

1.

A pickaxe, a pair of heavy boots, and gloves. That is all the miners are given when they arrive at their camps; the rest, they must supply themselves.

Most can't. Mining is not a job that attracts folks with money—if you can afford to buy a set of mining gear, you can afford not to mine. Eyal himself had only enough coin to buy a blanket and a sleeping pallet, and the blanket he received was thin, not nearly enough to keep warm in the bitter cold of the mountains.

Tonight, he's tugged it up to his chin and wrapped himself in it completely, but it's not enough. His pallet seems emptier than usual.

They took Aryeh away this morning. It's for the best, Eyal knows; the boy had been coughing up dust for weeks, and took to the pallet three days ago, unable to lift his pick anymore. Aryeh was never meant from the mines. He hailed from the south, a willow of a boy who arrived a few months after Eyal.

He wasn't even supposed to mine. Aryeh had been sixteen when he came, and looked it, but the overseers let him work anyway. He hadn't even known how to swing the pickaxe when he first joined.

Eyal himself was seventeen when he took up his pick, but he at least seemed older. At least he could bear the grueling work of the mine.

He turns over, bunching the blanket in his fists. He's only got himself to blame for Aryeh's absence, anyway. *Eyal* was the one who carried the boy out of the shaft, who wiped the black dust from Aryeh's blacker mouth and screamed at the overseers to call a doctor. *He* was the one who held a cup of cold, clear water to Aryeh's lips in the rare times the coughing subsided.

He was the one who paid the doctors when the overseers wouldn't do it. Eyal's the reason Aryeh's gone from this place, not anybody else.

Eyal stares up at the canvas stretched ten feet above his head, gray in the dark. The tent is silent but for the breathing of sleeping men and the occasional snore. There are thirteen men here, besides him; each team of miners has their own tent, and there are fifteen men to a team. They won't replace Aryeh for a while yet, not with the winter coming on. The overseers might worry, but Eyal has the strength of seven men. They'll trust in him to pick up the slack.

Aryeh used to share his pallet. The boy was poor, poorer than most men who came to mine. He'd come with nothing but the clothes on his back, pockets empty, and had slept on the grass his first two nights. Then he'd fallen in the mine, and when Eyal picked him up he saw

Aryeh's thin, young face, his thick Ruvav brows, and knew that he'd be looking after him as long as Aryeh was mining.

The pallets are made for only one man, but they'd made do. More often than not Eyal had fallen asleep with an arm thrown over Aryeh's waist.

It was for efficiency, he tells himself, closing his eyes. He turns over again. We kept each other warm in the winter when the blanket wasn't enough, and he watched my back as much as I watched his.

They looked out for each other. That's all it was, not anything else.

Eyal doesn't sleep much.

"Eyal!" another man shouts the next morning, as Eyal tugs on his boots. He glances up to find the miner waving the canary's cage in front of his face.

"You'll be taking Sunny down, now that Aryeh's gone," the man informs him. His name's Dagen. "Think you could manage that?"

"I'll try," Eyal mutters, reaching for the cage. Old Sunny is squawking her head off inside, but he simply sets her down beside her and keeps lacing his boots up.

It was always Aryeh's job to take Sunny down the shaft, weak as he was. He was unlucky enough to be the last man to join their crew. When he was sickening, Aryeh would carry the bird down and lean beside her, singing an old Ruvav song. His voice was rough and the other miners complained, but Sunny always sang along, and that was what mattered.

Eyal doesn't know if he'll be able to manage a song.

The sun's not quite over the horizon when they start the descent into the mine, and by the time they get out, it'll be setting. The mine steals your days as much as it steals your health. At least they're paid well, even if they never get the time to spend the money.

Three of the men in their team carry lanterns, one at the front, another at the back, and the third smack in the middle of the line. Each glows with an uncanny intensity. Sorcery. Eyal doesn't quite trust it, but they haven't got much choice; after the explosions some years ago, the overseers are wary about letting natural fire down into the shafts. Something to do with the air. That's why he's carrying a canary, too—the bird can sense the bad air, somehow. Eyal has never been instructed on the specifics, just told that he'll know when the air's gone wrong. And he's supposed to keep Sunny singing.

They've been mining in a new area for the past month or so, and by now they've carved out a sizable tunnel. A good deal of it's Eyal's work, and the ceiling's low enough that he has to

be careful how he swings the pick, but the overseers are pleased with their work. A second team was sent to join them a week ago to pick up the speed.

Rumors about the new tunnel have been flitting around the camp ever since. That the overseers are hoping for minerals, or precious metals. But as far as Eyal can tell, there's nothing here but coal.

When they get to the tunnel, Eyal makes his way to the very farthest bit, sets Sunny's cage down, and yanks the pickaxe from his belt. He cracks his neck. If he's stuck in this shaft all day long, he might as well pull his weight.

Pull my weight, Eyal thinks. I'm pulling half the team's weight.

He turns to tell Aryeh, the words half-formed on his lips. But the space to his right is empty.

Oh.

Eyal closes his eyes, then heaves the pick over his shoulder and brings it down on the stone before him as hard as he dares.

"Eyal," the miner to his left—Axel—says, after a good twenty minutes. "Isn't Sunny s'posed to be singing?"

He looks down at the bird's cage. Sunny is sitting delicately on her perch, preening her wings. Eyal curses in Ruvav.

"Damn bird," he says, pausing his work to crouch beside the canary. He bangs on the bars. "Sing, stupid."

"Aryeh used to sing with her," Axel says. He probably thinks he's being helpful.

"I'm not singing."

"She's s'posed to be makin' noise," Axel points out. "Come on. What the hell are we going to do if there's bad air and Sunny isn't singing the way she ought?"

"I hate you," Eyal mutters, but he scours his mind for a song anyway. The only thing he can come up with is an old Ruvav lullaby his mother used to sing to him. It's a child's song, but the melody's easy enough to follow, and none of the men round him will know what he's saying. Aryeh was the only one who spoke Ruvav.

"Hishem shivat, babav yeriq," Eyal says, singing as loud as he dares. Sunny peers at him. Eyal clears his throat. *"Vavif shala mefak levrafh, abal el taged demij."*

The sun sets, dear doll, and your eyes grow heavy, but your mother's at your side.

His ears burn. Sunny peers at him, curious, and so Eyal hums the tune back without any of the words.

The canary squawks once, then sings the notes tentatively.

A wave of relief washes over him. Eyal stands, still humming the lullaby, but at the very least Sunny is singing it as well. Hopefully she'll keep it up if he stops.

There's no way to tell the passage of time in the shafts, what with the song gone, but it crawls by. At one point Eyal wipes his head, leaning against the stone, but it can hardly be longer than an hour or two past dawn.

They're allowed to halt for lunch, a half-hour break spent sitting in the shafts and feasting on what little fare has been provided today. Usually it's something meager like a bit of bread with a thin slice of beef, or cups of broth. Thin as he was, Aryeh always finished early, and spent the rest of the break stroking Sunny's feathers. *Ahel*, he loved that bird.

Eyal wipes his forehead, resting it against the rocks again. He's got to get Aryeh out of his head.

“—*matches*—”

“I don't care if it's banned, I'm having a smoke. Overseers can kiss my arse.”

He glances towards the entrance of the tunnel. A pair of miners are muttering together, picks resting against their knees; far as Eyal can tell, they're not part of his team.

“I'm having a smoke,” one of them repeats. He's a bit taller than the other. “Honestly, Stennar, what are the odds that this place comes crashing down? The bird's still singing.”

“But a *match*,” Stennar mutters, sounding furious. “You're not supposed—”

“Like I said. Overseers can kiss my arse.”

Eyal shakes his head, turning it towards the cool wall again. He doesn't much care one way or the other whether or not the miner smokes, as long as Sunny's still singing.

The air, however, is suddenly strangely silent.

Eyal frowns. When he glances down at Sunny, the bird's head has fallen forward, as if she's just gone to sleep.

Even though she was singing her little heart out only a moment ago.

He kneels, opening Sunny's cage tentatively. In the past when Eyal's held her, he could feel the bird's heartbeat as soon as he touched her. Now, her tiny little body has gone completely still.

Eyal turns Sunny over in his hands. Her head lolls back, black eyes lifeless.

“Eyal?” Axel asks, voice tentative. Eyal looks up towards the tunnel's entrance. The miner from earlier is leaning against one of the wooden beams that serve as reinforcements, back turned. Eyal looks down at Sunny's body again.

“I think Sunny's—”

There's the strike of a match. Eyal cuts himself off, holding his breath, and waits. He doesn't know what for.

Then comes a deafening boom, and the tunnel comes crashing down around them.

2.

They've been digging for nine hours, and they've found eleven of the thirty men that went down the new shaft this morning.

Nels doesn't think he's ever seen anything so gruesome. Most of the bodies are twisted grotesquely, skulls smashed or ribs caved in, blood smearing the skin. He's thrown up twice today, and he's certain he's not the only one.

Eleven men.

Most of them can't even be identified.

The explosion was heard through the entire mine, and the earth shook in the shaft Nels' team was working in. For a terrible moment he feared they'd be buried, too, but then the rocks had stilled and every miner around him let out a great sigh of relief.

Then, the overseers came running, saying that walls of the newest shaft had collapsed, taking all the men within it, and that Nels' team better start digging the bodies out.

Nels leans forward, pulling a loose stone off the pile before him and tossing it away. He can just make out a bit of cloth, stretched over skin, and his stomach clenches. He's not uncovered a body yet, only seen them carried out. He isn't exactly eager to come face-to-face with a bloody, crushed corpse.

He takes a deep breath, then starts to clear the stones away. This man's lost his life to the mines. The very least Nels can do for him is recover his body.

It's hard work, almost harder than mining. Nels has to be very careful not to disturb the body any more than it already is, yet still remove the heavier stones. His hand itches for his pick, but he keeps it at his waist.

Strangely, though, this man doesn't seem to have any injuries.

Nels uncovers an arm, a shoulder, the chest. The man is covered in coal dust—when Nels wipes it away, he can see the deep copper skin of the Ruvav—but other than that, his body seems utterly untouched by the collapse. Nels frees the miner's left arm to find a small, battered canary's corpse in his hand.

He leans forward, picking the rubble from the man's face. A sharp profile is revealed soon enough, cheekbones prominent even beneath the coal dust and dark facial hair dotting the jaw. Nels swallows. The man looks as though he's only gone to sleep, looking nothing like the other miners claimed by the stones. Like he might wake up at any moment.

"I'm sorry," Nels says softly, picking a tiny stone off the man's collarbone. He glances back up at the coal-streaked face.

The miner's eyes are wide open, staring straight at him.

Nels screams and screams and screams.

3.

Leif Isaksen has been an overseer of the Sverhul mines for only two months. As such, she doesn't exactly have much experience dealing with collapses.

She *definitely* doesn't have much experience dealing with miners surviving being buried under tons of rocks for nine hours.

The rest of the Sverhul overseers have been whispering about Leif behind her back ever since she was appointed. Most think her position is ill-deserved: she's all of twenty years old, and gained the title of overseer mostly because it was passed down to her from her father. And in one man's words, the mines "hardly need some little girl who insists on trotting around in men's clothes."

Leif suspects the only reason most of the overseers respect her authority is because of her father. Magnus Isaksen was one of the most fearsome mine overseers in his time, leaving a legacy which has remained intact even after his retirement. If it weren't for his name, the rest of the camp likely would've turned Leif out the day she arrived. As it is, she receives little advice from her peers and little respect from the miners under her command, the latter of which may have led to the recent accident.

As it is, Leif finds she has a great deal to prove at the Sverhul mines, and she's determined to exceed expectations.

It's been three days since the collapse, and about two and a half since the Ruvav miner was pulled out of the rubble. As far as Leif knows, he's spent most of that time in his tent, being looked after by a doctor from the town. Apparently, the man is covered in bruises all over and has developed a nasty cough, not unlike the one that plagued the other Ruvav boy on the team.

Leif hopes dearly that she won't lose both of them.

Word has gotten out about the miner's miraculous survival by now, and, as one would expect, plenty of gossip is flitting about the camp. She tries not to listen to any of it, but the sheer amount is nearly overwhelming, especially considering that the sole survivor of the collapse hasn't yet left his tent.

"A lot of the men think it was Ruvav black magic," mutters the man to Leif's right. He's in his fifties and a veteran of the Sverhul mines, his name Ivar Vangen. He's also one of the only overseers in the camp that genuinely cares about Leif's opinion and wellbeing.

"We're not even *considering* the idea."

“I’m not saying we should,” Ivar replies, reaching for his coffee mug. “I just think you should be aware of the rumors. Some think he set a curse on the mines after Aryeh Nattoriv was taken by the doctors.”

Leif rubs her temples. “And why in Vinder name would he do that?”

“He’s Ruvav.”

“Ivar—”

“I’m not accusing him of practicing black magic simply because he’s Ruvav. I wouldn’t dream of it. That’s what some of the men think, that’s all.”

She sighs. “Do you think we should dissuade the rumors, try to find the real source of the collapse? Something logical, and not racist?”

“It’s what I’d do,” Ivar says. He glances at Leif. “But it was your team that were lost in the shaft. It’s your call. And Holmsen’s.”

“Don’t remind me,” Leif mutters. Ivar flashes a quick, gap-toothed smile.

Peer Holmsen. He’s the overseer of the second team that went down in the mine, and one of Leif’s greatest critics. The second she makes a misstep, he’s at her side, clamoring for all to come and see.

Their discussions about the collapse have been some of the least enjoyable of Leif’s life, and that’s saying something.

They’ve been forced to collaborate ever since Holmsen’s miners was assigned to work with Leif’s in the new shaft, and it’s been almost unbearable. Holmsen seems to almost take glee in blaming Leif for the collapse—she sent too many miners in, she didn’t consider the risks of a new shaft, she was too irresponsible. Never mind that *Holmsen* was the one who insisted a second team of miners be sent down with Leif’s.

She taps her fingers on the table absentmindedly. “Will he be joining us?”

“Apparently,” Ivar replies, “he said that since it’s your miner we’re talking to, he doesn’t need to be present.”

Leif groans, raking her hands through her hair. Holmsen will just find some tiny flaw in the Ruvav’s answers later, some little thing that lets him pin all the blame on Leif’s team, not his own. Leif won’t be surprised if the man campaigns to have her dismissed from her position after this is all over.

“And Eyal Natmatch has been sent for?” she asks. Ivar nods.

“Fifteen minutes ago. He should be arriving any minute now.”

Leif reaches for her own mug of coffee. “Thank you.”

She glances down at the papers before her. She's prepared a series of questions for the miner, most of them concerning the mine collapse. Where he was, what he was doing, what he remembers. So on. And the last few—

Well, she's got to ask about his survival, doesn't she? The family that owns the mines will be expecting a full report.

"Excuse me."

Leif looks up from her paperwork. Standing about a foot from their table is a Ruvav miner, hands clasped in front of him. His eyes are darting between Leif and Ivar.

"You're Eyal Natmateh?" Leif asks. The miner's lips thin.

"Natmateh."

"I'm sorry?"

"My name," the miner says slowly, "is not Eyal Natmateh. It's Eyal nat Mateh. *Nat* means *son of* in Ruvav. "

Leif's gaze falls to the papers before her. Hastily, she crosses out *Natmateh* and replaces it with the words *nat Mateh*.

"I apologize," she says, looking back to Eyal again. "The man who wrote down your information when you came must've misheard you, written down the wrong thing. I'll make sure your records are corrected."

Eyal Natmateh. Aryeh Nattoriv. Leif doubts that the error was a singular one, and Eyal clearly shares the opinion, but it's not something they can correct here in this tent. Right now, Leif is going to ask the boy about the mine collapse, and later she'll correct his name on the Sverhul records.

She takes a moment to study him. Eyal is well-built, almost made for mining, with biceps that strain against his shirt. A bit tall, though. Aside from that, there's nothing that makes him particularly notable: he has the typical Ruvav dark skin and darker curls, the heavy brow.

Well.

Aside from the bruises covering his entire body, there's nothing that makes him particularly notable.

"Have a seat," Ivar offers, before Leif can. He gestures to the chair against the opposite side of the table. "You look like you need it."

"Thanks," Eyal mumbles. Leif glances down at her papers again.

"We're just going to ask you some questions about the collapse," she says, not looking at the miner. "Just trying to figure out what happened and all. I've got to deliver a full report to the family that owns the mines, in case there's anything they need to be aware of."

“Are you the overseer of one of the teams, then?”

“I am.” Leif looks up at last, forcing a smile on her face. “Yours, actually. Leif Isaksen.”

“Nice to meet you,” Eyal says, even though this isn’t the first time they’ve met. The first time was five days ago, when Eyal came storming into the overseers’ buildings demanding that Aryeh nat Toriv be taken to a *proper* doctor, because he was coughing up half the mine and the camp physician refused to do anything about it.

Maybe Eyal doesn’t remember. There *had* been a lot of overseers in there, even if Leif is the one in charge of the man’s team. She herself hadn’t realized they’d met when Eyal first came in.

The man’s been under a great deal of stress lately. First Aryeh nat Toriv, then the collapse—his forgetfulness is certainly excusable.

“So,” Leif says, clearing her throat. She looks down at her questions. “The collapse.”

“Yes.”

“What do you remember before the shaft caved in, if anything?”

“Sunny stopped singing. Our canary,” Eyal explains. He lowers himself into the chair. “And there was a miner—I don’t know his name—I heard him arguing with another man about smoking a cigarette. Then I noticed Sunny wasn’t singing anymore, and when I went to check her, she was dead. I had her in my hand and I heard someone light a match, and then the rocks came crashing down.”

Leif blinks. It’s a very concise explanation, certainly not what she’d expected, and hopefully will point them in the right direction. She scratches the story down.

“Why were you with the canary?” Ivar asks, Leif still writing. Leif glances up at Eyal for a moment.

“Aryeh nat Toriv used to keep an eye on Sunny,” Eyal replies. His face has gone troubled. “The morning of the collapse, one of the other men handed her cage to me and said that since Aryeh was gone, I’d be watching her.”

Leif hums, adding the detail in her margins. “Do you know what team the miner who was arguing about the cigarette belonged to?”

It’s not in her list of questions. But since Eyal doesn’t know the man’s name, it’s very likely they weren’t on the same team, which meant the smoker belonged to Holmsen’s men.

Which means that *Holmsen* would be at fault for the deaths of twenty-nine men, not Leif.

“Not mine.”

“Thanks,” Leif says, and writes the note in the corner. Ivar raises his eyebrows, but she just stares back at him.

“Where were you when the collapse occurred?” Ivar asks, leaning forward. Eyal snorts.

“Same place they found me. It’s not like I was able to wiggle around underneath all that rock.”

Leif flips to a new piece of paper. “And were you well-instructed on the dangers of the shaft? Told that there could be absolutely no live flames in the mine, lest they mix with bad air and cause an explosion?”

“Once.” Eyal furrows his brow. “Last autumn, when our team was filled out. Not since then, though.”

“Mm.”

In Isaksen opinion, the teams ought to be reminded of the mine’s dangers at least once a year. Once a *season*, if Leif or her father had their way, but it would take valuable time out of the miners’ days, and in the end cost profits.

Not very much profit, of course. But Magnus Isaksen had often voiced the thought that the board that ran the Sverhul mining camps was prone to avarice, and it’d take a disaster and many mens’ lives before they changed their minds.

Maybe this is that disaster.

Leif taps the table. “Would you say that if teams were briefed on the dangers of mining more often, this collapse could’ve been avoided?”

“Leif,” Ivar warns. Eyal looks confused.

“I suppose,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “But I... I don’t know, ma’am. I don’t know enough about the other team to venture a guess.”

“That’s all right, *Herr* nat Match,” Ivar says, before Leif can reply. “This is only our first look into the collapse. We will not be overhauling camp procedures because of your answers today.”

Leif purses her lips together. “I have one last question for you today, sir,” she says. Eyal’s face brightens considerably at being called *sir*. “Why do you, personally, believe that you alone were spared in the collapse?”

“I, ah...”

The man looks at his feet. Leif’s eyebrows raise.

“I have a tattoo right here,” Eyal says at last, tapping his chest. “An angel’s eye. Would you like to see?”

Leif shrugs. Ivar says yes.

The miner tugs his shirt down below his collarbone, revealing a small diamond-shaped rune, a diagonal line cutting through its middle. Leif peers at it; after a moment, Eyal pulls his collar back up.

“They’re Ruvav symbols,” he says. “Most of us have them tattooed when we’re young, usually as babes. Angel’s eyes are meant to ward off evils and keep us safe. It’s recorded in our holy book as a protection given to us by our god.”

Leif blinks, pen hovering over her paper. “So you believe that—”

“My angel’s eye kept me safe,” Eyal replies. “That’s all. I’m not special, no Ruvav black magic or anything.”

“*Herr nat Match—*”

Eyal shrugs. “I’ve heard the rumors, even if I’ve been tucked up in our tent. I’d just like to dispel them.”

Leif nods, head dipping over her papers again.

Believes his angel’s eye saved his life. (Angel’s eye = Ruvav protection symbol)

“That will be all for today,” she says, looking up at Eyal. “Though I do expect that you will be called in again over the next week or so, and possibly as the investigation continues.” She offers him a smile. “You’re a goldmine, sir. We usually don’t have an eyewitness with these things.”

Eyal nods a little. “May I go?”

“You may go,” Ivar affirms, and the miner sweeps himself up from the chair.

Leif watches him go. Eyal has the slightest limp—his right leg drags along behind him a little, left leg leading. She wonders if it’ll be permanent.

“So,” Ivar says, after Eyal’s left. Leif looks down at her notes.

She flips through the pages. “If he’s right, Holmsen’ll have a lot of shit to answer for.”

4.

The coming days are some of the most restful Eyal has ever had in the camp. The doctor has insisted that he remain resting in his team's tent, and has had a cot set up for him. It's got three woolen blankets and a pillow, which is assuredly the most care he's ever received here, too.

He's called to the overseers' thrice more, always to give testimony. Leif Isaksen is present every time, looking more tired with each visit, and so is the burly man who sat to her right, and a new overseer who has the look of a rat about him. He's certainly more suspicious than Leif or the burly man, once even demanding to see Eyal's angel's eye, and then demanding proof that it isn't some harmful rune.

As religious texts are banned from the camps, Eyal has no way to prove it to him, but he tells the overseer that he can go to any Ruvav home and find angel's eyes carved over the doorway.

