went into the kitchen. That, at least, was something he could do. He looked Merridy over, wondering where to start. She had a bag slung over her shoulder, the strap wrapped tightly around her torso. The moment Cedric tried to loosen it, she opened her eyes. Her hand twitched towards the bag, too weak to grab it.

He let go of the bag to take her hand instead. "Merridy?"

At the sound of his voice, she turned her head. Slowly, her eyes seemed to focus on him, her gaze becoming clearer until she... smiled. She really fucking smiled at him, as if she didn't lay bleeding and barely conscious on his sofa.

"What happened?" he whispered. "Who did this to you?"

Her lips moved, but no sound came out. She furrowed her brows, trying again. "No. No one. Ta..." Her hand in his twitched, pulling towards the bag. "Take."

Cedric's gaze fell onto the bag. He didn't really care what

was inside, but it seemed to be important to her. It was heavy as he lifted it, to pull the straps over her head and out from under her. He reached inside without looking, and his fingertips found something round and smooth. Crystal, his subconsciousness supplied as his magic latched onto it.

The moment he pulled the object out, his heart seemed to skip a beat. He had seen sketches of it before, had heard descriptions, but it was so much more beautiful than he had ever expected. The crystal was perfectly clear, the gold flawless, each gemstone a masterpiece in itself.

And there was no fucking way it should ever have been in her possession.

"What did you do?" he whispered.

Merridy's eyes were half closed again. "Got it... for... for... you."

There was still the hint of a smile on her lips, despite her bleeding out on his fucking sofa. For him. *For him*. Cedric could have screamed. It was his fault, but in a way he had least expected.

"You did what?" He didn't want to shout, but it had come out louder than intended. "How? *Why?*"

He had spent weeks trying to find a way in. Weeks after which he had been convinced the only way was to either find a trustworthy chaos mage with the right domain, or to infiltrate the staff that was hired to help with big receptions. Yet here she was, a little bookworm and failed pickpocket, just... *getting it* for him.

"Wanted... help."

"But how? How did you manage to do that? Who... what..." He didn't dare reaching for her, his fingers hovering over her as he asked, "What the fuck happened to you?"

"Fen... fence."

Her voice was so quiet, he had to read her lips more than he could hear the word. Forcing his thoughts to focus, he tried

to make sense of it. He had spend hours and hours scouting the place, so it wasn't hard to recall the layout—and the fence around the fucking house. He had never truly considered going *over* it, so he hadn't paid it much attention, but he remembered the sharpened spikes on top of it.

"Did you climb it?!"

Cedric had definitely lost control over his voice at this point. She couldn't be that reckless, could she? But she obviously *had been* that reckless. He had no explanation for how she had gotten into the house after that, not to mention to find the globe and make it out again.

"Have you lost your mind? What if someone saw you? What if someone had caught you?" His voice failed him, his throat impossibly tight. *What if you had died?*

"Don't... don't shout." Her voice, weak as it was, was trembling, and tears glistened in her eyes.

Cedric swallowed. He had to calm down. Too vivid was the memory of how terrified of him she had been in the beginning. The last thing he needed now was for her to be scared of him. He reached for her hand again; the left hand, which wasn't a bloody mess.

To be fair, it was unlikely someone had seen her and followed her to his house. No one would wait this long to storm it, giving him time to hide the proof of the crime. But she could have died. Bleeding out on the streets, or after getting arrested. In her condition, she would have been dead in the dungeon long before he would have even learned what had happened to her.

"Shh. It's okay," he whispered, brushing his thumb over the back of her hand. Nothing was okay, but it would be. "Laurent is looking for a healer. You'll be fine."

"No. No healer."

"Yes healer." Cedric didn't know what her problem with healing magic was. During her recovery, he had humored her

stubborn refusal to be seen by a healer for her foot, not least because that had meant a few more weeks until she could even think about leaving. But this, this was so much worse. "You need help. More help than I can give you."

She didn't say anything else, but the trembling of her hand increased. Cedric cupped it carefully, looking up at Yvan who returned with a bowl of water in one hand and a few towels in the other.

"We'll have to take off your clothes and take a look at your wounds," Yvan said. He placed the bowl on the coffee table and gestured for Cedric to give him some space.