Most of the time, though, he sleeps. His body aches like it never has. The bruises are only beginning to fade, and so they're looking uglier than ever. If Eyal were vainer, he'd refuse to leave the tent for fear of being seen.

Ache brings exhaustion. This is something Eyal has known for a long time, but now he knows it intimately. Sometimes he can hardly even drag himself from the cot when the doctor visits, and then the doctor's brow knits and he tells Eyal to sleep as much as possible.

So he sleeps.

He hasn't slept this much in years, not since he was a little boy. At first he felt lazy for it, but now as the hurt of the collapse truly begins to set in, Eyal finds he's grateful for it. When he's not asleep he's wishing he was, and when he is he's asleep.

But with sleep, of course, comes dreams. On occasion he dreams of his sister Meira and his father, other times the men on his team. Most of all, though, he dreams of Aryeh.

Sometimes the dreams are good: Aryeh in his arms, singing a Ruvav folk song, or cradling Eyal's face while he presses their foreheads together, bodies tangled on the pallet—something that never happened between them, but certainly should have. But more often than not, the dreams turn to nightmares. Aryeh coughing and coughing until blood and guts spill from his mouth, or transforming into a demon, or turning to dust and then dissolving into the wind.

One dream, though, is the worst of them all.

It begins with Eyal lying on the pallet, immobile. Aryeh is sitting beside him and pulling his work boots on, coughing all the way through, and then Dagen hands him Sunny's cage.

"You'll be taking Sunny down, now that Eyal's gone," Dagen says, and Aryeh will nod his head.

"I'll try," he'll reply, taking the cage, and then Eyal finds he can stand.

He follows his team to the entrance of the mine, and there he stops, because some strange force blocks him from entering. Aryeh is carrying Sunny's cage in one hand, covering his coughing mouth with the other, and Eyal's heart wrenches.

"Aryeh," he screams, *"Aryeh, don't go!"*

But the boy cannot seem to hear him.

Eyal waits beside the entrance, then. He hasn't any idea how long he waits, only that it seems like both forever and no time at all. And suddenly the mountain shakes and there's the muffled sound of an explosion, and finally, *finally*, Eyal can slip inside.

He watches as the rescuers dig the bodies from the rubble. Eyal tries himself, but his hands simply pass through the rocks, and he simply must watch and wait. A blond man digs in at the end of the shaft, face smeared with coal, and when he looks back Eyal recognizes him as the miner who found him. Nels was his name.

Then Nels shouts, turning round to face the rest of the rescuers. For a moment, Eyal brightens, and then he hears Nels' next words:

"I've found another one!"

Three men drag a body from the rocks. The corpse is limp, its chest cavity crushed, and when the miners set it down Eyal will hurry over to check the face.

Aryeh's familiar features are always staring up at him, blood dripping from the boy's nose, and his lips are blackened.

Eyal always wakes up sobbing.

It's the only nightmare that comes back. The others Eyal endures but once, and then he may forget them, but he sees Aryeh's battered body almost daily. He cannot wash the image from his mind, no matter how hard he tries, and it haunts him in his waking hours.

He speaks of it to no one. Not the doctor, not the overseers. To talk of his nightmares would be to reveal exactly what little life he had with Aryeh, exactly how the boy brightened Eyal's life in this dusty smudge of a camp. Eyal is not yet ready to share that.

He may never be.

As the days pass and the nightmare keeps returning, Eyal finds himself unable to slumber, tired as he is. Whenever he closes his eyes, he can see Aryeh's bloodied face, his broken chest.

He prays for sleep, hands pressed over his angel's eye, but *Ahel* doesn't grant it.

The doctor fusses over him with every visit, bemoaning the circles that are forming beneath Eyal's eyes. He presses a tincture into Eyal's hands one day, promising that it will make him sleep, and Eyal promises he'll take it. He tries it as soon as the man leaves, in fact, and it lulls him into a deep, deathlike sleep almost immediately after the bitter dose passes his lips.

He doesn't dream.

When Eyal wakes, it's to find a pair of hands gripping around his neck, a knee pressing him down on the cot.

He sputters, arms flailing; the hands only grip harder.

The tent is dark around him, the air cold. The tincture must've made him sleep into the night. Eyal cannot make out a single detail of his assailant, only that their hands are calloused and the knee that keeps him down has a great deal of strength behind it. A miner, then.

Ahel, protect me; Ahel, keep me safe.

Eyal reaches forward blindly, hands groping over his attacker's face. The man simply shakes him off, and Eyal gives a choked cry.

If only he were stronger. If only the stones hadn't sapped his strength, if only he could see. If only Dr. Henriksen hadn't given him such a potent tincture. *Ahel, do not let my life be snuffed out when it has only begun.*

"Please," Eyal tries to whisper, but the word doesn't clear his lips.

As a boy, he barely learnt the prayers of protection, too eager to leave his lessons behind. Now Eyal gropes for the verses that are his only hope and presses his hands over his angel's eye.

O Ahel, hear my prayer. Frustrate those who—those that plot against me, cover me under your wings. Protect me against the demons—the demons of the Earth. May the angels watch over me and—

And—

Eyal gives a muffled cry, tears beginning to stream from his eyes. He grips uselessly at the hands that hold him.

He wants to see Aryeh again.

Ahel, let me live a little longer.

The seconds tick by, each infinite, and Eyal finds his world is nothing but pain. His limbs ache, his chest hurts. He cannot breathe. It is rather like being trapped in the mine again, only he doesn't have a dead canary in his hands this time.

"Damn it," hisses the man upon him. He closes his hands a little tighter around Eyal's neck. "Why won't you die?"

I find I'm wondering that myself, Eyal thinks, but he can hardly summoning the breath to speak it. He scrabbles at the man's face, fingernails scratching. Aside from that, though, there's little he can do.

He misses being the strongest man in the mine.

Eyal thinks first of his sister, then Aryeh. Then he closes his eyes and waits for a death that will never come.

"Herr nat Match?"

Eyal opens his eyes blearily to find the doctor's worried face peering into his own, round spectacles slipping down his nose. The man's expression dissolves into one of relief.

"Thank the gods," he says softly. He lifts Eyal by the shoulders, gently. "We thought we might've lost you."

Not yet, Eyal tries to whisper. *Not damn yet*.

He's moved to an overseer's bed, after that.

The overseers live in a small barracks, with wooden walls and a leaky tin roof. Still, it's better than the miners' tents, and more secure by far. The door to Eyal's tiny room is fitted with a lock, and the two keys are given to himself and Dr. Henriksen.

No one knows what happened, only that Eyal went into the tent one night as healthy as he could be, and the next morning there was a ring of bruises around his neck and he could barely speak. As soon as he can talk without pain, he's questioned on the attack by Ivar Vangen, the burly overseer from the meetings, but Eyal can offer little information.

"It was black as pitch," he croaks, hands fiddling with his collar. "Couldn't see a thing. All I... All I know is he was strong and had calloused hands, like a miner."

"Like a miner," Vangen repeats, face dark. He scribbles something down in his notes.

It's been nearly three weeks since the collapse, nearly three weeks since they took Aryeh away. Eyal doesn't take the sleeping tincture again, too afraid that he won't wake up, and the nightmares have returned cruel as ever. He sleeps little nowadays.

He misses Aryeh dearly.

Rarely does Eyal venture out of the barracks, but when he does, it's clear that the mine has carried on work without him. In the daytime, the camp is nearly empty; in the night, it's filled with tired, filthy men who are too eager to sleep to pay any attention to him.

For the first time since he came to the Sverhul mines, Eyal finds himself on uncertain ground. As long as he's been at the camp, he's stood out as a strongman, one of the miners who

hewed from the earth twice what the rest of the other men on their team did. He was a member of his team, Aryeh nat Toriv's... friend. Eyal had a place, no matter how meager that place was.

Now he is... what?

A battered, aching boy who cannot sleep at night.

He's lost what little belonging he had at Sverhul.

His most frequent visitor is Dr. Henriksen, who comes to inspect Eyal's slowly healing injuries twice a day. His bruises are healing, but slowly, and the pain isn't fading. When he speaks, his voice is still rough, vocal cords likely damaged. The doctor fears that Eyal's voice and throat will never truly be healthy unless a healing sorcerer or Ruvav *ashevi* sees to it.

The only other person who ever visits him is Leif Isaksen. She comes every few days to make awkward conversation with him for perhaps a quarter of an hour, notes always in hand, and then flees again.

Eyal supposes she feels guilty for the accident, guilty for everything that's happened to him. Leif always seems a little nervous at first, like she doesn't quite belong—and she doesn't, if Eyal thinks about it. Leif is the only woman he's seen at Sverhul, besides the few that come to cook or visit mining husbands. Certainly the only female overseer he'd ever met.

Sometimes he wonders how she got to the position, but he doesn't ask. Most likely, Leif will just look away from him and mutter a non-answer.

And Ivar Vangen comes on occasion. Why, Eyal cannot fathom. The man hasn't a single obligation to be checking on Eyal: they were not on the same team, Ivar is not a doctor, he is not Eyal's overseer. But he does visit, often at Leif's side, and his mere presence seems to ease her.

Eyal is grateful for their visits, even if he hardly shows it. If it was only Dr. Henriksen who came to see him, he's not so sure he wouldn't go mad.

One morning, he wakes to a knocking on the door. Leif or Ivar, then, for Dr. Henriksen would simply enter and rouse Eyal himself. But when Eyal opens the door, a small man in military uniform stands before him.

Eyal stares.

"You are Eyal nat Mateh?"

He gives a nod.

"You have been summoned to the third overseers' tent," the man says, clasping his hands behind his back. He gives Eyal's clothes a critical eye. "I was told you were to leave immediately, but I suppose you'll need a moment to dress."

Eyal nods again, a bit dazed, and shuts the door.

It takes very little time to dress. When he unlocks the door again, the man in uniform is still waiting there, hands still clasped. Eyal supposes he must be a soldier.

“I can walk there myself,” he says, without thinking. The soldier’s mouth twists; whether it’s in distaste or amusement, Eyal can’t quite tell.

“I suppose you can,” the soldier replies. “But my orders are to accompany you wherever you go, and I intend to follow them.”

Eyal opens his mouth, thinks better of what he’s about to say, and then closes it again. Wordlessly, he sets off in the direction of the overseers’ tents, the soldier following close behind him.

Leif is there, as usual, with Ivar at her side. The two of them are poring over papers. A seat has been left open for Eyal, as usual; it’s across the table, as usual. In the corner sits Peer Holmsen, arms folded and face miserable.

As usual.

But for the pair of straight-backed soldiers flanking the tent’s entrance and the uniformed man sitting to Leif’s left, nothing has changed.

The uniformed man is the first to notice Eyal’s presence, standing almost as soon as he enters the tent. Leif and Ivar glance at him, glance at Eyal, and stand themselves.

Peer Holmsen continues staring at his shoes.

“Eyal nat Match, I expect,” the man in the uniform says. “Unless Olstad has gone and found the wrong Ruvav miner.”

“Sit down,” Ivar mutters. Eyal looks between the two men, then does as he’s told.

The uniformed man seems unaffected. “Captain Edvard Christensen,” he says, gesturing to himself. “And you are in fact Eyal nat Match?”

“I am.”

“Good, good.” Christensen settles back into his seat, Leif and Ivar following his lead. Christensen glances at Leif. “*Fraulein*, would you mind explaining to *Herr* nat Match why I and my men are here?”

“They’re going to accompany us to the capital,” Leif says, sounding tired. “You’ve been summoned by the queen.”

Eyal stares at her.

The tent is silent for a long time. At last, Eyal manages a strangled, “Why me?”

“Because of your miraculous survival,” Christensen says, lacing his fingers together. “As I’m sure you know, Vinderheim is in the middle of a war. And it’s...” he hesitates. “It’s not going as well as we’d like.”

It's not going as well as we'd like is an understatement if there ever was one. Far as Eyal knows, the war over the Brenfel mountain range has been raging for nearly nine years, with no end in sight, and Vinderheim's lost a good deal of land in the meantime. The Kraznians have already claimed the two westernmost peaks, and they don't show any sign of retreating.

"Quite frankly, the situation is looking fairly hopeless," Christensen continues. He looks at Eyal. "Which is why Queen Solfrid was so intrigued to hear about *you*."

"I'm a coal miner."

Christensen raises an eyebrow. "A coal miner who survived a mine collapse and a murder attempt. I've seen a great many things, *Herr nat* Mateh, and even I find that extraordinary."

Eyal opens his mouth, fingers tapping his angel's eye, but the captain cuts him off.

"See, around nine hundred years ago there was this Kraznian soothsayer, Lujza Novomeská. She gave hundreds of prophecies during her time, and so far, all of them have been accurate." Christensen slides a piece of paper across the table. "The one that really matters is what's known as the Prophecy of the Deathless Warrior. Essentially, it says that in Vinderheim's most dire hour, there will arise a man who cannot die who shall save the nation." He shrugs. "I'm not privy to the details, but essentially, the queen figures you're the deathless warrior and she wants you at court as soon as possible."

Eyal squints down at the page. It looks like a letter. It's difficult for him to read—it's written in Vinder, and he's learned little of the script. He catches a few words here and there (things like *mine* and *Eyal* and *Sverhul*) but it'll take time for him to truly understand it.

"So," he says, looking up at Christensen. "Why couldn't she just send a messenger? Why soldiers?"

"There's already been one attempt on your life. Likely related to the collapse, but we can't be sure. The queen wants to make sure you get to Lystad safely, and before Krazny figures out who you are."

Eyal stares back down at the letter.

Lystad. The capital of Vinderheim, located near the eastern sea. He's never been, but he's heard stories of streets paved with diamonds and roofs of gold, and that the people of Lystad dress in clothes made from sheets of silver.

Eyal isn't fool enough to believe in priceless fashion or architecture, but even so, the city must be a wonder to behold.

I'm a coal miner.

It's the home of the queen.

“You won’t be going by yourself,” Christensen says, perhaps in an attempt to ease Eyal’s worry. “*Fraulein* Isaksen and *Herr* Holmsen will be coming with us too, as well as *Herr* Vangen.”

“Does the queen think they’re going to fulfill nine-hundred-year-old prophecies, too?”

Leif snickers. Christensen doesn’t look amused.

“The family that owns these mines is *very* interested in the mine collapse. They’re preparing a full inquiry, and as the overseers of the lost teams, *Herr* Holmsen and the *fraulein* will be testifying.” The captain pauses. “*Herr* Vangen’ll be there to accompany *Fraulein* Isaksen, since she’s not yet twenty-one.”

Leif hardly looks thrilled about it. Nor does Ivar, who’s currently massaging his forehead with a pained expression on his face.

Eyal stares down at the letter in his lap, then glances at Christensen again. “And what if I don’t want to go? What if I want to stay at Sverhul?”

The captain raises an eyebrow. “You’re not being *asked* to go to Lystad, *Herr* nat Match. You’re being ordered. We leave before nightfall.”

5.

War meetings are, in Draha's esteemed opinion, one of the most boring things to have ever graced the face of the earth.

They occur twice a week, more often if there's been recent developments in the fighting at Brenfel, though that happens rarely. Draha is required to attend every single one. Why, she's not sure; the meetings are run mostly by generals, particularly the Queen's Five. People who have actual experience fighting. Seeing as Draha isn't even seventeen years old yet and has never actually seen battle, she feels rather out of place.

But Queen Alzbeta wants her present, and Draha goes where the queen says. Ružena makes very sure of that.

Currently, Draha is lounging in her seat at the very end of the table, only half-listening to what's being said as she scratches Boris' ears. The hound has his head in Draha's lap, tail wagging, and it's much more entertaining to give him a little attention than it is to listen to the Five drone on and on about foreign policy and arms orders.

Boris flops onto his side, the thump audible as his huge body slams into the floor. Draha snickers. Gregor Siroky, the Queen's Second and current head of the Five, shoots her a look, and Draha makes a face back at him before kneeling to rub Boris' belly. Queen Alzbeta might order her to attend the war meetings, but she can't keep Draha from bringing her dog along with her.

The doors to the war room suddenly swing open and every head turns to look, even Draha's. From her position, she can see little more than mud-streaked boots and rough riding trousers, but she knows those boots and trousers very well.

"General," Gregor Siroky says immediately, rising. He is followed by several murmured *generals*, several chairs scraping across the floor as their occupants stand. Only Draha remains where she is, listening as Ružena Király's boots click as the woman crosses the room.

As the Queen's First, Ružena is the most highly ranked individual in Krazny's military, and she makes sure everyone knows it. Draha's heard countless stories of Ružena asserting her dominance in her youth, one particularly appalling tale involving a horse whip and a mouthy colonel. She's been away from the capital for the past five months, overseeing the war, but something's made her return.

If it's forced Ružena back home, it's a very big something indeed.

"News from Vinderheim," Ružena says, wood creaking as she settles into her chair at the head of the table. The other generals immediately follow suit. "Draha, get up off the floor."

Draha pops back into her chair, face heating. Ružena smiles at her briefly.

Draha's heart soars immediately, followed by a flash of guilt. She'd thought that she'd grown out of needing Ružena's approval in the time the woman was gone. Clearly, she'd been wrong.

"News from Vinderheim," echoes Andrej Zeman, the Queen's Fifth. "Honestly, Király, would it kill you to quit being quite so mysterious? We are in the middle of a *war*, for Reinhilde's sake, and—"

"Vinderheim has found their half."

Every eye turns to Zlata Marek (the Queen's Third) who is currently holding a slim piece of paper, its plain brown envelope lying abandoned on the table. Marek's dark gaze roams over the writing hungrily.

"Their half of *what*?" Zeman demands. Marek sets the paper down.

"Their half of the Novomeská prophecy. Ours is Drahomíra; theirs is a young man named Eyal nat Match. Seventeen. Coal miner. He survived a collapse, and a subsequent murder attempt."

"Deathless," a lieutenant general murmurs. A hush has fallen over the room, Draha included.

Ružena is grinning.

"Ruvav, then?" asks Iyov nat Nava. He is the fourth member of the Queen's Five, and the only one with Ruvav blood in his veins. "How interesting."

"How did we get this information?" Siroky asks. "Vinderheim knows the prophecy too. If they had any sense at all, they'd be keeping this to themselves."

Ružena stretches back in her chair. "He's a miner, remember. Gossip isn't exactly unheard of in the northern camps, and it travels fast. One of our spies in Guljorde heard the news, and then it was only a matter of confirming it via wildblood to make sure it was true."

"What are they doing with him?"

"Taking him to court."

"Any escort?"

"Edvard Christensen. A handful of soldiers."

"Christensen is a pansy," Lieutenant-General Kozár interjects. "If we get the word to your wildblood soon enough, we might be able to grab nat Match in time, get him—"

Ružena cuts him off. "We are not kidnapping Eyal nat Match. He poses no threat to us at the moment, and besides, the boy has enough to deal with already. Jakob Rendahl will be waiting for him in Lystad. I don't envy his—"

“It doesn’t matter if he doesn’t pose a threat to us *now*. He’ll pose one in time. If we act now and send instructions to your wildblood, we could delay his—”

“*Nikolas Kozár.*”

Kozár goes quiet, as does everyone else around the table. Even Boris freezes at the sound of Ružena’s voice.

“You would do well to remember that I am your superior officer,” Ružena says, voice clipped. “We will not be interfering with Eyal nat Match’s journey to Lystad. He is the Vinder—”

“Ruvav,” Iyov mutters.

“—half to the Novomeská prophecy. We found *our* half eight years ago.” Ružena gestures down the table, and every eye in the room suddenly focuses on Draha. “Drahomíra has had eight years longer than Eyal nat Match to prepare for their shared destiny. We can do very little about him at the moment, but I strongly doubt that we have anything to worry about.” A smile curves her lips. “Really, Kozár. I thought you would have more trust in Drahomíra’s abilities.”

“If I may speak, General?” Kozár asks, voice quiet.

“You may.”

“I would like to point out that Drahomíra has spent the entire war meeting playing with her dog.”

Draha swallows, face heating. She buries her fingers in Boris’ thick coat.

“He’s just such a sweetheart,” she mumbles. “And this is boring anyway.”

Kozár’s expression is nothing short of miffed. Most of the Queen’s Five, however, simply look exasperated, and both Iyov and Ružena are grinning widely.

“She is sixteen years old,” Ružena replies. “Eyal nat Match is only one year older. Neither are ruthless soldiers, true enough, but Drahomíra has received *extensive* training since the age of eight from not only Kraznian sorcerers, but Jarghali and Tenguran as well. We have nothing to worry about when it comes to the prophecy.”

“General, I—”

“We should direct our attentions towards our soldiers and their needs instead.” Ružena’s expression suddenly turns sharp. “I have spent several months at the warfront, and I assure you, it is nowhere near the effortless victory that we are making it out to be. Our soldiers are tired, dirty, and hungry. We *need* to pay more attention to their needs, and that begins immediately. Klimek.”

A young corporal jumps. “Yes, General?”

“I believe you are in charge of food and resources. Do you have anything to present?”

“Yes, General.” Klimek straightens. “If I may begin?”

“Of course.”

Klimek immediately delves into a long explanation of the army’s resources (or rather, the lack of resources), a monologue which Draha soon tunes out of. All eyes are on the corporal and her presentations, Ružena’s hawkish gaze pinned firmly on her, and so Draha takes the opportunity to slide from her chair once more and bury her fingers in the thick fur of Boris’ neck. The dog wags his tail, then buries his head in her lap.

Draha closes her eyes, then takes a deep breath, counting to ten before releasing it just as Iyov has always taught her to do. It helps less than she would hope.

For her twelfth birthday, Draha received four gifts: a set of watercolors from Valentín (he’d been hoping she’d develop an affinity for art, as he had), a tiny puppy from Iyov (the puppy had quickly grown into the not-so-tiny Boris), a silver necklace inlaid with pearl from Timotej (the poor boy has always been terrible at gift giving), and a box of chocolates from Ružena (Draha’s always had quite a sweet tooth, even then). The chocolates had disappeared within a day, but Draha’s kept the box. It’s mahogany, with a lovely grapevine pattern carved round the edges of it, and she keeps her few bits of jewelry in it. Including the necklace from Timotej.

Tonight, she empties the jewels out onto her bed, then removes her shoes and roots her bare feet to the ground, wooden box in hand. It’s a technique Valentín taught her long ago; as long as she holds something with a strong connection to an individual—preferably something they’ve physically handled—and ties herself to the earth, she can find them anywhere. Draha isn’t the best at it, as it’s an earthblood practice, but she can manage it.