As soon as Cedric let go of her hand to stand up, Merridy whimpered. Her eyes fluttered open, but didn't stay open for long.

"I'm right here," he mumbled, settling down on the sofa above her head. "I'm here."

He took her searching hand, a lump forming in his throat when she instantly relaxed. Yvan was the gentle one; it was unsettling, seeing her display her trust in him so openly. Trust he wasn't sure he deserved.

Cedric kept holding her hand while Yvan got to work. With a pair of scissors he must have brought in the pile of towels, he cut the shredded remains of her shirt, pulling them off carefully. Her stomach looked like a fucking bloodbath beneath, but once Yvan started to wipe it off, it became clear that most of it had already started to dry. A few of the deeper cuts still seeped blood, but it wasn't an alarming amount.

"What happened?" Yvan asked.

Right. He had been in the kitchen, when...

"Barbed wire fence," Cedric said between grit teeth. She must have dragged herself right over it. Yvan's expression was a mirror of his own horror at the thought, but he didn't say anything, merely continuing his work in silence.

Above her stomach, bloody cloth was wrapped around her

chest. Yvan cut those wraps as well, revealing unblemished skin. The red smears on her breasts must be from where the blood had leaked into the bandages, because there were no wounds to be seen. Thank the gods.

While Yvan got up to fetch fresh water, Cedric remained sitting. He wouldn't leave her alone until she was patched up and safely in her bed. Perhaps the bleeding had mostly stopped, but she was obviously in bad shape. Her skin was ice cold, her hand trembling in his. Her breaths came way too fast, even if she had calmed down, was barely conscious again. He had so many questions, but all of them would have to wait.

By the time the front door opened, Yvan had exchanged the water multiple times. Merridy's legs had only shown a few scratches, so he had wrapped her lower body into a blanket. One of the towels covered her upper body, bright red spots spreading slowly on some parts of it.

Laurent entered the living room, closely followed by a young woman in dark gray robes. Her black, frizzy hair was bound back, and she was slightly out of breath. The two of them must have hurried.

"Tania. I'm so glad to see you," Cedric said.

She wasn't the best healer he knew, but she was discreet—and she was a woman. Cedric wondered briefly if she was the first one Laurent had been able to find at this hour, or if he had chosen her on purpose. Knowing his friend, the latter seemed a reasonable assumption.

"Wish I could say the same." Lips pursed, the healer looked at the scene, her gaze lingering on the bloodstained towel. "What's the problem?"

"Multiple lacerations, heavy blood loss," Yvan said matter-of-factly while getting up. "I don't think there's any internal injuries, but it would be better if you made sure."

"Do I want to know what happened?"

"No," Cedric said.

"All right." Tania put her bag on the coffee table and sat down on the spot Yvan had abandoned. The moment she turned her attention towards Merridy, her demeanor shifted. "Hey," she said, her tone no longer harsh. "My name's Tania. What's yours?"

Cedric waited a moment, to see if Merridy would reply, but her eyelids only fluttered. "Her name's Merridy," he said quietly, stroking a strand of hair at her temple.

"All right, Merridy. I'm gonna check what I'll be dealing with. Don't..." The moment Tania lifted the towel, her voice faltered. "Don't worry," she continued, a forced smile on her lips. "I'll fix you up in no time. But first I'll make sure there are no hidden injuries."

She folded the towel and put it on the floor next to her before raising her gaze to Yvan.

"Yvan? I'm gonna need some boiled water, warm, and some more clean towels or whatever you can find."

Yvan nodded and headed for the kitchen, while Tania put her hands on Merridy's stomach. She closed her eyes, clearly focusing on her magic. There wasn't anything to see, and Merridy didn't react, so Cedric looked around, clearing his throat.

"Laurent."

When his friend gave him a questioning look, Cedric nodded in the direction of the bag. Watching Laurent's eyes widen as he picked it up and peered inside could have been funny, if not for the situation at hand.

"Take it somewhere safe. We'll stay low for a day or two, then we'll contact them. If word spreads, they might approach us before that."