A strong earthblood like Valentín can trace someone’s presence over hundreds, thousands of miles, down to the very inches of space they occupy. Valentín can even trace where a person’s *been*, as well as where they currently are. Draha can just about manage someone’s general vicinity.

She tracks Ružena’s presence back to the woman’s quarters, which have been left empty for the past several months. It’s a relief to know Ružena is back home, back in her rooms, even though Draha had already seen her at the war meeting. It’s a relief to know she’s *back*, and for good this time.

Draha practically has to restrain herself from running to Ružena’s rooms.

“Ružena?” she asks, when she finally reaches the door.

There’s a moment’s pause. Then: “Drahomíra?”

“*Áno!*”

“Come in!”

Ružena's sitting on her desk, poring over papers. As usual. Her quartz eye has been removed from its socket and set in its jar, where Ružena usually puts it at the end of the day, and an eyepatch has been strapped over the right side of her face.

The lines of her face are especially pronounced in the candlelight. This, coupled with Ružena's single eye, make her look even older than usual.

Though Draha doesn't actually know how old she *is*. Going off Ružena's appearance, Draha would put the woman somewhere in her early thirties, but she knows for a fact that Ružena is Tenguran as well as Kraznian, and Tengurans always seem to age slowly. She also knows that Ružena grew up with Iyov and Valentín, which would put her somewhere in her mid-forties, but she hardly looks it.

Except for now.

Ružena's black hair has slipped from its bun, spilling down her back, and Draha takes the opportunity to reach for a brush and begin working the knots from it. Ružena smiles a bit and leans back in her chair.

"Thank you, dear."

"Of course. You should take a break."

Ružena laughs. "I see Iyov's gotten to you in my absence, then."

"Boris has."

"Ah." She tries to turn round, presumably looking for Boris, but Draha slaps her cheek lightly. "Where is that dog of yours? Shouldn't he be at your heels?"

"He's sleeping. I thought I ought to let him rest."

Ružena snorts. Draha grins, then begins to weave the woman's hair into a braid. When she's finished, she ties the plait off with a bit of ribbon, then sits on the edge of the bed so Ružena might braid her own hair.

This is an old tradition for them, one they've kept up ever since Draha first came to Ilazovna. She'd been terrified the first night she'd been at the palace, separated from her mother for the very first time in her very young life, in a loud, unfamiliar place, and about to meet the queen the very next day. Ružena had taken her aside and braided her hair to soothe her, and the act quickly grew into a common practice. Whenever the general came back after a long absence, she'd braid Draha's hair on the first night she returned, whether to calm Draha, herself, or both of them. As Draha grew, she started braiding Ružena's hair as well, and it's morphed into their very own tradition.

Draha likes it. Ružena's as close to a mother as she has these days, just as Iyov and Valentín are the closest things she has to fathers. Having her hair braided feels intimate, private, just the thing a mother would do.

"Have you seen the queen yet?" she asks when Ružena finishes. Draha's known for years that the two women have a very special relationship, the sort Iyov and Valentín have. If she were in Ružena's place, she'd see Queen Alzbeta as soon as possible.

But Ružena simply shakes her head, settling onto the bed herself. "It's been a long journey. I'll see her after I've gotten some rest."

"Not that you *were* getting rest."

The woman shakes her head, massaging her temples. "I still have plenty of work to do. The front lines are a mess, and—oh! Speaking of the front lines, I have a special job for you." Ružena's eye gleams. "Your very first assignment in the field."

Draha bolts upright, heart pounding as she tries to keep herself from grinning too widely. "Yes?"

Ružena reaches for a map. "We've been having trouble with Mount Frodje. Seven months of constant besiegement, and Vinderheim hasn't lost an inch." She points to the Brenfel range, circling one tiny peak with a finger. "If Frodje falls, there will be only one more mountain to claim before we reach the flatlands. I think your skills may help us finally seize Frodje once and for all."

"Really?"

"Really." Ružena grins, furling the map up. "You'll learn more later, and you won't be going to Frodje for a little longer. I want Iyov to sharpen your battle tactics before you finally leave—though I hope you won't be needing them."

"Then shouldn't I go immediately? You said that we've been fighting for Frodje for seven months straight and still haven't gained any territory, so..."

Draha trails off, shrugging. Ružena sets the map back down on the desk.

"We haven't lost a single soldier for weeks at this point. Vinderheim's been using some earthbloods, throwing our forces back either with the wind or ground every time we try to seize the mountain. Frustrating, and the soldiers can sustain quite a few injuries, but you need to focus on training. I can't afford to have you captured."

"I won't be *captured*," Draha says, indignant, but Ružena just sighs.

"You've never been to war, not to mention that you're only sixteen years old. You need more time to prepare, Draha. War is difficult."

"I know it is."

“No, you don’t. You won’t know until you’ve lived it.”

Ružena goes silent for a moment, staring at something only she can see. Draha remains quiet. She’s learned enough in her eight years in Ilazovna not to disturb the general when she gets like this.

“Enough of this,” Ružena says abruptly, rising from the bed. “Gods, I’ve been immersed in the war for months. I...”

She trails off, massaging her forehead again. Draha waits.

“Care to visit Iyov with me?” Ružena asks. She smiles briefly. “Haven’t seen that man in months. I’ve been missing him.”

“You’ve been missing his brandy.”

“Nonsense. Iyov is excellent company. Besides, he hasn’t been deep in the cups in years.” She pauses. “Unless something’s changed while I’ve been gone?”

Draha shakes her head. Ružena sighs with relief.

“I’ll write Valentín. He’s always glad to hear that Iyov’s been taking care of himself. Coming?”

“Coming,” Draha confirms, and pushes herself off the bed with a grin.

Oh, how she’s missed having Ružena around.

6.

He's got very little to pack, just his clothes and blanket, though Eyal supposes they'll have clothing and bedding plenty in Lystad. When he's finished, he brings the suitcase out to the front of the overseers' barracks, then hesitates.

Leif and Holmsen are still packing, presumably. Only Ivar, Christensen, and the soldiers are outside. Ivar's leaning against the barracks wall with a suitcase of his own at his feet, a pipe clamped between his teeth.

"Watch this," Eyal says to him, holding out his case. "I've got... I've got to check on my tent for a moment."

Ivar just shrugs and takes the suitcase from him.

His team's tent is still standing, even now, all these weeks after the collapse. It's been left untouched since then.

Ten men slept on pallets, including he and Aryeh. They were the only two that shared. Eyal lists the names in his head: *Heinrich, Erich, Lars, Oskar, Dagen, Jesper*. The rest would lay on the ground. Some had blankets to soften it, others did not. *Kristoff, Niclas, Axel, Richard, Patrik, Gunther, Mats*.

He stops beside his pallet, untouched since that fateful morning. The blanket he bought so long ago is still shoved to one side, not carefully folded up like the ones on Lars' or Oskar's pallets. Eyal kneels, hand ghosting over the rough fabric.

If he closes his eyes, he can pretend that this is just another cold morning in the camp, that he's about to wake Aryeh from sleep or that Axel is about to ask if Eyal's seen his boots. He can pretend that nothing has changed, that he's still just an ordinary miner.

Eyal doesn't close his eyes. Better to stay in the present than to dwell in the past.

There's a rip in one of the pallet's seams, near the top. He leans forward, tugging on it, and a small, folded book falls out.

He reaches for it. The script on the front is Ruvav, written in a careful hand: *Prayers*

The name Aryeh nat Toriv is scrawled in the inside cover, the handwriting far messier. Eyal smiles.

The book is a *tippa sepram*, a pocket-sized prayer book meant to be carried on long journeys, when the *Sepram*, the Ruvav holy book, cannot be taken. Most are handwritten, custom-made by their owners. But from what Eyal can tell, Aryeh didn't make this one himself. It was written for him.

It's a miracle that Aryeh kept this in the camp this long. Eyal has no idea what would've happened if the book was found, only that it would've been bad. Very bad, most likely.

He traces the letters of Aryeh's name absentmindedly.

He should leave it be. It's Aryeh's book, not his, and he has no right to touch it. Eyal ought to tuck it back into the pallet and forget he ever saw it.

But he doesn't know how long he'll be away from Sverhul, or if he'll ever return. Aryeh won't. Eyal doesn't know what the overseers will do with their tent and what's inside, either. To destroy a book of prayer is a sin, even a *tippa sepram*. If he leaves the book in the pallet, it might end up burned or worse.

And it's all he has of Aryeh.

Eyal leans back on his heels and begins looking through the *tippa sepram*'s pages, mouthing the prayers under his breath.

Christensen divides them into two groups: himself, Holmsen, Eyal and Eyal's guard, and then Leif, Ivar, and the two other soldiers that accompanied the captain to the mines. A coach will carry each group to the train station at Elsvik, where they'll board a special car sent by the crown. The car will carry them to Lystad, stopping only to refuel. They will not be allowed to disembark until they reach the capital.

"Leif," Ivar mutters, as she's about to board the coach. She glances over her shoulder, and the man gestures.

"A word," he says quietly.

Leif follows him to the back of the coach. Ivar's expression is troubled, thumb worrying at the end of his pipe.

"What?" Leif asks, a bit irritated. Ivar just studies her.

"Have you written your parents?"

Leif's shoulders drop.

"Not yet. I'll send them a letter once we get to Lystad, all right? It won't—"

"If you leave a letter behind to be sent to them, it'll likely reach them as we reach Lystad," Ivar interrupts, crossing his arms. "If you send one as we reach Lystad, it'll take days to arrive."

"Ivar—"

"And if you can't be arsed enough to send a note to your parents saying that *Queen Solfrid* summoned you to the capital, *I'll* be the one who gets grief for it."

Leif doesn't say anything, just folds her arms and stares sullenly at the ground. Sure, Ivar will get grief from her father, but *Leif* is the one who'll have to contend with Hedda Isaksen, and that's a nightmare all its own.

She peers up through her lashes. Ivar has replaced his pipe in his mouth, an eyebrow raised.

"I'm already twenty," Leif mutters. "They don't need to know my every move."

"I think they'd like to know you're going to *Lystad*."

"I don't think they will."

"Leif."

"Mother can't even call me her daughter," she spits, hands curling into fists. "If she doesn't care enough to do that, do you think she'll care about me crossing half the country?"

Ivar sighs, taking the pipe out. "Your mother has... unusual priorities. I don't agree with her in the slightest, but she'll worry."

"*Worry*." Leif laughs bitterly. "I bet she spends her whole day *worrying* about me."

Ivar is quiet for a long time, rubbing his thumb over the pipe's handle. At last he pushes himself off the coach, tucking a hand into his pockets.

"At least write your father."

Leif gives a terse nod, then climbs into the carriage.

The ride to Elsvik is long, a terse silence hanging in the air. Leif sulks most of the way. The only positive aspect of the journey is that Holmsen is riding in the other coach; the journey would be all but unbearable if he were with them. As it is, Leif is eager to leave the coaches behind once they reach the trains.

Elsvik is a tiny little town, significant only because it's as far as the railroads go. If you plan to go farther north, you've better rely on a coach, a horse, or your own two feet. Twice a month, wagons of coal from the Sverhul mines are dragged down the mountainside to be loaded into cars at Elsvik, then sent to a factory for processing.

Leif has accompanied these wagons exactly once. All overseers do at the beginning of their positions, though most don't go down again, especially if they're in charge of teams. Certain men are appointed to manage that particular job.

Elsvik is exactly as she remembers it—a small, gray town covered in snow and ice. The train station is located at its southernmost edge, and they have to ride through the town to get to it. As they pass through the streets, the residents look up, staring at the coaches and the crown's seal on its edge.

Probably the most excitement they've had in months, Leif reflects, and folds her arms across her chest.

“We’ll likely reach Lystad tomorrow morning,” Christensen announces, as soon as their little group has made it inside the train car. “The stations between here and the capital have been instructed to give priority to this train, and we expect to stop only to refuel, and twice at the most.”

There are four cabins in the sleeping car, each exactly the same inside. Leif takes the one furthest back. Christensen tells them that the lounge is one car ahead, the dining car one back, then retreats to the dining car himself.

Leif walks into her cabin and slams the door shut behind her.

The cabin itself is modest; a single bed is tucked away in the corner, a writing desk opposite it. A small dresser has been shoved against the wall.

“Sparse,” she says aloud. The word echoes in the empty room.

Leif runs her hands through her hair, then collapses onto the bed and stares at the ceiling.

The journey to Lystad is a blur.

Eyal spends most of the time in his cabin, studying the letter Christensen gave him. He can speak Vinder perfectly; it’s only the script that troubles him. After staring at the words for nearly an hour, he’s able to understand the gist of the letter.

It’s addressed to him, of course, and opens with a paragraph detailing how excited and relieved the queen is to have found the prophesied warrior at last. Then it delves into an explanation of the current crisis in the Brenfel mountains, and gives a brief summary of what will be expected of him once they reach the court. He’ll be under the care of the Ovesens, the family that owns the Sverhul mines, and the letter mentions someone named Jakob Rendahl.

At the end of the page lies a signature that takes Eyal several minutes to decipher. When he has, he almost drops the letter to the ground.

Her Majesty Solfrid Volden, Queen of Vinderheim, Lady of the Mountains

The queen of Vinderheim wrote the letter that he’s holding. At the very least, she signed it. The queen of Vinderheim had direct contact with the piece of paper in Eyal’s hands.

“*Ahel*,” Eyal whispers, closing his eyes.

He attends dinner only so that Olstad has a chance to eat. Peer Holmsen and Leif are notably absent, likely still in their rooms, and Ivar doesn’t say a single word throughout the

entire meal. Christensen and his soldiers talk, but only to themselves, and it makes Eyal feel particularly lonely.

It's hardly a new feeling. As a boy, his only company was usually his sister, and siblings can only play together for so long before they start to hate each other. Where other children have memories of raucous fun, Eyal can only remember jealously watching the boys he knew as they laughed together, played together, and he himself stood in the shadows.

But he hasn't felt quite so alone in a very long time. At Sverhul, he had Aryeh, and the rest of their team to an extent. Axel. And after the collapse, Eyal was either sleeping or recounting the crash or talking with Dr. Henriksen.

Besides, there's a difference between being alone and *feeling* alone.

He excuses himself early, the car's windows barely beginning to darken. Only Olstad seems to notice, and that's just because he's supposed to stick to Eyal like a burr. Maybe that's the worst bit—that the soldiers not only ignore him, but ignore his absence, too. Eyal's never felt quite so invisible as he has tonight.

(Although maybe that's a low bar. People have always seemed to *see* him, maybe because of his height or his Ruvav blood or his miner's pick. He hasn't been invisible since he was maybe ten years old.)

He tries to sleep. He fails, of course. Every time Eyal closes his eyes, he can see Sunny or Aryeh or Axel, bodies slack and bloodied.

He tries anyway. By the time he gives up, the moon has come out, its crescent twinkling in the sky.

Olstad is leaning against the wall opposite Eyal's cabin door. He's drooping with exhaustion, though he snaps his head up as soon as Eyal opens the door.

"Are you going anywhere, sir?"

Eyal drums his fingers on the door's edge. "Just the lounge car. You don't need to accompany me—I doubt there are any Kraznian assassins hiding in the couches." He pauses. "Not that they'd have much success, anyways."

"I believe the captain is more concerned with Kraznian kidnappers."

Eyal raises an eyebrow. "Do you really believe that there are any Kraznian kidnappers hiding in the lounge, simply biding their time?"

Olstad looks torn. Eyal sighs, rubbing his temples.

"Look," he says. "You can stand in the vestibule outside the car door, all right? I just... I'd just like some time to myself."

“All right,” the soldier says uncertainly. “But if you’re wanting time to yourself, sir I don’t think that—”

Eyal walks past him, through the vestibule, and into the lounge car. There, he finds Leif Isaksen curled up in one of the armchairs, still dressed in her overseer’s uniform.

“*Hallo*,” Leif says, surveying him.

“*Hallo*,” Eyal replies. He stares at her in turn.

Leif has a journal balanced in her lap, a lead pencil in her hand. She hasn’t taken her eyes off him yet, and it’s starting to get very uncomfortable.

Eyal gestures to the couch across from her. “Do you care if I sit?”

The girl just shrugs in response, tracking Eyal as he crosses the room and settles on the couch. She looks almost... scared, like he’s caught her in some illicit behavior.

He shuts his eyes, leaning his head against the couch’s back. “What are you doing?”

“Drafting a letter. To my mother.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Not really,” Leif mutters. When Eyal opens his eyes again, her expression’s turned from fear to a scowl. “*Mother’s* not exactly the right word. Demon, more like.”

“Ah.” Suddenly, the scowl makes a lot more sense.

“You write your mother much?”

“Not really,” Eyal says, stretching. “Considering she’s been dead for sixteen years.”

Leif blanches.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think—”

He shrugs. “It’s fine. I... I never knew her, you know? She died when I was two years old. I don’t even know what she looked like.”

“Still,” Leif mumbles. She snaps her journal closed. “If somebody tells you their mother’s been dead for sixteen years, you’re supposed to tell them you’re sorry, aren’t you?”

“I suppose.”

The cab is quiet. Leif is fidgeting with her pencil, face still pale; Eyal tips his head back again to stare at the ceiling.

“So,” Leif says, after a while. Her voice is quiet. “Lystad.”

“Yes.”

“Prophesied warrior.”

Eyal cracks his neck. “Yes.”

“You’re scared out of your wits, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Leif bites her lip. She must do it plenty, considering how chapped the skin there is. She wipes the side of her face, leaving a smear of charcoal behind.

“I’m scared too,” she admits, spinning the pencil between her fingers. “Not as scared as you are, I’m sure, but I...” she pauses. “I’m going to have to testify before the Ovesens. My family’s worked in the Sverhul mines for *generations*, and I’m the one who’ll be representing us before the people who control our livelihood.”

“I thought you hated your family.”

Leif gives a crooked smile. “Just my mother.”

“Mm.”

“But it’s nothing compared to what you’re facing,” she sighs, leaning her head back to stare at the ceiling. “I mean—the *queen*. The Court of Lystad.”

Eyal rubs his forehead. “You’re not exactly making this easier, you know.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He shuts his eyes for a moment. “But I... I understand. I’m not alone in this.”

“Exactly,” Leif mumbles. There’s the barest hint of a smile on her lips, but it’s one of the first times Eyal has ever seen such a thing. He offers a small smile of his own in return.

He stretches again. “Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“No. After midnight, I suppose.”

“We should probably get to bed. Wouldn’t want to sleep through arriving at Lystad.”

“No, I...” Leif looks down at her journal. “I suppose not.”

Eyal stands and offers her a hand. Leif glances up at him, fingers tapping against her notebook again.

“I think I’ll stay up a little longer,” she mumbles. “I, ah... I’d like to finish this draft.”

Eyal blinks. “All right,” he says, and makes to leave.

When he looks over his shoulder, Leif is staring at the journal, the cover still closed.

“Wake up, you great lout.”

Leif groans, burying her head under her arm. “Go ‘way, Ivar.”

“Wake up.”

A pair of hands hook themselves under Leif’s arms, hauling her into a standing position. She blinks blearily, looking round, and freezes.

She’s still in the lounge car, still dressed in her overseer’s clothes. Only now, there’s sunlight spilling through the windows and the clock in the corner reads eight o’clock.

“Gods,” Leif mumbles, falling back onto the armchair. “Did I spend the whole night in here?”

“It would appear so.” Ivar holds out her journal. “We’re nearly at Lystad. Get ready—Christensen says the Ovesens will be waiting at the station when we arrive.”

Leif nods wordlessly, clutching the journal to her chest, and dashes out of the car.

It takes very little time to ready herself. The overseer’s uniform is the finest clothing Leif owns, so she’d already planned to wear it when they entered the capital. It’s wrinkled from a night in the armchair, but she can do nothing about it. Her hair’s a bit of a mess, too, but Leif simply rakes a comb through it and pulls it up into a tight bun.

The rest of their little group has moved to the lounge car. The soldiers are relaxing in the furniture, Christensen chatting amicably with them; Holmsen is perched on the edge of an armchair himself. Ivar leans against the wall.

Eyal, for his part, is staring out the window.

Leif steps beside him. “Something interesting?” she asks, and the boy jumps.

“Not much,” Eyal replies once he’s recovered. “It’s just—I’m from this tiny town in the middle of the country. I’ve never even seen the sea. So Lystad...”

“Ah.”

The Lystad station is far finer than the one in Elsvik, made of gleaming iron and steel with a glittering glass roof overlooking the platform. It’s almost enough to take Leif’s breath away, and she hasn’t even seen the *rest* of the city.

Christensen has them disembarking almost as soon as the train rolls to a stop. “We’ll be looking for the Ovesens,” he says, as Leif jumps down onto the platform. “I’m not quite sure if they’ll see us or not, so—”

“Captain Christensen!”

“I think they’ve found us,” Eyal mutters. A trio of young women is hurrying across the station, all smiling prettily. Leif can’t help but stare.

“Captain Christensen!” the oldest woman calls again. “Oh, Edvard, I had no *idea* that you would be leading the escort!”

Christensen grins. “Didn’t you hear? I was handpicked by the queen herself.”

The two embrace. Leif, more than slightly uncomfortable, glances at Eyal; the miner looks like he might throw up.

“I do apologize,” the woman says, pulling back from Christensen. She pats his arm affectionately. “Edvard was a dear friend growing up. He was a bit like the brother we never had.”

“And they were like my sisters,” Christensen adds. “I’m pleased to introduce the lot of you to the Ovesen sisters.”

“I’m Hanna,” the oldest woman says. “This is Klara, and that’s Sigrid.”

“*Hallo*,” Klara says politely. Sigrid beams, waving a hand.

It’s patently obvious that the three are sisters. They’re all about the same height, with the same rosy-cheeked complexion and cool blue eyes. Hanna and Sigrid’s hair is a fine white-blond color, Klara’s braids only a shade or two redder. Each is wearing white frocks and gloves, fox-furs draped over their shoulders. They could be triplets.

“I assume you are Eyal nat Mateh,” Hanna says, looking at Eyal with twinkling eyes. “Nobody else looks quite Ruvav the way you do.”

Eyal dips his head. “I am.”

“We’re very excited to have you with us,” Sigrid interjects, clasping her hands together. “I mean, really! The prophesied warrior, staying in *our* residency—oh! It’s almost overwhelming!”