Laurent nodded. "Got it. You take care of her, and let me worry about the rest." He wrapped the strap of the bag around his wrist a few times. "But..." His gaze wandered to

Merridy and back to Cedric. "If you find out *how* she managed that. Please let me know."

As Laurent left the room, Cedric turned his attention towards Merridy and the healer. Tania raised her hands, her expression less grim than before.

"No internal injuries, just a couple of bruises in the making. That's good. Ah, Yvan, thank you." She took the bowl of water from him, putting it next to her on the floor. "I'm gonna have to make sure the wounds are clean before I close them, and that..." She trailed off, grabbing her bag.

Tania pulled a bunch of little vials and jars out, until she found what she had been looking for. A vial holding a green liquid, so dark it was almost black. She filled half of it into a tiny glass before holding it out to Cedric.

"Can you give her that to drink? It will help with the pain."

Cedric lifted Merridy's head, then shuffled closer, so he could prop it against his thigh. He waited until she opened her eyes before he put it to her lips, tilting it slowly. Merridy grimaced, but didn't complain.

"I'm... cold," she whispered when the glass was empty. Her teeth were chattering just as much as she was trembling.

"I know. I'm sorry." He took her hand once more. Her fingers were ice-cold. "You will feel better soon."

While Tania started cleaning the first wound, Yvan went to the fireplace, to throw a few more logs onto the embers. Cedric decided quickly that it was an entirely bad idea to watch. He wasn't particularly squeamish, but watching the healer dig around in the wounds, to find whatever fibers or dirt might be stuck inside, was too much, even for him. Even with his eyes closed, he could still smell the blood, and feel the way Merridy squirmed under the healer's touch. She was trying her best not to scream, but her choked sobs were just as hard to bear.

"Can you help hold her down?" Tania said after Merridy had twitched a bit too violently.

Yvan looked just as grim as Cedric felt as he sat down at the other end of the sofa, putting his hands on Merridy's thighs. Cedric placed his right hand on her shoulder as well, but kept holding her hand in his left.

It seemed to go on forever; cleaning a wound, pulling out fibers of black wool, scraps of moss and flakes of rust. Healing it, agonizingly slow. Moving on to the next.

With time, Merridy's movements grew weaker. Tears still ran down her cheeks, and she still twitched weakly whenever the healer had to dig around in another cut, but her body seemed to be at its limit. She wasn't truly conscious anymore. Cedric didn't let go of her hand, and didn't stop stroking the hair at her temple.

The sun had already risen by the time Tania closed the last wound. Her brown skin had an ashen tint, but the gleam in her gray eyes was unbroken as she looked at Cedric.

"All done. Time to get her into some fresh clothes, and into bed. Do you have any —"

"I'll get something," Yvan said, making his way up the stairs.

Cedric hadn't moved in what felt like hours. Merridy's hand was still in his — or again, after Tania had healed it.

"Will she be all right?"

Tania leaned back against the coffee table, rolling her shoulders. "I think so. She lost a lot of blood, so she will need much rest in the coming weeks. Especially in the first days it would be better if she wasn't alone."

"That won't be a problem. She's living with me for the time being."

Tania merely acknowledged it with a nod, not asking any questions. When Yvan returned, he handed her a folded bundle of clothes.

"All right, thank you." She cleared her throat. "Why don't you go do something in another room for a moment. Clean up or whatever." She paused, before she added, "Both of you."

Cedric didn't want to leave Merridy alone, but he saw the reason behind the healer's request. It hadn't been necessary to take off her underwear for the healing, but it was still soaked with blood.

He carefully put Merridy's hand down before he stood up, picking up his cane as he did so. His legs were stiff, his ankle aching, but his attention was fixed on her. Between the healer's potion and exhaustion, she had fallen asleep a while ago. She looked so vulnerable; tiny between the cushions, with way too pale skin and dried tears on her cheeks.

When he started to walk towards the kitchen, Yvan followed, putting an arm around his shoulder. Cedric leaned against him the moment they were out of sight, and Yvan pulled him close. Neither of them said a word for several minutes. Cedric closed his eyes. The exhaustion was starting to catch up with him now that the tension slowly faded.

"Can you stay home today?" he asked without thinking about it. He didn't want to be alone with his thoughts, with his guilt, with the question of how he should face her once she woke up.