“Thank you,” Eyal replies. Sigrid opens her mouth again, about to keep talking, but Klara lays a hand on her arm wordlessly.

“And where are the overseers?” Hanna asks. Her eyes dart between their group. “Leif Isaksen and Peer Holmsen? I’ve been told you’re to stay with as well.”

“I’m Leif,” Leif says. “That’s Holmsen.”

The man makes a face at her. Leif simply raises her eyebrows in reply.

When she looks back at the sisters, Hanna is looking at her doubtfully. “Pardon my nosiness, *fraulein*, but when heard that a Leif Isaksen was coming...”

“You expected a boy?” Leif surmises. Hanna nods, blushing slightly. “It’s all right. That’s what most people expect—I’ve gotten used to it by now.”

Hanna grins. “Klara was looking forward to your arrival,” she confides, sliding an arm around her sister’s shoulders. “She was quite excited to have some rugged young man staying with us and—”

“*Hanna*,” Klara warns. She shoves Hanna’s arm away.

The woman doesn’t seem troubled in the least. “Either way, we’re very honored to have you as our guests. I’m sure we’ll get on splendidly.”

“As am I,” Sigrid pipes up. “It’ll be excellent to have some new faces around!”

The girl beams, apparently unconscious of her sisters’ disapproving faces. She can’t be any older than eighteen. She seems sweet, if a bit silly, and her excitement seems very, very genuine.

So far, Sigrid is Leif’s favorite Ovesen sister by a wide margin.

The Ovesens have brought with them three fine carriages, all identical, much like the sisters themselves. Hanna directs Christensen and his soldiers into one, Leif and the other overseers into another, and then her sisters into the last.

“And I do ask that Eyal rides with us,” Hanna says, smiling. “We must get to know each other, after all.”

Leif glances in Eyal’s direction. He’s crossed his arms across his chest, face carefully neutral, but a muscle is twitching in his jaw.

“Wait!” Sigrid cries, as Leif begins to climb into her assigned carriage. “Leif, might you ride with us? You seem—you seem nice, and I suppose you have plenty of stories about the camp.”

Ivar bends to whisper in Leif’s ear. “If you leave me alone with Holmsen, I swear to gods, I’ll kill you.”

“I want to get to know Sigrid properly,” Leif whispers back. “She seems sweet.” Raising her voice, she says, “What do you think of it, Hanna?”

Hanna’s still smiling, though it doesn’t quite look genuine anymore. “Whatever Sigrid wants, of course. You’re certainly welcome in our carriage.”

Sigrid grabs Leif by the arm almost immediately, pulling her over to the carriage. The poor girl’s out of breath, she’s so excited.

“Thank *Ahel*,” Eyal mutters, as Leif settles on the cushion beside him. “I don’t know how I’d have endured a carriage ride with no one but them and Olstad for company.”

“They don’t seem that bad,” Leif whispers back. Eyal rolls his shoulders.

“Not for you.”

She doesn’t have time to discern what he means, because Sigrid is already sitting down on the cushions across from Leif, a great grin on her face. Leif smiles back tentatively, and the girl’s eyes crinkle with happiness.

“So,” Hanna says, crossing one leg over the other. “What was it like, to survive the mine collapse?”

“Painful.”

Hanna looks surprised. “Ah. I would have thought that your deathlessness meant that you were immune to pain, as well.”

Eyal says nothing, just shrugs again. Leif elbows his ribs.

“Well,” the boy says haltingly, “it doesn’t. Just means I can’t die. To tell you the truth, it was actually quite painful—I was stuck under tons of rock for nine hours. Couldn’t breathe,

couldn't move. Had a dead canary in my hand. At some points I *wanted* to die, just for the pain to stop."

"Oh," Hanna says softly, and the carriage grows quiet.

It's Sigrid who saves them. "What's it like up north?" she asks, swinging her legs. "I've always wondered. I've never been, which is strange considering that we own the Sverhul mines, but there you are! All I've ever heard about it is when Papa complains about reports—"

"Sigi," Klara murmurs.

"—and that's not very much. Just information about how the mines are doing and whatnot." Sigrid twists her braids around her fingers. "Is it very cold? I would suppose it is, since the mountains are so far north. Is there always snow up there?"

Leif and Eyal share a glance. The miner's mouth has twisted into a wry smile, petulant as he is, and Leif has the sense that he's becoming endeared to Sigrid as well.

"It's always cold, yes," Leif replies. "Though there's not much snow. We get some in winter and it doesn't melt for a while, but actual *snowfall* is very rare."

"That's fascinating. See, here in Lystad we get quite a lot, from late autumn all the way to early spring, and it's almost constant! I mean, I wake up nearly every morning to find that it's snowed, and I would have thought that it would come far more often up north, but you say it doesn't." Sigrid pauses to suck in a breath. "Isn't that odd? It's so much colder up there, but you don't get half the snow!"

In fact, there's little difference between the temperatures at Sverhul and the Lystad weather that Leif has seen so far, but that might be due to the late autumn season. Even if it isn't, she wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise, what with Sigrid's chattering.

The rest of the carriage ride continues in much of the same way. Klara and Hanna are relatively quiet, Klara studying her nails while Hanna eyes Sigrid with weariness. Sigrid continues to ramble. Leif does her best to pay attention, though it's difficult to keep up with the girl's speed; Eyal, on the other hand, is staring wide-eyed out the window.

"The roofs are made with gold," he murmurs at one point.

"What?"

He glances back at Leif. "At Sverhul, some of the miners told stories about Lystad. Streets of diamonds, roofs of gold, that sort of thing. I always thought they were bull, but—" he gestures out the window. "Look."

Leif peers out the window. In the distance rises a grand building, its walls built from dark brick, and the gold of its roof shines brightly even from beneath a layer of snow. She gapes.

“Ah, the Great Chapel,” Hanna says, leaning forward herself. “It’s nearly as big as the palace. The whole place is dedicated to our mother Reinhilde, of course, but it houses sanctuaries for each of her children. It’s Vinderheim’s greatest shrine.”

“Lovely,” Eyal says, eyes darting to Leif. *Reinhilde?* he mouths.

“Mother goddess,” Leif whispers. “Patron of the sky and earth.”

He gives a tiny nod, leaning back in his seat. Sigrid takes advantage of the silence to launch into an anecdote about the last time they visited the Chapel, which lasts for nearly a quarter of an hour and is spectacularly boring. By the time the carriages roll to a halt, she still hasn’t quite finished it.

“That’s enough for now, Sigi,” Hanna says, patting her sister’s arm. Sigrid’s face falls. “Oh, why the long face? We’ve got to show our guests around, and I’m sure you’ll enjoy that.”

Eyal is staring out the window again. Leif taps his arm once, twice. He doesn’t move a bit.

“This is where you live?” he asks, voice strangely quiet. The sisters smile brightly.

“Not exactly,” Klara answers. It’s only the second time she’s spoken since they entered the carriage. “We have a residency in the eastern wing.”

“But in general, this is where we live,” Hanna adds.

Leif reaches around Eyal to open the door, still not quite able to see past the boy. She pushes him forward, sending him jumping to the ground, and then climbs out herself.

They’re standing in front of a great, gilded palace, the likes of which she’s never seen before.

Hanna steps down daintily beside her. “Welcome to the Court of Lystad.”

7.

“Normally,” Hanna says, drawing the curtains of the picture window back, “the queen holds an hour-long audience starting at four o’clock, every day but holy days. For you, however, she’s made an exception. She’s expecting your presence at noon.”

Eyal gives a nod, lowering himself into the desk chair. He looks around the room dazedly.

The Ovesens had led them inside the palace, then down a series of long hallways until they finally reached the family’s residency. Then the sisters had directed each of their guests to a set of rooms. The rooms will be their own until they leave Lystad.

Every inch of the place reeks of finery. The hallway ceilings bear great murals, and the walls and floors of the palace are built from what looks like marble. The few people that he’s seen are all dressed in prettier clothes than Eyal’s ever seen, let alone owned, and the Ovesen residency alone is larger than the overseers’ barracks at Sverhul.

“You will have a maid,” Hanna says. “She’ll come in every morning and night to stoke the fire, and deliver your meals and whatnot. I expect she’ll visit when you’re out to clean up the place as well. And I’ve scheduled a tailor to come see you the day after tomorrow, so that you may...” she pauses, eyeing Eyal’s clothes. “So that you’ll have some clothes more fitting of the Court. If the queen decides you *are* the prophesied warrior, and we expect she will, you’ll be staying here indefinitely.”

“Fantastic,” Eyal says faintly. Hanna smiles.

“I’ll come collect you at half past eleven.”

She glides out of the room, shutting the door gently behind her, and Eyal is left alone.

He lets out a breath, turning on the chair. His new rooms are fit for a prince, the floor made of smooth, pale tile, the walls laid with mahogany. The four-poster bed against the opposite wall has silken-looking sheets. There are several fine paintings hung on the wall, two bookshelves full of volumes that Eyal can’t read. And across from the bed lies a fine fireplace, flames already flickering behind the grate.

The bedroom alone is nearly twice the size of the tent at Sverhul.

Eyal lets out another sigh and rests his forehead on the chair’s backing. Such fineries were not meant for a man like him.

Hanna comes to fetch him at eleven thirty, as promised. She’s carrying a slim, white box in her hands.

“I brought clothes,” she says, setting them on the desk. “They might not fit exactly, but I suppose they’re better than... that.”

Eyal glances down at himself. He’s wearing the same dark trousers and white shirt he put on to meet the Ovesens, though he’s thrown his jacket over the back of an armchair. They’re certainly not fit to meet a queen, but still. They’re the nicest things he owns, and he’d appreciate it if Hanna didn’t treat them with such disdain.

He picks up the box. “Might I have some privacy?”

“Certainly,” Hanna says sweetly, and retreats into the study. (The *study*.)

The clothing in the box consists of a pair of black trousers and jacket, a white shirt, stockings, and a wine-colored waistcoat. No shoes. Eyal simply slips on his old leather pair again. They’re nice enough, and he doubts that the queen of Vinderheim will be paying much attention to his footwear.

Hanna eyes him quizzically when he rejoins her. “Where’s your cravat?”

“Cravat?”

“The bit of fabric that... never mind.” She sighs dramatically. “I must’ve forgotten to put it in. It’s no matter. I suppose Solfrid expected you to be dressed in your own clothes, anyway, but I couldn’t resist the opportunity. You do look dashing in those.”

“Thank you,” Eyal mumbles. Hanna gives him a glowing smile.

The room she takes him to is in the center of the palace, a set of guards waiting patiently outside it. They survey Hanna, then Eyal, then look to Hanna again.

“I have an appointment with Her Majesty, gentlemen.” Hanna gestures to Eyal. “This is the miner she’s been so curious about.”

The guards part silently, pulling the doors open, and Hanna leads him inside.

“The Small Court of Lystad,” she whispers as they step over the threshold. “Where the queen entertains audiences.”

The Small Court is in fact very small considering its purpose, only about the size of Eyal’s new bedroom. Even so, it’s decorated luxuriously. A finely dressed woman is sitting in a chair across from the entrance, reading a book in her lap.

“Your Majesty,” Hanna says, sweeping into a low curtsy. Eyal bows beside her. When he looks up, the woman is smiling tiredly at them.

“Hanna,” she says. Her dark eyes travel to Eyal. “And you must be Eyal nat Match.”

Hanna nods eagerly. “He is, Your Majesty. If you—”

“Hanna, my dear, I hate to do this, but would you give me and Eyal some time to ourselves? I would prefer to conduct this with he alone.”

Hanna pauses, face falling. After a moment, she rearranges it into a pleasant expression and nods. “Of course. If you’ll excuse me.”

She turns and walks from the room, back stiff as a soldier’s. The door slams shut behind her, the queen sighing.

“I’m very sorry,” she tells Eyal. “It’s just...” She sighs again. “I know you must be very uncomfortable, what with all this fuss, but I would prefer Hanna’s absence. She has a very... lively presence, one would say, and I’d rather this be a casual sort of interview.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Eyal says softly.

“Pull up a chair if you like. I imagine it would be tiresome to stay standing this whole time,” the queen says, somewhat kindly. Eyal nods, then takes a chair from the side of the room and brings it to her side.

Queen Solfrid looks to be somewhere in her thirties, with black hair pulled back from her face and smooth, tanned skin. She’s clothed in a lovely white gown, a pearl necklace at her throat, but besides that she doesn’t seem to be dressed particularly regally. In fact, she reminds Eyal a bit of his stepmother—elegant posture, neat clothing, but with circles beneath her eyes and a weary bearing.

She seems kind.

Solfrid tucks her book beneath her chair with a quiet groan. “I apologize for the lack of formality,” she tells Eyal. “Usually, this would be a very proper affair, with the High Sorcerer and the king consort and everything, but the palace has been in a bit of a crisis lately.”

“Seems like it’s been in a bit of a crisis for the last nine years.”

Eyal regrets the words immediately, but the queen simply laughs a little, lips curling into a smile. She shifts in her chair a little.

“I suppose you’re right,” Solfrid muses. “But things have been particularly hectic in the past few weeks. The king-consort has been visiting his family in Aiokari, as is his right, but our High Sorcerer is away as well. With the two of them gone, I find myself lacking my most important advisors.” She sighs. “It’s been difficult, to say the least.”

“I’m sorry,” Eyal ventures. Solfrid smiles wistfully.

She folds her hands in her lap. “I’ve been told that you survived first a mine collapse, then a murder attempt, both of which should have killed you on their own. Is this true?”

Eyal nods.

“And Captain Christensen told you *why* you have been summoned? He hasn’t let you think we mean to peer and marvel at you like some circus freak?”

He nods again. “Ancient Kraznian prophecy.”

“An ancient Kraznian prophecy,” Solfrid echoes. “How ironic, that a Kraznian should tell us of our salvation, and that salvation is to come when we are at war with Krazny itself.

“I have exchanged telegrams with Jakob Rendahl, Vinderheim’s High Sorcerer. As the High Sorcerer, your future lies in his hands.”

Eyal straightens in his chair a bit, smoothing his trousers nervously. If the queen notices, she doesn’t comment on it.

“He knows the Novomeská prophecy better than I, better than anyone else, and he believes you are the deathless warrior it speaks of,” Solfrid continues. “Unfortunately, he’s been in the Brenfel mountains for the past month, consulting with warrior sorcerers on the battlefield. Without Jakob, we cannot move forward.”

“Is he coming back?”

The queen nods gracefully. “In three days’ time. It would be faster, but tomorrow is a holy day. Travel is forbidden. He returns the same day as the king-consort, which means the evening he returns, we shall be holding a ball. I’d prefer that Jakob meets with you as soon as he returns to court, but he’s informed me he’ll do it the next day, as he’ll be preparing for the festivities.” Solfrid rubs her temples. “He’s always been one for splendor. I’d remind him that time is of the essence if I didn’t already know he’d simply brush me off.”

“But you’re the queen,” Eyal says slowly. As far as he knows, queens have always ruled Vinderheim, the crown passing from mother to daughter instead of father to son. Solfrid is supposed to have the ultimate authority.

“Jakob is a sorcerer, and the High Sorcerer at that. He’s occupied the position since my mother took the throne. He plays by his own rules.”

Eyal frowns. Solfrid looks amused.

“It’ll be interesting to see how the two of you get along,” she muses. “Your personalities are... very different, to put it mildly.”

He’s not quite sure what to say in response. Thankfully, Solfrid keeps talking, and he doesn’t have to answer.

“As I said, I can do little in Jakob’s absence,” she says, folding her hands in her lap. “So I suppose that our conversation is at an end. I merely wanted to meet you, to make sure you knew exactly why you were here, and to tell you what happens from here.” The queen gives a faint smile. “As I said: your future lies in Jakob’s hands, not mine. Though I *am* very grateful and thankful that you have been found.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Eyal mumbles.

“You are dismissed.” Solfrid pauses. “And don’t worry about finding your way back to your rooms—I’m sure Hanna has been standing with her ear pressed to the door this entire time, just waiting for you to come out.”

He closes his eyes. “Naturally.”

“Oh, this is just *darling!*”

Leif raises her head from her journal. Sigrid is holding up a pale green gown, staring at it with wide blue eyes. The girl sets it on the bed gently.

“Is that my dress?” Leif asks, a little faint. Sigrid nods eagerly.

“Hanna said she’d picked out a lovely gown for you, but I didn’t think it would be quite so fine!” She clasps her hands. “You’ve just *got* to put it on. I’m sure you’ll look divine.”

“The gala’s not for another hour and a half.”

Sigrid shakes her head, grinning. “Gods, you’re silly. Klara’s been preparing all day long, and I think Hanna might’ve even started last *night*.”

“That seems a tad excessive,” Leif begins, but Sigrid is already pulling her from the chair.

“You’ve got a lot to learn about Lystad, then. Galas are fancy things—we had our dresses tailored *months* ago. Especially this one.”

Sigrid pauses, taking a breath. Leif almost asks her why, but then the girl plows on and she realizes how foolish it was to think Sigrid wouldn’t keep talking.

“The king consort only visits Aiokari twice a year, but everyone says that Queen Solfrid misses him dearly. He’s always gone for three weeks, and when he comes home she throws a grand ball to celebrate his return. It’s very... well, *grand*. Everyone’s always wearing the latest fashions, and the king-consort’s attendants always have the best stories about Aiokari.” She sighs blissfully. “It’s *always* warm there. Can you imagine? No snow!”

“Sounds fascinating.”

“It is, yes. And since the galas only come round twice a year, we’ve got to be looking our best,” Sigrid says, suddenly solemn. Then she giggles. “Usually I’m already dressed by now. The only reason I’m not is because I’ve been spending the day with you!”

“What a pity,” Leif murmurs, and Sigrid just laughs.

She *does* like the girl’s company. Nobody’s ever cared that much about Leif; at least, nobody her age ever has. But Sigrid has been stuck to her like a burr ever since they entered the palace. The day they arrived, she let Leif be. The next was holy day, and Sigrid made sure to sit beside her at worship, whispering all the while. Yesterday the younger sisters went out skating, and Sigrid insisted on dragging Leif along.

The girl is indeed very sweet, and it's rather gracious of her to pay such attention to Leif. But her presence has been *constant*.

Leif would very much appreciate a moment to breathe by herself.

"I assume they sent over a corset and petticoats," Sigrid murmurs, stroking her chin. "Where would they—ah!"

She leans forward, plucking two white cases from the floor with surprising strength and then setting them on the bed beside the dress and its box. The first case contains neatly folded cloth, which Leif assumes are petticoats; the second, a pale, sleek corset. A lump forms in her throat at the sight.

"Sigrid, I..." she hesitates. "I've never worn a corset before."

The girl looks positively shocked. "Really!"

"Really."

Sigrid shakes her head, tutting. "Well, we'll have that corrected in no time. They're not as uncomfortable as some people say, you know. Especially if it's laced up correctly." A bright grin crosses her face. "Why, I could lace it up for you! Vinder knows I've been doing it forever, ever since Hanna started wearing them, and I wasn't yet nine."

"How old are you, Sigrid?"

"Seventeen," the girl replies cheerfully. "Hanna's twenty-five."

Leif nods, tucking this fact away. Sigrid is unfolding the petticoats.

"They've put a chemise and stockings in here as well. Here."

She holds the garments out. Leif swallows, then takes them hesitantly.

"I don't, ah... I don't want—"

"You've got to wear these. You can hardly show up to the gala in your overseer uniform—everyone will think you're a man!"

Sigrid laughs, obviously amused at her little joke, but Leif's blood runs cold. She forces a smile onto her face.

"Very amusing," she mutters. "I just meant that I want to change into the chemise and stockings and such all by myself, see? I'm a... private person."

"Oh! Certainly."

Sigrid curtsies a little, still grinning, and then sweeps out of the room. Leif locks the door behind her.

She changes as quickly as possible. She was being perfectly reasonable, she's sure, but she can't help the little voice of doubt that says Sigrid's suspicious about something.

Leif hasn't been bare in front of someone since she was a child and her mother still insisted on dressing her. As she's aged, her need for privacy has only grown. The idea of someone seeing her, seeing exactly how her body looks, is positively bone-chilling.

She takes the supplements every morning, as prescribed, and she's visited a physician sorcerer thrice yearly ever since she turned eighteen. But her body isn't quite how she wants it yet. It won't be that way for a while. And at this point, somebody could realize exactly why she bristles at being called a man with a single look at her body.

Leif finishes lacing up the stockings, then unlocks the door. "You can come in again."
"Excellent!"

Sigrid wastes no time in dressing her. First comes the corset, which Sigrid first laces up far too tightly, then apologizes and loosens. She does make a comment about how Leif hardly needs shaping, considering her waist. It's both flattering and completely false.

The rest of the clothes are considerably easier to put on. After Leif reassures Sigrid that she can get dressed on her own the rest of the way, the girl leaves to prepare herself for the gala, though she promises to come back and help Leif with the finishing touches.

Once she's in the gown, Leif can't help but stare at herself in the mirror. She hardly recognizes herself.

The corset has pinched her waist into a shape she'd didn't think she could achieve, and the gown's fine embroidery makes her seem more delicate than she is. *I look—*

I look—

"I look like a lady," Leif whispers, happiness slowly seeping through her. She spins the skirt a little. "I look *pretty*."

The dainty slippers are soft and warm, lined with fur on the inside. Leif pulls them on almost cautiously, marveling at the way they're fitted perfectly to her feet.

The girls in the mountains would've killed for shoes like these, and *Leif* is the one who gets to wear them.

She smiles.

"Leif, can we come in? I've brought powders!"

"*Ja*. Door's unlocked."

Sigrid sails in, a bejeweled case nestled in her arms. Klara, quiet as ever, is following closely behind her.

"I'm going to do your face," Sigrid declares, setting the case down on the vanity. "And Klara will be doing your hair. She's better at it than any maid I've met."

Leif peers at the case. "My face?"

“Ah! Powders.” Sigrid taps the case. “I got it for my birthday this year. It’s the finest set of powders Papa could find—there must be a dozen shades of rouge alone. You don’t need very much of it, I daresay. You’re already so lovely-looking. But a dusting of powder wouldn’t do you any harm.”

“Sit,” Klara says, and gestures to the little chair beside the vanity. It takes a bit of effort, but at last Leif figures out a way to sit comfortably despite the stays and the Ovesens set to work.

It takes very little time at all. Leif has her eyes closed throughout the entire process, after a request from Sigrid. It’s a very strange experience. She’s never worn powders before, and the feeling of brushes crossing her face with Klara tugs on her hair is honestly quite unsettling. But Klara is done with her quickly, and Sigrid finishes up almost immediately after.

“Open your eyes,” Sigrid says, not quite able to keep the excitement from her voice. Leif does so cautiously.

This time, she stares at the girl in the mirror for far longer than she would care to admit.

A pale pink paint stains her lips, just colorful enough to be noticeable, and Sigrid has applied the rouge so expertly Leif can barely tell it’s there. It looks perfectly natural—as though she’s been out in the cold all day and has just come back in, face flushed and lips reddened. It ought to look comical, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t at all.

Klara’s done her hair up so intricately that Leif can barely believe it. Her sandy locks have been pulled back into a bun, wrapped round with braids. It’s a style she’s never even thought about wearing, much less attempted, and yet it took Klara less than five minutes to put together. Leif reaches up with a shaking hand, touching her hair gingerly.

Sigrid is rocking on her heels. “Do you like it?”

“I...”

Leif trails off, still staring at her reflection. She touches her lips lightly.

Nobody’s ever done this sort of thing before. Not the girls she grew up with, and certainly not her mother. She’s never even had *friends* to help her with this sort of thing.

“*Takk,*” she manages at last. “*Mange takk.*”

Thank you. Thank you very much.

She pushes herself up from the vanity hesitantly, careful not to damage the petticoats. Sigrid is beaming, still bouncing up and down. Even Klara is smiling a bit.

Leif clears her throat. “Should we be going, then?”

“Hanna is waiting for us,” Klara says quietly, as though the answer is obvious, but she offers Leif her arm like a gentleman would. Sigrid giggles a little and Klara’s smile widens, just a bit; after a moment’s hesitation, Leif grins and takes her arm.

“Lead the way,” she says, drawing herself up and raising her nose in her best impression of Hanna Ovesen. “I’d hate to be late for the greatest gala of the year.”

8.

The ballroom is the grandest thing Eyal's ever seen. It's nearly as big as the entire Sverhul camp, with a domed ceiling and one wall that is made almost entirely out of windows. The *Hvit Ballsaal*, Hanna told him. Marble floors, chandeliers, velvet drapes. The entire room screams of luxury.

And yet the ballroom is nothing compared to the people within it. There must be two hundred nobles in attendance at least, all dressed in finery that would cost an entire year's pay for most folks. Jewels glitter at women's throats. A man in military dress passes them, and Eyal stares after him: the sword at his waist looked to be made from solid gold.

The most impressive are the sorcerers. He counts twenty-one of them, but those are only the ones he can find, and Eyal can hardly see everyone in the ballroom. Each sorcerer wears stiff, embroidered robes over their clothes, and the embroidery is some of the most intricate Eyal's ever seen. The needlework covers not only the sorcerers' hems, but their entire robes, and detailed patterns are stitched into the fabric. Something to do with their magic, most likely. One woman has a pair of snarling wolves sewn into her collar; another has tree blossoms spilling down her back. Eyal spies a male sorcerer with a pair of knives on the inside of his forearms.

He's glad Hanna was so fussy about his clothes. She's had him dressed in a midnight blue suit, a gray waistcoat beneath it and a cravat at his throat. The outfit is stiff and heavy and the cravat tickles his neck, but at the very least he's dressed appropriately.

The Ovesens have their very own table, reserved for them constantly and to the left of the royal family's seating. (Margrit Ovesen is a duchess, Eyal's learned, and that makes her husband a duke and her daughters duchesses as well.) Currently, he and Hanna are the only ones sitting at it. Klara has vanished into the crowd, so silent Eyal didn't even see her go, and Margrit and Henrik have yet to arrive. Sigrid pulled Leif away to the festivities almost as soon as they arrived, chattering about party games. She's sweet, Sigrid.

A serving girl passes by them. Hanna calls after her, voice almost unbearably polite, and the girl doubles back to them.

"Some champagne, if you please," Hanna says warmly. The girl nods.

"How many glasses, madam?"

"Two."

The girl bows, then hurries off into the crowd. Eyal watches her go.

"I don't drink," he mutters. Hanna just laughs.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything. Especially champagne. In Aiokari, they call it *igrochriso*—‘liquid gold’.”

Eyal hums noncommittally, peering at the throng before them. Hanna’s parents have yet to appear, though at least twenty minutes have passed since the evening began, and he cannot see the queen’s elegant profile among the nobles. He glances towards Hanna.

“How soon ’til your parents arrive?”

“Not for some time,” the woman replies. The serving girl reappears, balancing two delicate flutes of champagne on a silver tray; Hanna plucks them up and sends the girl on her way. “Their arrival is announced, you see, and the highest-ranking nobles tend to hang back so they might be announced at once. Countesses, then duchesses, and finally the queen.” Hanna pauses, blue eyes twinkling. “And the High Sorcerer’ll be in the mix, too. *Herr* Rendahl has always been one for a show.”

“Ah.”

“Here.” She hands Eyal the second flute. “It’ll calm your nerves.”

Eyal doubts it, but he tries the drink anyway. The champagne is surprisingly good-tasting, bubbly and light, and he’s quick to take a second sip. Hanna smiles.

“Told you you’d like it,” she says loftily as she sips on her own glass. “Just wait until dinner. Mother’s told me that they’re serving roast hare.”

“Interesting,” Eyal says faintly. “Any other dishes?”

Ruvav do not eat hare, or rabbit for that matter. They’re *Ahel*’s sacred animal, said to be the first creatures created, and thus are highly honored. The *Sepram* says that they are some of the only animals with souls.

Hanna’s face is puzzled. “Of course. Smoked salmon, as always, and Aiokaran swordfish.” She brightens. “Oh, and *oksetunge*.”

“What?”

“Ox’s tongue.”

Eyal’s stomach turns. “Hm.”

Smoked salmon is suddenly sounding very, very appealing.

Hanna glances over at him, face drawn with concern. “Don’t worry,” she says, setting her glass down. “For as... *unusual* as some of the food is, I’m sure you’ll find something to enjoy. Gods know there’s always plenty of it.”

Eyal shrugs wordlessly, taking another gulp of champagne, and scans the crowd. He catches a flash of a rosy gown; a moment later, Sigrid appears before them. Leif is trailing behind her at a much slower pace, holding a slim glass in each hand.

“You’ll never guess who I just saw,” Sigrid gasps, flopping into a chair. Hanna raises an eyebrow.

“Who?”

“Per,” Sigrid replies. She grins widely. “He says he’s ever so happy to be back home, and that he’s missed you, and that he’s looking forward to continuing our skating less—oh, thank you, Leif!”

Leif nods, tucking herself into the seat at Sigrid’s left elbow. Eyal glances at her furtively.

He hadn’t quite recognized her when they first gathered outside of the Ovesen residence. They hadn’t seen each other since they arrived at the palace, and this Leif is quite a different one from the overseer that Eyal knew. He knows he looks different, too—the barber that Hanna had attend to him trimmed his *eyebrows*—but he hadn’t expected Leif to have changed so much. Even her figure’s different.

Sigrid takes a sip. “Anyway. Per said he’ll be coming to see you tomorrow for tea. Being away was absolutely dreadful, he says. He couldn’t even write you for fear that the letters would be intercepted.”

“And how heartbroken I was,” Hanna says drily.

“Who’s Per?” Eyal asks.

“Peter Aalberg,” the woman replies, and downs the rest of her glass. “Have you seen any servers? I need more to drink. Excuse me.”

With that, Hanna smiles lightly and pushes herself away from the table, glass in hand. Eyal glances at Sigrid, who’s practically bouncing up and down in her seat.

“Per—*Peter*—is Hanna’s betrothed,” she explains. “Everyone calls him Peter, really, but he’s always so nice to me that I call him Per instead. He doesn’t mind.” Sigrid tucks a lock of hair behind each ear. “Mama and Papa and the Aalbergs arranged it two years back. The Aalbergs own the Brenfel mines, see, so by marrying Per and Hanna will combine the money. It’ll rival the royal riches, Papa says.” Sigrid gasps a breath. “They haven’t set a date, but I’m looking forward to it. Hanna’s promised me that it’ll be a spring wedding. Not this spring, of course, it’s too close. There’s so many preparations. But hopefully next.”

“And Per’s your friend?” Leif asks quietly. Sigrid’s grin grows, impossible as it seems.

“A very dear friend,” she says. She looks at her lap. “One of my only friends, really. Mama says that I talk too much and it drives people away, but Per always listens to me. He’s very shy, but he—he’ll go skating with me and have tea with me and watch plays with me. He’s even letting me teach him how to sew. I think it’s a very useful skill, no matter who you are.” She

hesitates. “It’s nice. Nobody else ever does it with me, either, except for Klara and sometimes Hanna. So that makes it even nicer.”

Eyal bites his lip. Leif glances at him, then says to Sigrid, “I think Peter seems sweet. It... it’s very good of him to do that.”

“Oh, it is!” Sigrid’s smile returns. Then she hesitates, smile fading, and looks at her lap again. She’s fiddling with her skirt.

“You’re my friend, right, Leif?” she asks quietly. Leif blinks.

“Of course.”

Sigrid lifts her head. “And Eyal, you’ll be my friend too? I know we haven’t seen much of each other, since Hanna’s been so busy with you, but I was hoping...”

“Certainly,” Eyal replies. The girl smiles.

“*Takk mange*,” she says, a little shyly. Eyal can’t help but smile a bit himself.

“The steward says that the nobles will be announced in a minute or two.”

He startles a bit. Klara Ovesen is sitting on Sigrid’s other side, hands folded in her lap. She’d sat down so quietly that Eyal hadn’t even notice her arrive.

“And then *Herr* Rendahl will come in, and then the queen, and then they’ll serve dinner,” Sigrid says. “Eyal, Hanna told you what dinner’s like, *ja*? I told Leif all about it.”

“She did.” Leif smiles humorlessly. “It sounds very interesting. Exactly what a Ruvav man would eat.”

Eyal presses his lips together. “I will be eating the smoked salmon.”

“Why would...” Sigrid begins, and Eyal explains.

“Hare and rabbits are sacred to the Ruvav. We don’t eat them, we don’t kill them, we don’t skin them—in fact, we go out of our way to avoiding harming them. So roast hare is...”

He shrugs. Sigrid looks horrified.

“I’m so very sorry,” she says, perfectly serious. “I won’t have any either, then. It seems cruel to serve something sacred to the Ruvav when they make up part of our population.”

Eyal blinks. “I—thank you.”

He hadn’t expected such courtesy at Lystad, apart from being excused from Vinder worship. Most Vinder ignore the Ruvav, if they don’t outright mock his people and their beliefs. For Sigrid to do such a thing is particularly kind, and in fact, it might be the first time any Vinder person has treated Eyal so.

“Where’s Hanna?” Klara asks softly.

“Went to get more champagne as soon as I mentioned that I’d seen Per,” Sigrid replies. “I’m sure she’ll be back very soon.”

Leif and Klara exchange a glance. Eyal suppresses a smile and looks down at his shoes.

Hanna returns just as the crowd in the room begins to thin. Ivar is at her side, and though Hanna carries her empty champagne flute, Ivar is carrying an almost-full bottle.

“I see you’ve started drinking for the night,” Leif says as the two sit. “Will that be followed by a bottle of vodka, or brandy? Or more champagne?”

Ivar’s mouth twists. “I was carrying it for *fraulein* Hanna.” He slides the bottle across the table with a bit more force than necessary. “And I am a *whiskey* man.”

Hanna fills her glass. “Leif, I think it would amuse you to know that when I found *Herr* Vangen, he was talking to Lady Marina Rosten, and she seemed absolutely *enchanted* with him. Couldn’t stop blushing.”

“You *dog*,” Leif exclaims, leaning forward. Ivar shoots Hanna a glare, and the woman simply smiles and takes a sip of champagne.

“We ought to hush,” she says before Ivar can say a thing. “The nobles will be announced any moment now.”

Ivar’s face simply darkens. Leif, on the other hand, has a terribly gleeful expression. Eyal’s glad he isn’t in Ivar’s place.

The ballroom is quieting. People have settled themselves at tables for the most part, and the few still standing are hurrying to their seats. Eyal can hear murmuring here and there; even so, the room is mostly silent. As if everyone is holding their breath.

Suddenly a sorcerer in a deep red robe stands, her sleeves swinging. “If I may have your attention, please!”

Eyal winces. Somehow, the woman’s voice has been amplified to echo through the hall. She’s a table over, but it sounds as though she’s talking directly into his ear. From the crowd’s expressions, it seems to be the same for everyone else.

Hanna leans over to him. “Synne Sanger. Queen’s herald.”

“We have a number of seated nobles in attendance tonight,” Sanger announces. “Please, welcome the first of them—the Countess Beate Stromberg and her husband, Count Jan Stromberg!”

A woman in a soft blue gown glides through the ballroom’s great doors, holding the arm of a spindly-looking man. Light applause rises from the crowd. The Strombergs smile, then turn away towards their seats.

Sanger gestures towards the doors. “The Countesses Karianne and Kristina Hassel!”

A pair of dark-haired twins, barely older than Sigrid. They curtsy in unison.

The herald continues on in this fashion for some time, the nobles' rankings gradually increasing as Sanger goes on. At last, the herald pauses for breath, then outstretches her arm towards the great doorway once more.

“Duchess Margit Ovesen and her husband Duke Henrik Ovesen, Lady and Lord of Sverhul!”

The couple that enters the ballroom look remarkably similar to their daughters. Margit has Klara's rosy hair and Sigrid's round cheeks, and Henrik's blond locks are the same color as Hanna and Sigrid's braids. They smile as the rest of the nobles have, then move to their table. Neither says anything as they sit, though Margit does give a small wave.

Sanger raises her voice. “*Herr* Jakob Rendahl, the High Sorcerer of the Lystad Court, and Vinderheim's Hallowed Healer!”

Eyal leans forward.

A tall, fair man steps through the doorway, hands tucked behind his back. His short-cropped hair and neat beard are blond, edged with gray. Out of all the sorcerers' robes that Eyal's seen, the High Sorcerer's are the only ones that are black beneath the embroidery.

A detailed anatomical heart has been stitched over each breast with bright red thread. Veins extend outward from each organ, mapping the robe as they would a body.

Jakob Rendahl smiles, then retreats to the royal table, taking the chair to the left of the queen's seat.

“His Majesty King-consort Melanthios Volden, Lord of the Mountains, Son of the Sea, the man whose return we honor!”

Melanthios' clothes are nearly entirely Vinder: a dove gray suit and white waistcoat, pale boots shining at his feet. The only Aiokaran piece is the silver laurel crown perched on his head, which contrasts beautifully with his dark braids. He smiles, waving a fluttering hand at the crowd.

Unlike the rest of the nobles, he doesn't move to his seat, but simply stands waiting. Sanger clears her throat.

“Now, will you please rise for Her Majesty Solfrid Volden, Queen of Vinderheim, Lady of the Mountains, and our glorious ruler!”

The entire ballroom stands at once, applauding nearly before the herald has even finished speaking. Eyal cranes his neck, suddenly grateful for his height, and catches a glimpse of the queen through the crowd.

Solfrid's hair has been pulled back into an intricate bun, a white gold crown framing it. Her clothes are entirely white down to the furs pulled around her shoulders and the slippers just barely visible beneath her hem. Lace climbs up her throat, arranged to look like snowfall.

This gown is tighter than the one Solfrid wore when during their meeting, and for the first time, Eyal realizes the woman is pregnant.

The applause dies after a short time, and Solfrid gestures for them to sit.

She smiles, looking round at the crowd. "It is good to see you all here tonight—good to know that even in wartime, we may join together. I know you are eager to eat, so I will not keep you from the feast. But remember this—be happy tonight. We have a great deal to celebrate."

With this, Solfrid takes her husband's arm and crosses the room to her seat.

Servers descend upon them almost immediately, bringing plates upon plates of the most delicious-looking food Eyal has ever laid eyes on. Mutton, sausages, salmon. The *oksetunge* Hanna mentioned. Not to mention the side dishes—flatbread spread with cheese, soft-boiled eggs, cranberry marmalade. Leif's claimed a large portion of *fiskesuppe*, a creamy fish stew. As he reaches for the bowls of pickled herring that he remembers so well from his childhood, Eyal can almost forget that most people in this hall are feasting on hares.

Still, the meal gives him pause. At Sverhul, the miners were given little more than scraps to sustain them through their grueling labor. Maybe that's why Aryeh sickened so easily. And here, where hardly anyone does a lick of work, the amount of food is almost overwhelming.

Eyal glances down the table at Henrik, whose mustache is wet with vodka, and Margit, who's working her way through a plate of lamb. *They're the ones who get the money when the work's done*, a little voice whispers in his head. *And they and their daughters have a week's worth of food in front of them while the men who break their backs at Sverhul starve in the mines.*

He doesn't have much of an appetite after that. He keeps to the pickled herring and flatbread, and asks for a glass of milk when he's finished his champagne. It's peasant's fare, but Eyal doubts he'd be able to stomach the delicacies before him anymore.

Ivar seems to be having the same dilemma, though he says little through the dinner. The man eats only smoked salmon, occasionally reaching for his glass of whiskey. Near the end of the meal, he glances at Eyal's plate and understanding crosses his face.

The main course dishes are cleared away, and dessert is set before them. Bread pudding. Macarons. Aiokaran walnut cake.

Eyal takes two *pepperkake* cookies. Nothing else.

His stepmother liked baking *pepperkake*, he remembers. She searched long and hard for the recipes, and ginger was always expensive, but she did it anyway. Once, when Eyal was eleven and Meira was nine, they'd asked why she loved it so much. She'd smiled, crouched down in front of them. *Once, when I was a little girl, my mother took me to a bakery. She was so fair nobody knew we were Ruvav, and she bought me pepperkake cookies. It made me happy, you see. I want you to be happy too.*

As he bites down on the second cookie, he closes his eyes and thinks of his stepmother. Eyal hasn't seen her or Meira since he left for the mines a year and a half ago, and letters are few and far between.

He can still see his stepmother at the stove, Meira doing sums at the table. He hopes nothing's changed.

Everything's changed.

"Nothing's changed," Eyal whispers to himself, so quietly no one else can hear him.

As the meal comes to an end, the room grows silent again, heads turning towards the royal table. Eyal glances over himself. The queen drains her glass, then pushes herself from her chair.

"Quiet, please," she calls. "Unfortunately, I do not possess Sorcerer Sanger's capabilities. Quiet."

The last of the chatter dies out. Solfrid sets her gloved hands on the edge of the table, surveying the room.

"We have much to be grateful for tonight," she says. Her voice echoes through the air, and Eyal wonders if a sorcerer has magicked it for her temporarily. "For years, we have struggled with Krazny over our own land, over the mountains *we* have claimed for centuries. This battle drains our resources and our people, and as the years pass, hope has become fleeting." Her face is grim. "I need not tell you of the horrors our soldiers see on the front. Many of you have experienced them first hand.

"This war has stretched on for nine long, long years. As much as it saddens me to say, Vinderheim has suffered in the time since. Our children leave to fight and come back in pieces, if they come back at all; we have never seen such a financial depression. We have lost land. But tonight, I am glad to tell you that soon, *soon*, this war shall be no more.

"Nine hundred years ago, the Kraznian soothsayer Lujza Novomeská delivered what is known as the Prophecy of the Deathless Warrior." Solfrid's gaze is cool. "It tells of a man who cannot die, who will rise during Vinderheim's darkest hour and save our great nation. I am pleased to tell you that three weeks ago, the deathless warrior was discovered."

Eyal feels his blood chill.

“In the Sverhul mountain range, a mine shaft collapsed, burying the thirty men inside. When the bodies were removed, one man was still alive. It should have killed him, but he lived yet. Days later, an assassin attempted to murder him. He survived.”

A gasp shudders through the crowd. Eyal places his head in his hands, heart pounding.

Solfrid’s voice thunders through the hall. “Eyal nat Match is only eighteen years old, but he has exhibited extraordinary powers. He is the warrior that the Novomeská prophecy has promised us, and I am proud to say that he is here with us tonight. Let us see you, *Herr* nat Match.”

“Stand,” Hanna whispers. Eyal pushes himself upwards, hands shaking, and looks out at the crowd.

Every eye in the room is on him.

“He will be trained by our greatest sorcerers,” Solfrid announces. “*Herr* Rendahl has already promised to teach *Herr* nat Match himself. I promise, that with Vinder might and Eyal nat Match, we *will* win this war. Krazny has challenged us on our own ground, yet they have already delivered their own doom. We have found the deathless warrior at last. Soon enough, this war will be but a memory. The Kraznians will be humiliated, Vinderheim shall prove triumphant, and we will reclaim our glory once more!”

A cheer rises, the sound of applause echoing through the cavernous ballroom. Eyal sits quickly. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Solfrid gaze around the room a final time, then take her seat again gracefully.

The king-consort stands. “Please, enjoy the rest of the evening! We have great cause for celebration!”

Cheers erupt anew. People are standing, crossing the ballroom, and Eyal blinks. Hanna glances at him.

“Dancing,” she explains, and offers her arm.

“I think—”

He doesn’t finish, just closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He can still feel eyes on him, can still feel dozens of people staring at him. Eyal can’t tell if he’s being paranoid or if it’s some sort of magic he didn’t know he had.

“I don’t know how to dance,” he mutters, raking his hands through his hair. He doesn’t look at Hanna.

“But you’ve got to! I’ll show you, *ja*? We can start with something simple.”

Eyal shoves himself up from the table. “I have to leave. I’m sorry. I can’t...”

He trails off. He has no idea what to say. Hanna is staring at him blankly, blue eyes wide with confusion.

“I have to go,” he says shortly, and flees.

9.

“Apparently, Jakob Rendahl is two hundred years old, and he’s such a skilled healer he can bring the dead back to life.”

Eyal scoffs, trying to tie his cravat. “Who told you this?”

“Sigrid. Don’t be so loud.”

He looks back at Leif through the mirror. She’s sprawled in one of his armchairs, massaging her temples. She looks fairly like herself again; her sandy hair is pulled back in a simple braid, and she’s swapped the green dress for trousers and a wine-colored waistcoat. She’s wincing.

The gala lasted until well after midnight, apparently, and Leif and the Ovesen girls stayed until the very end. Eyal came back to the residency around nine o’clock. When the others returned, Leif and Klara were considerably drunk, Klara giggling endlessly. (Sigrid is forbidden from drinking until she turns eighteen, and Hanna was as collected as ever.)