Yvan hummed his approval just as a quiet rustling sound made Cedric look up. Tania stood in the doorway, leaning against it in a clearly tired fashion.

"I'm done. She hasn't woken up, and I don't think she will for several hours. You should all get some sleep. I sure will." She pushed herself off the door frame and started to walk. "Oh, and Cedric?" she said, already halfway across the living room. "You owe me for this one. Big time."

That he did. Cedric sighed, leaning his head against Yvan's chest. The front door opened and closed, then everything was quiet.

"Should we let her sleep in our bed tonight?" Yvan asked. "That's better than the floor. You can take the sofa, and I might as well stay up."

"No. If she wakes up, she should be someplace familiar." Cedric lingered for a few more seconds, before freeing himself from his husband's embrace. "I'll make sure everything's ready. You can follow me in a moment and bring her."

When he started to walk, he looked down on himself. His sweater was stained with dried blood. As soon as Merridy was in her bed, he would change out of those clothes, and they would all get some sleep. And when she awoke, he would find out what the fuck had possessed her to do something as reckless as breaking into a house for him.



CHAPTER 16

The Offer

"She just climbed up the wall." Laurent's voice sounded as unbelieving as Cedric had been when she had first told him that.

"Mhm."

"Incredible." Laurent tapped his finger on the table. "Imagine what else she could get her hands on like this. Do you think she'd make it into the palace?" He grinned. "You should offer her a job."

"She's not going to do that again," Cedric growled.

"Why not? Think about—"

"Why not?" Cedric interrupted him, slamming his hand on the table. "She could have *died*. That's why not."

The amused smile on Laurent's face was infuriating. "However she managed to do this, she obviously has a skill you're lacking," he said, absolutely unimpressed by Cedric's outburst. "And she's already close to you. She did this *for* you. It will be hard to find anyone more loyal than that."

I missed you.

The memory of how Merridy had returned to him at the start of winter was entirely unwelcome. Of course Cedric was impressed with what she had achieved, but that didn't mean

he was willing to risk her getting hurt. When he didn't say anything, Laurent shrugged.

"Think of it that way," he said. "If you know what she's up to, if you know where she's going, you can protect her. You'll know if she doesn't make it back in time, can get her out if she gets into trouble. And she has already proven her loyalty to you, but if you want, I can vouch for her."

"I don't need anyone to vouch for her," Cedric snapped.

It wasn't her loyalty he was worried about.

"Think about it." Laurent patted his shoulder before he grabbed two cookies off the plate in the middle of the table. "I'm off. Business calls. The boring one."

Cedric stared at the table in front of him long after the door had clicked shut behind Laurent. Who was he fooling? Merridy was already too close to him. Even if she saved enough money to rent a place of her own, and even if all she would ever do was work for his shop, she would never be fully safe.

Still, he couldn't imagine her involved in a life of crime. When he looked at her, all he saw was a longing for a normal life, enjoying simple things with innocent, almost childlike wonder. But she wasn't a child, and he had no right to decide that for her.

When Cedric finally got up and walked up the stairs, he stepped into the library first. He picked up a book, holding it in his hands for several long minutes, not moving save for where his fingers traced the title. He could tell himself that he had never planned to invite her all he wanted; the fact that he still knew exactly where to find this book betrayed his lie.

Book in hand, Cedric continued to the study, where he knocked on the door. "Merridy?"

She called for him to enter, and he pushed the door open. The once so dark and dusty room had changed a lot since

she had moved in here. The curtains were of a light creme color now, making it much brighter and friendlier, even half closed as they were at the moment. All surfaces were clean, all shelves tidy. She had moved her bed—merely a mattress, but she had insisted it was all she needed—under the table, draping light fabric over the table in a way that resembled curtains. A string of colorful glowing crystals was wrapped around two of the table legs, and she had gathered a respectable amount of pillows.

Several of them were currently propped under her, allowing her to sit in bed and read. She was still way too pale a few days later, but the smile as she put down her book and looked at Cedric was genuine.

"It's not yet time for lunch, is it?" she asked.

"No." Cedric stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. "I just..."