Leif has spent the morning sprawled across Eyal’s furniture, alternating between complaining about her hangover and sharing whatever nonsense Sigrid told her at the gala. She’d be in Ivar’s room, she said, but he turned her out as soon as she started bemoaning her headache.

Leif shifts in the chair. “I do know that he’s very old and very talented. Hanna said that no one knows exactly how old he is.”

“He looked like he’s in his fifties.”

“I said to talk *quietly*,” Leif grumbles. “Anyway. He’s Lystad’s Hallowed Healer, remember? His magic is so strong his body heals itself, slows down age. He served Solfrid’s grandmother.”

Eyal tugs on the cravat. “Mm.”

“Do you need help with that? When I was little, my father used to put on cravats for holy days, and—” Leif tilts her head back “—he’d let me tie it sometimes.”

“That would be much appreciated.”

“It’s quite all right, *Herr* nat Match. The High Sorcerer does not require cravats to be worn in his presence.”

Eyal startles, hands tightening on the cloth, and Leif nearly falls out of the armchair. Eyal looks around wildly.

“Sorcerer Sanger?” he calls. Sanger’s chuckle floats through the room.

“I’m at the door,” she replies.

He hurries to open it. Sanger stands there as promised, hands tucked behind her back and a faint smile on her lips. She jerks her head towards Eyal's clothes.

"What you're wearing is fine, really," she says. "Our dress code is not nearly as... fancy as the court's."

Eyal eyes Sanger's clothes. She's wearing a pale gray uniform embroidered with blue, much like military clothes. "What about you?"

The woman simply shrugs.

Leif leans over his shoulder, resting her chin on Eyal's collarbone. "How could you hear us talking?"

"My specialty is amplification, particularly the amplification of sound. I could hear a mouse sneeze at twenty paces away." Her mouth quirks slightly. "And I can quiet or amplify my own voice as necessary. It's why I'm the queen's herald."

"Fascinating," Eyal mutters, and fiddles with his cuffs. Sanger lifts her eyebrows.

"I am not a spy."

"Can you read minds too, then?"

Much to his surprise, the sorcerer laughs, the sound bell-like. "If only. No. No sorcerer has ever been able to do so, despite *many* attempts. Minds are simply too complex to be read like a book." She shrugs again. "Even with magic, there's still a great deal that we haven't figured out yet."

Eyal finishes messing with his cuffs. "I suppose that includes me?"

"Indeed. I've been sent to fetch you." Sanger glances at Leif. "Though the girl will have to stay. The magicless are rarely allowed into the *Hal*."

"Fine with me," Leif mumbles. She rubs her temples. "I am... going to sleep."

"In your own bed."

She groans. "My rooms are too far."

"Leif," Eyal warns, and the girl grins mischievously.

"In my own bed," she echoes. "See you. Have fun with the healer, Eyal."

With that, she pushes herself off his shoulder and leaves, albeit a bit wearily. Eyal watches her go.

Sanger's voice guides him back to reality. "Jakob Rendahl is waiting, *Herr* nat Match."

Eyal shakes himself. "Of course."

The sorcerers dwell in an entirely separate building from the rest of the court. Located just to the east of the main court, it's half the palace's size and built of pale granite. The *Hal av Hellmakt*, Sanger calls it. *Hall of Sorcery*.

Eyal shivers as he steps over the threshold.

From the moment he enters the *Hal*, it's clear that this building is meant to be functional, not luxurious. The walls are made of simple plaster, the floors wooden. The ceilings are plain and unadorned. As uneasy as Eyal feels around sorcerers, he at least respects their lack of extravagance. This is a place for workers, not duchesses.

But despite such simplicity, there's no denying that the *Hal* teems with magic. He could feel it even before he came inside—even around the building, magic is almost a tangible thing. Now Eyal knows what is so odd about the sorcerers, why Sanger's mere presence throws him a bit. Magic runs in their veins and teems beneath their skin to such a degree that it is *palpable*. And in a place like the *Hal*, where sorcerers have practiced their craft for centuries, it is even stronger.

"We have around one hundred sorcerers in residence at any given time," Sanger says, leading Eyal down a corridor. "One hundred *trained* sorcerers, actually. Students aren't included in this count."

"Is it rare, then? To be a sorcerer?"

"Not particularly. It's estimated that one in fifty has the potential for magic, and only one in ninety ever come into their power, but that's a decent amount in a country the size of Vinderheim." She holds a door open for him. "I'd say there's thousands of sorcerers under the Vinder banner. They come to the *Hal* for training, of course, but most don't stay. There's a fair number who learn to heal and then go back home, and there are sorcerer's guilds in Havstol, Guljorde, and Vessfel. And a good deal have been going to the Brenfel range, lately." Irritation flits across Sanger's face. "They come here to train, not to learn. They want to be war heroes."

"Don't we want—"

"Not like them," Sanger replies, cutting Eyal off. "Only certain sorcerers specialize in fighting. We call them furybloods. But since the war began... well. Students come wanting to learn to fight. They're meant to be healers, inventors, botanists, but they'd rather learn to kill." She sniffs. "With the exception of furybloods, magic has never been about killing. For gods' sake, the High Sorcerer himself is a *healer*."

A pair of children dash pass them. They look no older than ten, but they're dressed in the same dove-gray clothes that Sanger wears, and their feet aren't touching the ground. Eyal stares after them.

Sanger keeps walking. “The other side of the *Hal* is a dormitory. Usually children would be in their classes, but every adult sorcerer attended the ball last night. The students have been given a day off while their teachers recover.”

“They were—”

“Not flying. Sorcerers cannot *fly*, *Herr* nat Mateh, whatever folktales say.” A quick smile ghosts across the herald’s lips. “Earthbloods are adept at controlling the air, like those two. Wildbloods can often transform into birds. None can fly in their natural human state.”

“Ah,” Eyal says faintly.

They continue on their way, through a maze of corridors and a few staircases, until they finally come to a stop in front of a smooth oak door.

Sanger doesn’t knock, just opens the door and strides inside. After a moment’s hesitation, Eyal follows her inside, heart pounding. When he glances at Sanger, one of her eyebrows is raised every so slightly.

Damn her hearing.

The room, once he has a chance to look at it, is deeply startling.

The floors are wooden, walls painted eggshell white, and there are a pair of windows opposite the door. Those are the most normal things about it.

Several illustrations have been hung on the walls. All are detailed medical drawings of various areas of the body, done in a detailed hand that spared no gory detail. The lungs. Glistening internal organs. Half of the brain, expertly labeled, with various pieces drawn again outside of the skull cavity, but magnified.

Two stone tables are in the room’s center, just long and wide enough for a tall man to lie on it comfortably. One is empty but for a towel and a tray of metal tools that look like they belong to either a doctor or a butcher.

A body lies upon the second table, bloody and bare. It’s been mutilated so badly that its gender is impossible to tell; the skin of the chest has been pinned back, revealing the chest cavity, and the face is gone completely.

Eyal thinks he might throw up.

Jakob Rendahl is leaning over the lungs, a terrible-looking silver instrument in one hand. He looks up as Sanger shuts the door.

“You might’ve knocked,” Rendahl says, setting the tool down. Sanger shrugs.

“You said you wanted to see the Ruvav boy as soon as possible.”

“I did,” the sorcerer allows. He takes the towel from the second table and wipes his hands. Now Eyal knows why Sanger said a cravat was unnecessary: Rendahl is dressed only in

his shirtsleeves, and the braces that ought to be holding up his trousers are unslung and hanging against his thighs instead. There's blood all down his front, making him look more like a mad murderer than Lystad's High Sorcerer. It's more than slightly unsettling.

Rendahl tosses the towel back to the table. "Sorry about the body. I thought Synne would fetch you later in the day, and I'd have time to finish... this."

He gestures vaguely at the butchery before him.

"Queen Solfrid wants him trained as soon as possible," Sanger says carefully. Irritation passes over Rendahl's face, just for a moment.

"And I would like to finish this autopsy," Rendahl replies. For a moment, there's silence. Then Rendahl shrugs and begins to pack up the tray of tools.

"Well," he says, "he's here anyway. We might as well begin this."

Sanger bows slightly. "May I be excused? I have a personal matter to see to."

"Be on your way."

"*Takk.*"

With that, Sanger exits the room, and Eyal and Rendahl are left alone.

"Follow me," the sorcerer says, turning away. He gestures for Eyal to come after him. "I have a small residency in the palace, so my quarters here are reserved for work, but I have a study. I suppose it will be sufficient for today's purposes."

There's no door separating the mortuary from the next room, merely an archway. Eyal has to duck to pass through it. This room is similar to the first. The only differences are that the illustrations are different, both tables have a body, and these bodies have been covered with a sheet.

"This was an apartment, once," Rendahl says, opening a door. "I had it converted into a workshop instead. Served me better."

"Why so many bodies?"

The man's face tightens. "It's a very long story," he says shortly, and disappears into the doorway. Eyal follows him reluctantly.

The study is thankfully normal, especially after the rooms before it. Three out of the four walls are lined with bookshelves, with a settee pushed up against the third, and a desk in the center of the room. There are no bodies, no horrifying medical drawings. Rendahl gestures to the settee as they enter.

"Sit if you like."

Eyal sits.

“I believe you have magic,” the sorcerer says, without preamble. He crosses behind his desk. “It’s very clear from what you experienced at Sverhul that—gods. Has my shirt been like this the entire time?”

He turns to Eyal, gesturing to the bloody mess that is his shirtsleeves. Eyal nods wordlessly.

“Dear gods,” Rendahl mutters. He flicks his fingers, running his thumb down the fabric, and the blood dissipates from the fabric, leaving nothing but clean white linen behind.

Rendahl shakes his shirt out a final time, then pulls his trouser braces up over his shoulders again. “What was I saying? Ah. Historically, Vinderheim has recognized six orders of sorcery, based on which god their magic leans towards—furybloods, earthbloods, shadebloods, wildbloods, corebloods, and lifebloods. Furybloods, also known as berserkers, specialize in violent magic, and serve Brother Soren. Earthbloods specialize in elemental abilities and serve Brother Jaromír. Shadebloods are best at strange magic; diviners, hedge spells, that sort of thing. They serve Sister Imriska. Wildbloods specialize in magic of the earth, dealing mostly with animals and vegetation, and serve Mother Reinhilde. Corebloods, such as myself and Synne Sanger, work with the mind and body. We serve Sister Agnete. Lifebloods’ specialties are harder to pin down, but essentially, they worked within the realms of life and death, and were particularly skilled at resisting others’ magic. Based on your experiences at the Sverhul camp, I believe you have an affinity for lifeblood magic.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s been dead for years. Least, we thought it was dead.” The sorcerer gestures vaguely. “The last lifeblood sorcerer died three hundred and seventeen years ago, at approximately two hundred years old.”

“Approximately?” Eyal asks, and Rendahl flashes a smile.

“They specialized in life and death, remember. It wasn’t exactly easy to die, and when you live as long as they did, you eventually lose track of your age. I myself stopped counting after one hundred and ten.”

“How old would you suppose you are?”

Rendahl shrugs. “Around one hundred and thirty,” he says. He reaches for a waistcoat that lies folded on the desk. “My body heals itself, as I’m sure you’ve heard. I haven’t aged in decades.”

He buttons up the waistcoat. “Anyway. *Usually*, potential students are tested by sorcerers who share their proficiency. A child that says she can talk to dogs would be tested by a wildblood. But unfortunately and obviously, there are no lifebloods left to test you.”

“Can I leave, then?”

“Do you think the queen would let you leave?”

Eyal drops his gaze to the floor. Rendahl is leaning against his desk, flipping through the book. He strokes his chin.

“In the past,” he says, and stands, “children were tested for lifeblood magic with an enchanted drink.” He sounds as though he’s reading aloud from the book. “A lifeblood sorcerer would put a spell on the drink; if the child was indeed a lifeblood, the drink would have no effect on them. If they were not, they would vomit after drinking.” Rendahl taps the page. “I’d use this method, but the spell is referred to only as an *eksam*, and I have no idea what the technique is.” He slaps the book shut. “Besides, I doubt I’d be successful. I believe it was a lifeblood-specific spell.”

Eyal curls his hands into fists on the cushions. “So how are you going to test me?”

“That is exactly what I’ve been wondering,” Rendahl replies. He strokes his beard. “The book also mentions that twine was used on occasion, but does not detail the procedure. I suppose it’s contained *somewhere*—the Lystad Library contains seven thousand, three hundred and sixty-three books, but we hardly have time to search all of them.” He drums his fingers on the book cover. “What to do, what to do.”

“I suppose you could—”

“Have you read the Novomeská prophecy yet, *Herr nat Match*?” Rendahl interrupts. Eyal trails off.

“No.”

“Excellent. I have a copy on hand.”

Rendahl begins leafing through the papers on his desk. Eyal watches him carefully.

The man doesn’t seem to be entirely *there*. He’s been hospitable enough, and his tone is appropriately serious for the topic, but there’s something off about him. It doesn’t seem to stem from his magic, which is almost overwhelmingly powerful, but something about him is *wrong*.

Maybe it’s the fact that he was leaning over a mangled body when Eyal first met him. Maybe it’s the odd look on his face, as though he can see something Eyal can’t.

(Although, he just might be able to.)

Eyal’s not quite sure what it is. Rendahl seems fairly docile, and fairly lucid but—not quite. Not entirely sane.

“Here,” the sorcerer mutters, opening a slim volume. He runs his finger down the index. “*Nesmertelný, nesmertelný*. Ah.”

Rendahl props the book up on the desk, then begins to read from it aloud.

*“When Vinderheim in turmoil be, a deathless man shall rise
hands marked black and lips mouthing prayers
heart pierced by lion’s claw.
Unto thee he gives deliverance, Vinder savior true,
as Lystad burns and mountains fall,
to his cause he shall stay pure,
and as the heir and beauty perish, their lives he indeed shall save.*

*His lungs of coal, they stand untouched
from the choking darkness that stole so many lives.
Down the mountains he shall come to thy children’s cries.
The usurper tries and fails to win his battered heart, and he holds his head aloft
even as his father falls.
His eyes meet one and then shall learn
the magic long ignored.*

*Thy soldiers! Thy armies! At last they will prevail
to send the foreign generals scurrying and strike foreign forces down.
The enemy falls down dead,
the witches all will kneel.
The deathless warrior leads them now, raven head bowed.”*

Rendahl closes the book almost reverently. Eyal stares at its cover.

“I’m supposed to do all that?” he asks, voice faint.

The sorcerer rises. “If you are in fact the deathless warrior,” he replies. He opens a drawer in the side of his desk and stares inside. “I believe you are. The queen believes you are. When you first came to Lystad, your hands were certainly marked black with coal dust.”

Eyal swallows. “Excellent.”

“Well.” Rendahl pauses. “We still need confirmation. The events at Sverhul... there is a chance, however slim, that they were accidents. I don’t believe they were, but you will always have naysayers. We need absolute *proof* that you are deathless, *Herr nat Match*.” He gives a great sigh. “But as I said before, we cannot use any of the old methods.”

Eyal swallows, smoothing a crease in his trousers. Rendahl’s eyes are fixed on some point in the distance.

“I think I have a solution,” the man murmurs, shifting slightly. Eyal blinks.

“What?”

Rendahl shuts the drawer, leaning on his elbows. “Do you see this knife?”

He holds up a white, ancient-looking blade. Eyal frowns.

“I do.”

“I bought it some sixty years ago,” Rendahl murmurs, turning it over in his hands. “It was carved from the claw of a Kirokan lion. I’ve never had much use for it.” He lifts his head.

“Come here.”

Eyal does as asked. Rendahl shows him the knife, and he turns it over in his hands; it’s very fine, and seem to be made entirely from bone. He wonders how large Kirokan lions grow.

“It’s nice,” he says, handing it back to Rendahl. The sorcerer flips it about in his hands.

“*His heart is pierced by lion’s claw,*” Rendahl murmurs. His pale eyes drift over to Eyal, settling on his sternum.

Eyal only has a moment to garner the man’s meaning.

“I suppose this will serve as well a test as any,” Rendahl says, and then he grabs Eyal by the shoulder and drives the knife into his chest, straight through his heart.

The pain is indescribable.

10.

Jakob Rendahl has served three queens in his time as High Sorcerer: Margareta, Rikke, and finally Solfrid. In all that time, he doesn't think he's ever seen any of them as angry as Solfrid is now.

The woman is doing an excellent job of hiding her fury. Even so, it's slipped out.

"What would we have done if he'd *died*?" she hisses, gripping the table. "What would I have told the court? *The High Sorcerer has killed our only hope?*"

Jakob holds her gaze. "He is not our only hope."

"*He's damn well close!*"

Solfrid takes a deep breath, collecting herself. If Jakob were not as powerful as he is, he reckons he'd be very scared right now.

The queen turns away and walks to the windows. "What if he hadn't lived?" she asks, staring out. "What if he had died? We—we have *no* records stating that protection sorcerers could sustain damage to the heart, and damage that great. There had to have been another way."

"Your Majesty—"

"*There had to have been another way.*"

"Your Majesty," Jakob repeats coldly, "I may remind you that Eyal nat Mateh is *alive*. He is comatose, but he is alive, and he will return to full health. I have Marta Ebbesen tending to his health at the moment, and she is the finest healer in Vinderheim after myself. As soon as I return to the *Hal*, I will repair his heart."

Solfrid turns to face him. "I don't understand why you had to *stab* his *heart*."

Jakob gives a great sigh.

"*Jakob Rendahl*. I am your queen. You will answer me when I address you, *do you understand?*"

"There is a particular line of the Novomeská prophecy," he answers tightly, "that reads 'his heart is pierced by lion's claw'. I had to ensure that he was man the prophecy spoke of, Solfrid. If I hadn't, he would simply be another lifeblood."

"Your Majesty."

"What?"

"You will address me as *Your Majesty*," Solfrid says, voice clipped. "You have called me Solfrid too long. It is time you remember your place."

Jakob narrows his eyes. "I understand."

“From now on, you will discuss all actions concerning Eyal nat Mateh with me or the king-consort before carrying them out, preferably myself. You are dismissed.”

He dips his head in a mockery of a bow. “*Takk.*” Then he adds, “Your Majesty.”

Solfrid looks back to the window. Jakob retreats from the room, then retreats from the palace entirely and returns to the *Hal*.

Eyal nat Mateh has been removed to his residency, where Marta is keeping him steady, though she hardly needs to. Jakob can spare a moment to himself. He makes his way to his rooms and his study, locking each door behind him.

Only then does he remove the book of Novomeská’s prophecies and open it to the page titled *Bojovník Nesmertelný*.

Deathless Warrior.

The book is old, much older than Jakob, and written in the archaic form of Kraznian that Novomeská spoke. Jakob knows a handful of the language, but a Vinder translation has been scrawled in the margin by some long-dead scholar. It’s the most accurate translation he can find, and thus his favorite.

Jakob runs his thumb over the dusty page, studying the scholar’s writing.

*When Vinderheim in turmoil be, a deathless man shall rise
hands marked black and lips mouthing prayers
heart pierced by lion’s claw.
Unto thee he gives deliverance, the Vinder savior true,
as Lystad burns and mountains fall,
to his cause he shall stay pure,
and as the heir and beauty perish, their lives he indeed will save.*

*His lungs of coal, they stand untouched
from the choking darkness that stole so many lives.
Down the mountain he comes to thy children’s cries.
The usurper tries and fails to win his heart, and he holds his head aloft
even as his father falls.
His eyes meet one and then shall learn
the magic long ignored.*

Thy soldiers! Thy armies! At last they will prevail

*to send the foreign generals scurrying and strike foreign forces down.
The enemy falls down dead,
the witches all will kneel.
The deathless warrior leads them now, raven head bowed,
and thy great sorcerer, thy queen's right hand,
shall stand above them all.*

Jakob smiles, running his finger under the last two lines a final time, and shuts the book tightly.

He makes sure to lock it in its drawer before he leaves the study.

11.

When he wakes, the pain in Eyal's chest has lessened considerably, but it's still there. Every breath he takes feels like breathing fire, and his heart *hurts*. He feels a stabbing with every heartbeat, every time the organ constricts, and it makes his head swim.

He lies back on the pillow.

"You're awake," a voice observes. When Eyal opens his eyes, he sees Jakob Rendahl's face hovering above him.

"Go away," Eyal croaks, and shuts his eyes again.

Rendahl gives a humorless little chuckle. "I plan to. I came to knit your heart back together, and to tell you that Marta will be keeping an eye on you for the time being. She'll ensure you make a full recovery, and send you to the *Hal* as soon as you're able."

"And how long will that be, *herr*?" someone asks. Eyal winces at how high her voice is.

"I expect three days. You're an adept healer."

Eyal opens his eyes halfway, glancing about the room. A young woman is standing at his bedside, wringing out a wet cloth. She has a mousy appearance, and is chewing on her fingernails. She doesn't look like a particularly skilled sorcerer; from the look on her face, she doesn't feel like one, either. Rendahl's face is impassive.

"Three days," he repeats firmly.

Eyal shuts his eyes again. Even still, he can't block out the sound of the man's boots clicking against the floor as he leaves.

The healer keeps him on a draught that tastes like too-sweet strawberries over the next few days. It's nothing like the tonic the doctor gave him at Sverhul. Eyal drifts in and out of sleep, lost to the world, and he can hardly tell reality from his dreams.

He finds himself returning to the same vision, over and over and over. He's at home, lying in the porch swing his father built years ago. It's late, a late summer night; he can hear the crickets singing in the bushes. His head is in Aryeh's lap.

They don't talk, don't even move except for Aryeh occasionally raking his fingers through Eyal's hair. They just sit. But the pain is gone from Eyal's chest and his neck and his whole body, and his hair is long again. Aryeh's hands are soft. The callouses he earned from the mines are gone.

A dream. That's all it is. A snapshot of a reality that could never be.

Eyal wishes he could stay in it.

Too soon, the sorcerer tapers him off of the draught, and he returns slowly to the waking world. If he were less proud, Eyal would beg for it back. Reality is too bright, too loud. His chest aches every time he takes a breath, like he's being crushed again, and he can hardly stand it.

The sorcerer fusses over him constantly. *Marta*, Eyal recalls distantly at one point. *Her name is Marta.*

Marta hardly looks older than him, but even in Eyal's weakened state, he can feel her magic. It's strong, nearly as powerful as Synne Sanger's. Clearly, she's been assigned to him for a reason. But even with all her power, the girl can't kill the way Eyal's chest aches, or the phantom pains in his every limb.

He'd ached after the collapse, of course, and badly. But the pain had faded. Eyal hadn't expect it to come *back*.

"It isn't right," Marta murmurs once, when the windows are darkening. Eyal manages to turn his head to look at her.

"What isn't right?" he croaks. The woman actually *jumps*.

"Your heart is repaired," she whispers, once she's collected herself again. "And your body isn't hurt anywhere else." She fiddles with a necklace. "But you're still in a lot of pain."

Eyal shrugs, then winces at the shock that reverberates through his shoulders. "Can you do anything?"

He only realizes his speech is slurred several moments after he's finished talking.

Marta is chewing on her lower lip. "Don't think so. We sorcerers can't numb pain, you see. We can heal you, but you have to rely on the doctors' tonics to take the pain away."

"Good to know," Eyal mutters, and shuts his eyes.

After what feels like weeks but is merely days, he can move on his own. He's glad for it; having Marta tend to his every need had been both embarrassing and deeply uncomfortable. But now Eyal can actually walk, not to mention sit up and feed himself.

(Not that he's *excited* about eating. Marta refuses to allow him anything but bone broth or a dreadful gruel, and Eyal thinks he might actually prefer to eat *oksetunge* by now.)

"You'll see Herr Rendahl again tomorrow," Marta tells him around midday. She holds a bowl out to him. Broth. Eyal grimaces.

"Are you sure I have to see him?" he asks, balancing the bowl on his lap. Marta blinks.

"Of course. The queen herself commanded it."

Eyal sighs and tips his head back. The room is heavy with silence. After a bit, he peers over at Marta again; the woman is staring at the floor with a worried expression, chewing on her collar. She glances over at him, eyes wide, and pulls the fabric from her mouth.

“I don’t understand why you don’t want to go,” she mumbles. “*Herr* Rendahl is the most powerful sorcerer in Vinderheim. It is an honor to study under him.”

Eyal closes his eyes. “He *stabbed my heart*.”

Marta’s voice is a whisper. “He had to make sure you were the prophesied warrior.”

He does not dignify this with a response, simply turns his head to the side and stares out the window.

He wants to go home. His body *hurts*, hurts like it never has before, and Eyal hates it. He would trade every finery under the palace’s roof for the opportunity to go home and see his family again and *stay* there.

Marta murmurs something.

“What did you say?”

The woman clears her throat. “I said that training with *Herr* Rendahl will be a great opportunity. If—if all goes well, you will be able to travel to Brenfel in under two years, and it will only be a matter of time before the war ends. Some people say you will end up a hero, and I, well, I agree. The gods smile on you.”

Eyal snorts. “I doubt that,” he mutters, and Marta flinches.

“Why not?” she persists. “Look at what you have survived. And now you are to be trained by the High Sorcerer, and you will be a hero to every Vinder, and—”

“I worship *Ahel*, not your gods. I didn’t even know who Reinhilde was before I came to Lystad.”

He glances over at Marta. Her mouth has fallen open, hazel eyes wide, and the sight would be laughable if Eyal wasn’t in such pain.

“So,” he says softly. “I can’t learn to be a sorcerer, even if I wanted to.”

As Eyal understands it, sorcerers incorporate their worship into their magical practices. Religious magic is hardly strange—the *ashev*, Ruvav magicians, lace every spell with prayers. But for Eyal to practice Vinder sorcery would force him to worship a god that is not *Ahel*, and that is exactly why his stomach rolls at the thought of becoming a sorcerer.

If there is one thing Eyal nat Match will never be, it is a heretic.

“Have you ever heard of the *ashev*?” he asks.

Marta is chewing on her collar again, but she nods. Eyal shuts his eyes.

“Do you think that there is any chance Queen Solfrid would let me study under an *ashevi*, instead of *Herr* Rendahl? The prophecy never says I’m supposed to be a sorcerer, just that I’m supposed to learn magic.” His heart jolts with sudden pain, and Eyal stiffens. “I want to

help Vinderheim, of course,” he manages. It’s getting difficult to breathe. “But I want to learn my people’s magic.”

Marta’s chair creaks, and the bowl of broth is lifted away. She begins to ease Eyal down into the bed. “You’re straining yourself. You ought—you ought to rest now, so that you’re ready to meet with the High Sorcerer in the morning.”

“Please answer me.”

“You need to stop talking. It’s tiring you.”

“It is *not*,” Eyal says furiously, and grabs her arms to keep himself in place. He grunts; it hurts, but everything hurts these days. “And I won’t stop until you tell me what you think.”

Marta’s gaze darts to his face. “What I think about what?”

“If the queen will let me learn from an *ashevi*.”

The sorcerer is quiet for a long moment, teeth worrying at her lower lip. Finally, she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and pulls the sheets over Eyal’s chest.

“I don’t know,” she whispers, and leans back in her chair. “I’m just a healer. I only talk to the queen if one of the princesses have gotten themselves into trouble and *Herr Rendahl* isn’t around to heal them.”

“But what do you *think*?”

Marta fiddles with her collar, then speaks at last. “I don’t... I doubt she will. *Ashev* training lasts longer than sorcerers’ training, I think. Queen Solfrid would not want to prolong the war.”

Eyal hadn’t expected any other response, really, but the words hit him like a blow. He sinks into the pillows and turns his eyes to the ceiling.

He reaches up to his chest, feeling for his collarbone, and rests his hand on his angel’s eye. It is the only part of his body that doesn’t ache at all.

“We’ll be meeting the inquiry in three days,” Ivar says, folding his hands. “It’s to be led by Henrik Ovesen himself. No one’s told me what they’ll discuss with us. You?”

Leif scowls. “This is the first I’ve heard of it at all.”

“Holmsen and I both received letters.” Ivar reaches into his coat, then removes a folded envelope and hands it over. “Holmsen is scheduled to meet with them at nine, you at ten, and I at eleven,” he says, and settles back into his chair.

Leif unfolds the letter. It’s short and impersonal, barely long enough to be a paragraph. It’s been signed by six separate people, the only legible name *Baron Gustav Engelstad*.

“I suppose mine got lost in the mail,” she mutters. “It’s not as though I’m living in the Ovesen residency.”

“I’m sure they simply forgot.”

Leif does not dignify this with a response, simply folds the letter up again and tosses it in the man’s direction. Ivar’s lips quirk as he takes it.

“You can’t stay long,” Leif informs him, crossing the room to pour them each a cup of tea. “Sigrid’s decided to take me riding today, but she’s apparently abed with a cold.”

“So you’ll be spending the day alone in your rooms, mourning your lack of friends and crying?”

She makes a face at him. “If you must know, Klara rides often, so I’ll be going with her instead.” She hands Ivar a cup. “She’s agreed to teach me in Sigrid’s place.”

“Have you ever ridden?”

“A few times,” Leif says defensively. “When I was younger.”

“By *yourself*?”

She doesn’t answer. Ivar raises his bushy eyebrows, and Leif sticks her tongue out at him.

“Klara will have her hands full,” the man remarks, bringing the tea to his lips. “You’re hardly graceful on your own two feet. Let’s add a horse to the equation and see how you do.”

Leif points to the door. “Get out.”

The day has dawned bright and clear, an inch or two of snow coating the ground. Leif slips her scarf over her nose. Beside her, Klara is wrapped in a sable coat, trudging through the snow silently. Her clothes are a stark contrast to the elegant skirts Leif has seen her in thus far—she’s traded her dresses for a blouse and riding breeches, her slippers for polished black boots. She looks less like a duchess and more like a soldier heading for Brenfel.

The Ovesens have five horses of their own: a great black stallion named Kobolt, two white ponies called Sokker and Sko, a gray mare known as Tage, and Klara’s caramel-colored horse, Sukker.

“You ought to take Tage,” Klara says quietly, stroking Sukker’s neck. “She’s the gentlest.”

A stablehand helps Leif with saddling the mare, as she hasn’t the slightest idea how to do it, and reassures her that she’ll learn it on her own soon enough. Leif has her doubts, personally. Klara was able to take care of Sukker in less than five minutes, and by the time Tage was properly saddled, Leif had spent about seven staring at the stablehand’s deft fingers without comprehending a single step.

And then, they ride.

The stables are to the east of the palace, a few hundred meters away from the forest just north of Lystad. Snow has been cleared from the yard behind the stables, and there are a few paths leading into the trees that have been shoveled as well. The yard is big enough for Leif. It's perhaps two hundred feet along each side, and for someone who has ridden so rarely, it's the perfect size to get used to simply riding a horse.

She and Klara don't speak much, even as the sun climbs to its highest peak and then begins to dip down again. Leif is focused on trying to keep control of Tage, though it's hardly difficult: the horse is content to stay at a slow trot that's barely any faster than a walk. Sukker, on the other hand, is circling the yard at all different speeds.

Eventually, Klara pulls up beside Leif. "Sukker is irritated," she says, keeping pace with them. "She doesn't like to stay in the yard. I'm taking her on one of the trails, and I think that you ought to come along."

Leif's heart drops. "I—I only just learned how to control Tage."

"You're very good for a beginner," Klara replies. "And Tage goes on the trails often. I'd take the easiest, of course."

For all her silence, Klara is not a woman to challenge. Leif considers the idea for a moment, then nods her assent.

Taking the trail is remarkably easy. True to her word, Klara has chosen the simplest route, and Tage trots along amiably. Leif hardly has to use the reins. Once, the horse stops to inspect a leafless bush, and all it takes is a light tug on the reins to turn her back on track.

The ride is quiet, peaceful. In the forest, Leif can almost forget that she's in Lystad; it's remarkably similar to the woods at home, the sort she played in as a child. She's almost sorry to leave them behind.

"Better than I expected," she admits, as the horses emerge from the trees. A smile ghosts across Klara's face.

"I told you," she says, and Leif shrugs.

"Tage's what made it easy. She could walk that path blindfolded."

They take the horses to the stables again, dismount and remove the equipment. The stablehand helps Leif with hers again.

When they're done, Leif turns and finds herself nose-to-nose with a brown-eyed, blond young man.

"You're in my way," the man says, with an almost tangible arrogance. Leif raises her eyebrows. She's standing in Tage's stall, not in the middle of the walkway.

"Are you going to ride this horse, too?"

Irritation crosses his face. "Of course not. I need to speak with Valter. Move."

Leif is not an unreasonable person. Usually, she would move to the side with a smile and a muttered apology. But this man has an absolutely insufferable air about him, an entitlement that Leif has rarely known. He's talking to her as though he would a child.

So Leif folds her arms across her chest and roots her feet to the ground.

"Unfortunately," she replies, "I have to leave. So if you'd kindly step aside, I'll be on my way and you can talk to Valter."

"There's plenty of room for you to move already."

"I can't get out," Leif answers. She eyes the man critically, and is sure to make it obvious enough that he notices. His brown eyes narrow, and he opens his mouth to speak when a voice comes carrying across the stable.

"Gunnar, what in Reinhilde's name are you doing?"

A bespectacled man appears around the side of the stall, pale brows furrowed in confusion. He clicks his tongue in distaste.

"Take a step back," he chides. "Let the lady out."

Gunnar huffs, but he does as the man says. Leif smiles cheekily and follows him into the walkway.

"*Takk*," she says, sweetly polite. "That's all you had to do. Now you can talk with Valter if you like."

Gunnar scowls. "Valter," he calls, and the stablehand comes out of Tage's stall. "Valter, there's something wrong with Kjaere's saddle. I need you to take a look at it."

"I do apologize," the man in spectacles tells Leif, as Gunnar and Valter walk away. "Gunnar's perfectly civil, usually, but sometimes he can be... irritable. He has bad days."

"Don't we all," Leif replies, and the man smiles. He offers her his hand.

"Geir Engelstad. Lovely to meet you."

"Likewise." She shakes his hand. "Leif Isaksen."

"Isaksen?" Geir asks, pushing his spectacles up. "The Isaksen from Sverhul?"

"*Ja*. I'm staying with the Ovesens, and Klara came to take me riding. Klara?"

The woman appears at Leif's side, dusting her hands off. "I was giving Sukker a treat," she says, and peers at Geir. "Geir Engelstad?"

"Klara Ovesen," Geir replies. Klara dips her head, then folds her hands in her pockets.

Geir turns to Leif. "My oldest brother is on the committee leading the inquiry into the collapse," he tells her. "His name's Gustav. He says he's looking forward to meeting you."

"I'm sure he is," Leif says, but Geir is already glancing past her.

“I’ve got to go meet with Gunnar,” he says, staring at something beyond Leif’s face. “He’s been looking forward to going riding for so long, and I promised I’d take him. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course.”

Geir flashes a quick smile, then passes them and heads for his brother and the stablehand. Klara takes Leif by the elbow silently and leads her from the stables.

“Geir Engelstad seemed nice enough,” Leif remarks, when they’re about twenty feet from the palace. “Even if his brother is a bit of a prick.”

Klara tugs her collar up. “Gunnar has troubles,” she says. She does not elaborate.

“What sort of troubles?”

“Ah... head troubles.” The woman gestures aimlessly. “He went away to war some years ago. They sent him back this spring.”

“What happened?”

Klara shrugs. “No one knows. He won’t speak of it.”

Odd, Leif wants to say, but she’s seen some of the soldiers who’ve come back home. Most are quiet about the time they spent fighting, their eyes going hollow when people ask about it. Some turn to drink, others smoke. A few return utterly transformed, a shell of the person they were before they left.

They stop in front of a pair of doors. Klara pauses a moment, hand lingering on the knob. When she speaks, her voice is barely above a whisper.

“He didn’t come back right,” she murmurs.

With that, Klara pushes the doors to the palace open and disappears inside. Leif stands in the snow for a few moments longer, trying to garner what the woman means.

12.

The first thing Draha notices when she enters the throne room is that it's covered in flowers.

This had been expected. Queen Alzbeta's demanded a display of her power before she's sent to Frodje, and plants are the easiest way for Draha to illustrate what she can do. What she *hadn't* expected was that the room would be covered from floor to ceiling in pretty blossoms and creeping vines, the walls and pillars almost completely obscured by greenery.

Draha tilts her head back, closing her eyes for a moment. Despite lacking any sort of roots or earth, the flowers are, in fact, still alive. A wildblood stands in the corner of the room, eyes glowing and a single hand outstretched as he extends the flowers' lives.

Even the dais at the room's end is covered in blooms. Queen Alzbeta sits in the center, face impassive as she drums her fingers on her armrests. Princess Ilona, heir to the crown, sits at her right, while Prince Timotej waits at Alzbeta's left. All three thrones are adorned with lilies and roses, the white and red of Krazny's flag.

The king-consort's chair is empty as ever.

Draha swallows, throwing her shoulders back. She's been in front of the royal family countless times before—hell, she and Timotej have been nearly inseparable ever since Draha came to the palace. Today should not feel any different.

Ružena walks at her side. The two of them are dressed in formal uniform, Ružena's embroidered with shadeblood black, Draha's with lifeblood white. She takes Draha's hand in her own and squeezes encouragingly.

"You'll do fine," Ružena whispers, without even looking Draha's way. "You've been training for this moment for years."

"I thought I was training for battle," Draha whispers back. Ružena's lips curve in a smile.

"That too."

They reach the dais and bow. Though Draha stays where she is, Ružena climbs the stairs and kneels at Alzbeta's feet, one fist over her chest and one folded behind her back. The queen smiles, if only for moment.

"My queen." Though light, Ružena's voice cuts through the room as sharply as a knife through butter. "You have asked as to whether or not Drahomíra Vysoky's power is truly as great as claimed. She has come here today to prove that it is indeed."

Alzbeta's flinty gaze suddenly turns to Draha, pinning her in place. "Does General Király speak the truth?"

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Very well.” The woman leans back in her seat. “You may begin.”

Ružena stands, crossing the room to the wildblood, and whispers in the man’s ear. The wildblood’s hand falls, the light in his eyes goes out, and Draha inhales deeply.

The change is nearly imperceptible, but there nonetheless. No longer supported by wild magic, the plants have begun to wither ever so slightly. Their life will sap in a few hours’ time at the most.

Not if Draha has anything to say about it.

“Brother Soren, you have blessed me with your power,” she says softly, speaking in ancient Kraznian. “May my actions please you.”

She sweeps her arm through the air. The flowers shrivel, vibrant colors disappearing as they curl and blacken, as though burned. Within moments, not a single petal in the entire sea of blossoms has any life left in it at all.

Draha can taste the death in the air.

“Impressive,” Alzbeta murmurs. “But can you do more than kill flowers?”

Draha huffs in annoyance. She flicks her hand, and the flowers suddenly spring back to life, their sweet scents filling the air once again. Both Timotej and Ilona’s eyes widen with surprise.

The queen seems unaffected.

“These are only flowers,” she says. “Not soldiers.”

Ružena seems riled for the first time. “My queen, if I may—this is simply an example of Drahomíra’s power. We did not want to risk any Kraznian lives.”

“There are prisoners in the dungeons, are there not?”

Ružena hesitates, eyes flicking towards Draha. Draha feels her skin crawl.

She hasn’t killed a person, not yet. It is an inevitability, but Ružena has always wanted to wait as long as possible.

Alzbeta is still tapping her armrests, still expectant. An idea flits across Draha’s mind.

She closes her eyes. She can still taste death in the air, of course, but she can also taste life. There is plenty of it.

“Prince Timotej, there is a rat beneath your chair. If you could remove it?”

Timotej squeaks, but he still reaches beneath his seat. After a moment, he pulls out a sizable rat, hanging by the very tip of its tail from the prince’s fingers.

Draha smirks. “Thanks.”

She snaps her fingers. The animal is suddenly flung from Timotej's grasp, squeaking frantically as it sails through the room, and it lands several paces behind Draha with a terrible crack. It is very much dead.

Draha flicks her wrist. The rat's body rises into the air and comes to hover between her and the royals, quivering. She takes a deep breath.

Brother Soren, allow me to give what I have taken.

She brings her other hand up. The rat jerks. Suddenly it is squeaking again, beady eyes wide with terror as it spins slowly.

"Kill a rat," Draha says clearly, "and I can bring it back to life."

She drops her hand, lowering the rat gently to the ground. Alzbeta has leaned forward in her seat.

"Can you do that with humans?"

"No, my queen," Ružena says, before Draha can reply. "Necromancy is easy enough with animals, but far too difficult with people. Draha would be capable of reanimating the body, but it would be little but a shell of the person it once was. She cannot call souls back from the dead."

Draha frowns. Never has she attempted to bring someone back to life, which means Ružena must be lying through her teeth.

But Alzbeta seems satisfied enough with this explanation. "Very well. What else can you do."

Draha smiles. "A great deal, Your Majesty."

"Show me."

A thrill runs through her veins. Never has she been able to demonstrate her power, never has she truly shown what she can do—

"That will not be necessary, my queen."

Ružena's face is cold, hands behind her back. Draha deflates.

Alzbeta raises an eyebrow. "And why not, general?"

"Draha's abilities can be... messy. I would prefer not to damage the throne room."

"It's no trouble," Alzbeta replies, smiling. "We have plenty of servants to clean it up. Besides, I find myself... intrigued."

Draha glances Ružena's way. The woman's jaw is locked, and though she's clearly trying to mask her displeasure, she can't conceal it completely.

"If General Király would like me to stop," she says quietly, "I would be willing to."

"Nonsense. I want to see what you can do."

Draha nods, smiling, and closes her eyes once more.

There are bones plenty in Ilazovna, some buried beneath the ground, others hidden elsewhere. A few have been laid to rest in the chapels, the remains of great dedicantes who served the gods well. Draha ignores them all, looking for the bones of an animal rather than a human.

She finds a blackbird, dead two years past with its corpse left in the gardens. Draha inhales, reaching with her mind, and pulls.

It's only a moment before the bird's bones appear outside the throne room's window. Draha jerks her hand, splitting the glass apart, and the bird's skeleton comes tumbling in, its wing bones fluttering just as they would have in life.

Rats. A fox. Three crows, fallen together. Draha calls them all and more, blood thrumming in her veins as she raises their bones, and soon there is a menagerie of skeletons running through the throne room, their well-worn joints cracking together in the silence. Draha smiles, driving them faster, faster—

She balls her hands into fists. The bones freeze where they stand, still once more. Even the birds' bones are frozen in the air.

There is silence for a moment. Then, Alzbeta speaks.

“You can raise these bones. Can you raise the dead?”

Draha hesitates, gaze flicking to Ružena. The woman's face is blank, head bowed. She does not meet Draha's eyes.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Draha takes a deep breath. “I could raise their bones.”

“Only their bones?”

She hesitates. “I have never tried to raise their spirits. I think Brother Soren might balk at that.”

Alzbeta nods, chin in hand. “Somehow I doubt that this is all you can do. What else?”

“I...”

“Tell me.”

Draha nods, pulling herself up to her full height. “I cannot die. I can cast protective spells around our soldiers, so they might be safe from harm. I can resist magic. I can keep the dying alive, even when they ought not to be. I can—”

Ružena coughs.

“I can do a great many things, Your Majesty,” Draha finishes quietly. “Far too many to list.”

Alzbeta nods, fingers drumming once again. She leans back in her chair.

“Your power is impressive. General Király had told me of your gifts, but I had never imagined...” The queen trails off, face thoughtful. “What you did with the flowers. Could you do the same with soldiers?”

“Of course.”

Alzbeta smiles wickedly.

“You have my blessing,” she says. “You may go to Frodje.”

Draha’s heart leaps. She bows quickly, low enough that her braid scrapes the ground.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I will make Krazny proud.”

“I am sure you will, Drahomíra. I am very sure you will.”

13.

Sanger comes to collect him around two in the afternoon. She's carrying a slim wooden cane, and though Eyal shakes his head when she offers it to him, she presses it into his hands anyways.

"Queen Solfrid is worried about your health, *Herr* nat Match," the herald says. "I remind you that you were bedridden only yesterday."

As it turns out, Eyal finds he's grateful for the cane. He hadn't realized exactly how difficult it was to walk, even with his pain having receded; by the time they reach the *Hal*, he's leaning heavily on it. Sanger is silent the entire way, but there's a hint of a smile on her lips.

Eyal turns to go down the hallway they took when he first came to the *Hal*, but Sanger puts a hand on his shoulder and steers him in the other direction without explanation. Soon enough, they arrive in front of a pair of black doors. Two guards stand outside silently, dressed in the royal uniform.