He looked around, as if he didn't know that there was only one place to sit in the room: the chair at the desk. Sitting down there would mean she'd have to converse with his shoes, which would not be very polite. Instead, he sat down on the floor, groaning quietly as he leaned back against the biggest crate. He was too old for this shit.

"I just wanted to talk." He cursed himself when he saw how her smile faded, how worry overshadowed those steel blue eyes of hers. "Nothing serious. Just... an offer if you so will."

A part of the worry stayed on her face, but curiosity won out. She straightened up, obviously waiting for him to elaborate.

"I never really kept what I do a secret from you," Cedric said. She had sat so often in the salon while he had met with some of his clients, or his business partners. "You already know much more than anyone else not involved, so on the one hand, it's just a formality, but on the other..."

He trailed off. If her confused expression was anything to go by, she did not understand what he was going for. He took a deep breath.

"I wanted to offer you to join my circle of confidants. Officially, that is, with all the boons and obligations that entails."

"And what would those be?" she asked.

Cedric studied her face. Why was it suddenly so hard for him to read her expression?

"Everyone offers their special skills for others to request," he explained. "A guard might be asked to share intel from the palace. A healer might be asked to help without raising questions, like Tania. Lots of it goes through me. As for you... you said you'd do it again. Breaking..." He cleared his throat. "Breaking in like that, I mean. I might ask you to help me acquire something that way in the future."

"That's all?"

Cedric shrugged. "In the end, it's a group of people who help each other. Just that the things we help each other with aren't exactly legal."

It was a bit more than that, really, but that was the gist of it. All the threads came together in his hands, and he knew how to pull them.

"So what do I have to do to join?"

"You just say yes."

"No solemn oath?" Merridy inclined her head, a mischievous grin on her lips. "No speech about how you'll strangle me to death with my own guts if I betray you?"

Godsdammit, Yvan really had to stop telling her old stories.

"If you betray me, I'll strangle you with your own guts," Cedric said, voice and expression deadpan.

Merridy laughed. "What's that?" She pointed at the book lying next to him.

Cedric picked it up, turning it in his hand. "You might have heard how we're using a cipher for some correspondence. Each confidant has their own book, and only I know which one it is, so those messages can't be compromised. I have a copy of each, of course, and I thought... here."

He stretched his arm and leaned forward to hand her the book. Merridy said nothing as she took it, sitting stock-still, staring at the cover.

"I had one of those on my shelf," Cedric said with a shrug that attempted to be casual.

Merridy cleared her throat. "Don't you need two for this to work?"

"I had two of those on my shelf."

She was quiet for a while before she said, "You know. My sister used to call me that. Merry." Lowering the book, she raised her gaze to look at Cedric. "I like the name. I think. It reminds me off..."

She trailed off, but it wasn't hard for him to guess what she had wanted to say. Of home, perhaps, or family. Of a time when she had been happy. There wasn't much she had told him about her past, but he knew her family was gone; most likely dead.

Merridy put the book down, so she had her hands free to crawl out from under the table. In front of Cedric, she sat on her knees, hands folded in her lap.

"Yes. I'd like to." Her expression was dead serious. "No solemn oath, but... I owe you my life," she said, wringing her hands. "I would never betray you."

"I know." Cedric sighed, opening his arms. "Come here."

She followed his invitation, putting her arms around him for a careful hug. Cedric pulled her closer, feeling how she stiffened at first, then slowly relaxed. He opted to ignore the quiet snuffle muffled by his sweater.

"Welcome aboard, Merry," he said.

Sunlight streamed through the window, painting warm circles onto the floor. In one of them lay the book, the cover showing a bright green meadow with a clear blue sky above. A fluffy white sheep smiled at the reader, a pink bow on its head; the same pink bow that decorated the title above:

The Merry Little Lamb.



Merridy is a pickpocket, trying to survive on the streets of a city that has no place for her. When she is caught and thrown into the dungeons, her life might as well be over. Between the cruelty of the guards and the trial awaiting her, there's little chance she'll ever see the light of day again.

The last thing she expects is to be freed by the man who rules the city's underground with an iron fist. Everything Cedric does has a price, and now she owes him her life, wondering what he saved her for. There is no way she could ever be of use to someone like him — or is there?