"Eyal nat Match," Sanger says, gesturing. One of the guards nods, then pulls the door open and ushers Eyal inside.

The room is far more lavish than anything he's seen in the *Hal* so far. The floor and ceiling are made of limestone, a picture window adorning the back wall. There are several portraits hanging on the others. A pair of couches are arranged neatly in the center, with a table between them, and a tea tray has been set upon it.

Queen Solfrid is curled on the couch opposite the door, cradling a teacup in her hands. Jakob Rendahl sits beside her with a bored expression.

"Good afternoon," Solfrid says, by way of greeting. She sets her tea down. "Please, come sit. I would hate for you to strain yourself."

"*Takk*," Eyal mumbles, and makes his way over to the second couch. He can feel both Solfrid and Rendahl's eyes tracking him as he moves. It's considerably unnerving.

The queen's gaze lingers on the cane. "I trust your recovery has been going smoothly."

"As smoothly as it can, Your Majesty."

"For that I am grateful," Solfrid replies, and folds her hands in her lap. "I hope that you will be able to leave the cane behind soon enough—*Herr* Rendahl, do you think that is likely?"

Rendahl nods slightly. "In a matter of days, I believe, although I cannot be certain. We will have to see how *Herr* nat Match continues to heal."

"Of course, of course."

Solfrid smooths her skirts, while Rendahl reaches for the tea. The air is considerably tenser than Eyal had expected it to be, certainly far tenser than it was when he met each of them separately. Perhaps their relationship is more strained than he had thought.

“Thanks to the High Sorcerer’s testing, as... *unconventional* as it was,” Solfrid says, “we can now assert that the Novomeská prophecy was written about you. Your training will proceed as we originally intended, with *Herr* Rendahl as your primary teacher.” She glances at Rendahl out of the corner of her eye. “If you have any *concerns* about your training, however, please bring them to me. I would like to address them myself.”

The emphasis she places on *concerns* is unmistakable, as is Solfrid’s current disdain for Rendahl. It’s plain to see that the sorcerer hasn’t missed a bit of it.

“Of course,” Eyal says, laying the cane over his lap. Solfrid smiles slightly.

“I’m afraid I must leave,” she says, placing her teacup in its saucer. “I have a meeting with certain generals about the front. I expect the two of you to keep discussing the training, of course—I intend for *Herr* nat Match to begin his studies as soon as possible.”

She rises, graceful even though she has to lean on the couch’s arm for support. Rendahl stands, offering her his hand, but Solfrid simply shakes her head.

“I have some materials to fetch,” Rendahl says, once the queen has left. He toys with the tassel of his coat. “If you’d like, Synne could take you on a tour, or you may remain here instead if you prefer. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to see the *Hal* in the future.”

Eyal considers it. “I’ll stay.”

“I don’t blame you. Excuse me.”

Rendahl leaves, and the room is thrown into silence. Eyal closes his eyes, leaning against the back of the couch.

His pains have faded considerably, especially compared with yesterday’s episode, but there’s still an omnipresent ache in his chest and arms. His breaths rattle in his lungs. Dully, Eyal wonders if this is how Aryeh felt before his sickness became truly serious.

He reaches up for his angel’s eye again, tracing the lines. They’re warm to the touch, warmer than the rest of his skin.

“*Ahel, tashmiv elei,*” he whispers, quiet enough that he can barely hear the words. “*Reba at hept’eim, shil valhiq ehkab shil shela.*”

Ahel, watch over me. Heal my wounds and ease my pain. An old prayer, one that children learn before they can even write, but a good one. Eyal can remember he and his sister chanting it countless times as their stepmother bandaged scraped knees or kissed bruises or, on

one memorable occasion, while their father stitched Meira's thumbnail together after it cracked all the way down the middle.

Eyal exhales, massaging his chest. Hopefully the aching will be gone by the end of the day.

The door opens again, startling Eyal into sitting up. When he peers over his shoulder, Rendahl is there as expected; only, he is carrying a rather heavy-looking stack of books in his arms, and his expression is one of concentration. He crosses the room to the couches, then sets the volumes down on the table.

"Reading material," the sorcerer says, dusting off his hands. "You're not particularly familiar with the ways of Vinder sorcerers, are you?"

Eyal shakes his head. Rendahl smiles for a moment and perches on the couch again.

"I thought as much. This discusses traditional Vinder sorcery—" he holds up a slim, red book—"these talk about protection sorcerers, though the blue one is more accurate, as it was written in their heyday—" a navy blue volume, and a green one embossed with silver shields—"and this is prescribed to all beginning sorcerers, and is easily applicable to all studies." A black book, much thicker than any of the others. Rendahl stacks the four on top of each other, then pushes them to the side.

He taps the other books. "These, I will instruct you to read as needed. Can you read Vinder?"

"A bit. Not well."

"We'll have to find you a tutor," the man muses. "I'm sure I can find someone, or—"

"I know the perfect person to do it," Eyal interrupts. Rendahl's pale eyebrows lift.

"Really? Who?"

"Leif Isaksen," he lies, after a moment's hesitation.

Eyal has no idea if Leif would be a good teacher, or even if she'd be willing to tutor him. But out of anyone in Lystad, she's the one Eyal knows best, and he isn't exactly eager to study with someone of Rendahl's choosing.

He smooths his trousers. "I can ask her when I get back to the residency. I'm sure she'll say yes."

Rendahl blinks. "Well, that's that matter settled, then," he says after a pause, and leans back against the couch. He crosses one leg over the other.

"We'll begin your training with some basic ideas," he tells Eyal. He gestures aimlessly. "Control tests, breathing exercises, that sort of thing. Now—I know it sounds childish, but it's

how every student starts, whether they're three or thirty. Magic is fueled by emotion. The sooner you learn to control your emotions, the sooner you learn to control your gift."

"I can control my emotions perfectly fine."

"Can you?"

Eyal simply stares back at him. For a long moment their eyes remain locked, blue against brown. In the end, Rendahl is the one to break: he looks down, reaching for his teacup, and dumps an impressive amount of sugar into it.

"Nevertheless, that is what we'll begin with," he says, stirring the tea. "And you'll study sorcerer traditions surrounding Søren, of course. He is the patron of life and death, so naturally, he was the god protection sorcerers chose to honor." Rendahl smiles lightly. "Healers honor him, as well."

Eyal feels as though someone has grabbed his heart with an icy fist. He leans his cane against the couch, touching his tattoo again.

"I can't study sorcery," he says. Rendahl blinks.

"And why the hell not?"

"I'm not Vinder," Eyal replies. "I don't—I don't worship Søren, or the rest of your pantheon. I worship *Ahel*. For me to practice Vinder sorcery, and honor Søren, would be heresy."

And I cannot, will not, shall not be a heretic.

Rendahl rests his hand in his chin. "So what do you suggest you do instead? The prophecy is very clear in saying you will study magic."

"I should study with an *ashevi*. A Ruvav magician. I can fulfill the prophecy, but I don't have to violate my beliefs."

"*Ashev* training takes years."

"I think they could be persuaded to make an exception. My people are devout. I think that any *ashevi* or any priest you found would be willing to shorten my training, if it meant I could stay true to my faith."

Rendahl is silent, circling the rim of his cup with a finger. Eyal takes a deep breath.

"If you were in my position, would you want to worship a foreign god?" he asks quietly. A thoughtful expression slides over the sorcerer's face.

"I will speak to Solfrid about it," he says at last. Eyal's heart leaps.

"*Mange takk*," he says, but Rendahl holds up a hand.

"I said I would speak to the queen. I cannot guarantee anything. If it were my decision, I would be more than willing to consider the idea, but all choices concerning your training are to

be Solfrid's." Rendahl pauses. "She wants this war to end. Desperately. If that means you must violate your faith, I believe that is a sacrifice she is willing to make."

Eyal bites his lip. "Of course."

Ahel, tashmiv elei.

When he returns to the residency, Sanger accompanying him once more, Hanna Ovesen is waiting there for him. She's holding a rough brown envelope and smiling kindly.

"This came for you," she says. She extends the envelope towards Eyal. "At least, we think it came for you. It was forwarded to the palace from the Sverhul mines, and no one else can read Ruvav."

Eyal takes it, examining the writing on the back. It's done in an untidy hand that he knows well, and the name on the return address simply confirms the writer's identity.

"I was thinking we could—" Hanna says, voice distant, but Eyal holds up a hand.

"Please, excuse me. This is from my—my best friend. I have to read it."

Hanna trails off, blinking. Eyal gives her an apologetic smile, then hurries into his rooms. He's already torn open the envelope and taken out the letter inside by the time the door shuts behind him.

It's only a page, but the front has been covered completely and the back halfway. Eyal slides into a chair.

Dear Eyal,

You haven't written me yet. I'm disappointed in you—you promised you would, but it's been almost two months and there hasn't been a single word. I'm hoping that your letters got lost in the mail.

You asked me to tell you how I was doing. I'm doing better, I think. I'm not coughing up dust anymore (but to be fair, that stopped days after I left the mines) and it doesn't hurt to breathe so much. It still hurts, but only a bit, and only when it's very cold outside. I'm strong enough that I can walk around. Chava (my older sister) won't let me work, but I will soon, Ahel willing.

Now.

How are you doing? Two months is an awfully long time to go without seeing you. I suppose that most days are the same, but there's got to have been a few exciting things. Is Sunny faring well? Please tell me she is. And how is Axel? He was the only other one besides you who was always kind to me. Tell him that I wish him all the best. I must confess, I don't

miss the mine all that much. It's so much warmer back home, I'm not coughing nearly as much, and I can pray again. Chava has even let me go to the temple a few times.

I hope that the cold isn't terrible. It was awful last year. Remember those men who froze to death in their tent because they didn't have anything to keep them warm, just their clothes? I felt so bad for them. You better be keeping warm, even without me there. I don't think I could bear it if I found out you died at the mine.

Can I tell you something? I miss you terribly.

Sometimes, I wake up and think you're there, and it's so disappointing to realize you aren't. My sisters and Abba and Eli are sick of you, I talk about you so much. I worry about you a lot. I'm afraid that you'll get sick, too, or you'll strain yourself, or that there will be an accident in the mine.

Please write to me. It's awful without you around, and waiting for word from you has been just as bad. I don't want anything else, really. Just a letter from you. It would mean so much.

I wish you all the best, and I hope you keep yourself safe. I know how reckless you get. Write to me.

Sincerely,

Aryeh

P.S. I can't sing without hurting myself. Isn't that a shame? I miss it so, even if my voice really was terrible.

Eyal finds he's smiling like a lovesick schoolboy.

But his eyes rake over the letter again, and the smile fades from his face. He traces Aryeh's handwriting solemnly.

Is Sunny faring well? How is Axel?

Clearly, word of the accident has not yet reached Aryeh's southern home, at least not among the Ruvav. The idea of breaking the news in a letter makes Eyal want to cry, but he cannot possibly leave Aryeh in the dark. He owes the boy that much.

(Actually, he owes Aryeh a great deal.)

I miss you terribly.

Eyal closes his eyes. "I miss you too," he whispers, the words deafening in the silent room. "I miss you so much."

Slowly, he reaches for a piece of paper and a pen. An inkwell has been set upon the desk already. He dips the pen in the black ink, then pauses, mulling over what to say.

Dear Aryeh, he writes, and relishes the way the nib sweeps over the paper. He'd forgotten how much he loved writing in Ruvav.

How badly I miss you.

The Ovesens typically take supper together in Margit and Henrik's dining room. And, as Leif has come to find out, any and all guests staying in their residency are invited to join. She has made an appearance every night since she arrived at Lystad, as has Ivar. Peer Holmsen has skipped it more often than not. Eyal has generally made an effort, but lately has been absent from the table.

Henrik Ovesen is often missing as well. Ivar asked once, and Margit said it was because of the man's busy schedule. Tonight, Leif is glad for it: she's not sure she'd be able to make it through the meal knowing that she had been snubbed by Henrik's committee, while Holmsen and Ivar were treated perfectly well. Ivar wasn't even overseeing a team. It was Leif's men that were lost in the mine, and yet she was the one who was ignored.

The table is unusually quiet tonight. Sigrid is too sick to attend, and Margit, though chatty, is unable to fill the space her daughter has left. Eyal has made his first appearance in days, but he simply picks at his roast pork silently. The whole meal has an air of awkwardness about it. By the time it ends, Leif is glad to go back to her rooms.

Eyal catches her by the arm on the way out. "Can we talk?" he asks quietly, and Leif nods.

They end up in Eyal's rooms, since his are the closer ones. Eyal closes the door carefully, then leans against the wall.

"So?" Leif asks, tapping her thighs. "What do you want to talk about?"

Eyal's gaze is fixed on the floor. "It's a bit embarrassing. I..."

He clears his throat. "I'm supposed to study with Jakob Rendahl," he mumbles. "He gave me a load of books to read. Only—I don't know how to read. Vinder. I don't know how to read Vinder."

"Oh," Leif says, after a second. Eyal glances at her.

It's not a particularly shameful admission, though she can understand why he'd be embarrassed by it. A fair amount of people can't read. Leif only knows because her mother was determined to have a bright, shining overseer for her child, and that wouldn't have been possible if Leif were illiterate.

"Anyways. I told Rendahl that I don't know how to read Vinder, and he said I'd need a tutor. He said he'd find someone for me, but I didn't really want *him* to appoint someone. I told

him I knew the perfect person, and when he asked who it was, I ended up spitting out your name.”

Leif blinks. “Ah.”

“Yes.”

“You want me to teach you how to read?”

“I would,” Eyal mumbles. His face has gone red. “If you want to. Do you?”

“Of course.”

Eyal exhales. “Thanks,” he says, leaning against the wall more heavily than before. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you’d said no.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Leif says, smiling a little. “At the very least, it’ll give me something to occupy my time.”

Since it doesn’t seem like the inquiry will be taking up all that much of it.

She slides her hands into her pockets. “So. How soon should we start?”

“Tomorrow, maybe? Or the day after.” Eyal’s brow is furrowed. “Rendahl has to talk with the queen about—something, so we won’t be starting my training for a bit. But I want to start learning as soon as I can.”

“Day after tomorrow is holy day,” Leif muses. “Does tomorrow work?”

“Sure. Tomorrow.”

Eyal is smiling. Whether if it’s with relief or something else, Leif doesn’t know. What she does know is that she’s never seen him grin so widely.

14.

A note from Rendahl arrives at Eyal's door the next morning, written in elegant script. Vinder, of course. Rather than struggle over it himself, he fetches Leif to read it to him.

"The queen's approved your request for an *ashev* teacher," she says, leaning back in her chair. "As soon as one can be found, you'll start studying immediately. As long as they're willing to cut down the traditional time spent in training."

"*Ahel*," Eyal whispers. He reaches for the note. "And this is real?"

"It says *Jakob Rendahl* right there." Leif points to a nearly illegible signature at the base of the page. Eyal wouldn't have been able to read it himself.

He folds the note up carefully. "*Ahel*," he repeats, leaning his head against the back of his chair. When he looks at Leif, the girl's grinning.

"What?" Eyal asks, and Leif just shrugs.

"You seem so surprised."

"I ought to be. This is the first time the government's ever done anything for me, instead of the other way around."

Leif laughs.

The days turn into a week, the week into two. They pass peacefully enough.

The inquiry committee takes up far less of Leif's time than she'd expected. She'd come to Lystad with a notebook almost completely filled with information about the collapse, most of it taken from Eyal's account, and she presented it at the very first meeting. But the committee declined to read it, and not a single one of them has mentioned it since.

(Leif brings it every time anyway, just in case.)

And they're calling on Ivar and Holmsen far more than Leif. That irks her the most: Holmsen initially refused to have anything to do with the collapse, and Ivar wasn't even managing either of the teams. *Leif* is the one with the most information, the best witness besides Eyal, and the committee has shoved her to the side.

She knows why, too.

Each and every member of the inquiry is a man. *Rich* men, with titles and expensive cravats, who can afford to look down their noses at her. In their eyes, Leif is likely little more than an overconfident girl from the mountains meddling in things she shouldn't be. So even though she's the one of the most knowledgeable witnesses the committee has, they don't care about her opinion.

She has other things to occupy her, at least. Sigrid made an excellent recovery from her cold, and has affixed herself to Leif's side once more. The girl takes her skating, riding, even attempts to teach her how to embroider. Leif is spectacularly bad at it. It wouldn't concern her much, but Peter Aalberg joins Sigrid for sewing sessions, and his handiwork is finer than a dressmaker's.

If she's not presenting to the committee or listening to Sigrid, she's tutoring Eyal. They meet once a day, with each meeting lasting an hour. It's more difficult than Leif had expected. Eyal speaks Vinder fluently, and can even use it with Ruvav interchangeably, but he's hit a wall with the written form.

One of the greatest challenges lies in the Vinder alphabet. Ruvav is a completely phonetic language, with thirty-one letters; a letter for every sound that exists in the language. Vinder, on the other hand, has considerably less.

"I don't *understand*," Eyal complains one day, head in his hands. Leif taps her fingers nervously.

"Don't understand what?"

"*This*." He jabs the word *thi*, or *for*. "You can't—you can't combine letters to make a new sound. It doesn't work that way."

"In *Ruvav*, it doesn't work that way. In Vinder, it does."

Eyal gives a groan, lying his head on the table. He folds his arms over his face.

"I *hate* grammar," he says, voice muffled. Leif snickers.

"So do I," she admits. Eyal makes an unhappy noise.

Leif has received two letters from her mother since they arrived at Lystad. She's read both of them, but only once.

Her mother claws at her with every word. Leif imagines she can even hear the woman's voice, soft and sweet. Sweet like rotted berries. She doesn't know if she wants to sob or vomit after she reads each letter.

She cannot even begin to draft responses.

Her father has sent her a single letter, no longer than a note. A congratulations. He didn't mention her mother's letters, barely even acknowledged the collapse at all. He simply said he was proud Leif had made it that far, and to tell Ivar good day for him.

Leif rereads the words for nearly an hour, pathetic as it is. In all her life, all twenty years she's been his child, Magnus Isaksen has never told her that he's *proud* of her.

She stuffs her mother's letters in a drawer, refusing to look at them. Her father's, Leif sets carefully in the corner of her desk.

Two weeks after she goes riding with Klara, Leif finds herself returning to the stables alone. She's gone back since then, but never by herself. But she needs to escape the stuffiness of the palace, and both Klara and Sigrid are otherwise occupied.

By now, Leif has started to think of Tage as *her* horse. The mare pricks up her ears when Leif enters her stall, eager to see her. She's let Leif brush her out once or twice. Leif still needs the stablehand to help her saddle the mare, but she's gotten used to the feel of the reins. She no longer hesitates to take the trails anymore.

She lets Tage trot around the yard for about ten minutes or so as a warmup. Then Leif guides her out into the open, onto the trail that she took with Klara the very first time out, and allows herself to relax. The air is sharp and clean and cold, and the only sound is that of Leif's own breath.

Unfortunately, she can only relax for so long.

She and Tage have completed about a third of the trail when she hears hoofbeats behind them, only slightly muffled by the snow. Leif stiffens.

A tan horse with a black and white mane gallops past them, its rider sitting side-saddle. Then the horse slows, coming to a stop, and the rider turns it round.

"Is that Leif Isaksen I see?"

Leif narrows her eyes. "Gunnar."

She pulls Tage to a halt. Gunnar huffs, then doubles back beside her.

"What do you want?"

"To say hello. Is that a crime?"

She's seen Gunnar a few times since they first met, always around the stables. Leif has been unable to gauge his personality. Sometimes he's nice enough, if a bit teasing, but he's absolutely awful just as often. He doesn't seem to care about anything but his horse and himself, and it drives Leif mad.

"You're decent," Gunnar says, voice thoughtful. Leif perks up a bit. "Especially for a peasant."

The bit of pride she'd felt immediately dissolves. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't be so offended. You're from the mountains, *ja*?"

She nods. Gunnar shrugs.

"Exactly. Peasant. Peasants don't ride horses."

"I am not a *peasant*," Leif says hotly, nudging Tage into a trot. "I come from a very respected line of overseers. Just because I'm not swimming in money doesn't mean that I'm some—some common rube."

“I never said you were a rube,” Gunnar grumbles. His horse is keeping pace with Tage. “I just said you were decent for a peasant. I’m surprised that someone who’s had so little contact with horses can ride so well.”

“You’re so damned arrogant,” Leif mutters under her breath. Gunnar raises his head.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m sure I heard something.”

She huffs, spurring Tage on faster. “If you heard anything, it was me saying that a peasant like me could ride far better than you any day.”

She glances back at Gunnar. He isn’t outraged, as Leif had expected him to be; rather, his expression is almost calculating.

“Is that a challenge?” he asks after a moment, leaning forward in his saddle.

Leif doesn’t stop to think. “Yes.”

“I bet I can beat you back to the stables,” Gunnar says loftily. He shifts his legs. “And how’s this? Winner has to pay the loser fifty *likke*.”

Fifty *likke* may be a drop in the bucket for someone like Gunnar, but it’s a third of Leif’s monthly salary. “Twenty.”

“Thirty.”

“Deal,” Leif says, and spurs Tage into a gallop. Behind her, Gunnar shouts something about cheating, but she simply lowers her head and drives her horse on faster.

She finds she’s enjoying herself even more. There’s something undeniably exciting about racing—taking Tage on trots through the forest is relaxing, and a welcome break from the palace, but Leif can feel the adrenaline pounding in her veins already. The uncertainty of the race makes it even better. Leif is good, very good for a beginner, but Gunnar’s been riding his entire life. He’s never more than a few paces behind her, even overtaking her at one point, but Leif takes a deep breath and spurs Tage onwards again.

She’s competitive, always has been. The chance to beat someone as infuriating as Gunnar Engelstad is irresistible.

And beat him she does.

Tage skids into the yard only moments before Gunnar’s horse does, but she comes in first all the same. Leif grins as she relaxes the reins, letting the mare ease into a trot.

“Thirty *likke*,” she calls, stretching her arm out. Gunnar huffs.

“That was a fluke,” he mutters. “You took off before me, not to mention I’m riding sidesaddle.”

“Thirty *likke*.”

Gunnar slows his horse, allowing it to begin a cool-down walk. “Thirty *likke*,” he grumbles. “But I wonder how you’d do in a *real* race.”

Leif pauses.

“A *real* race?” she asks, careful to keep her voice level. Gunnar is smirking.

“Not some sprint through the woods,” he drawls. “They’d clear a trail for us, set a start and finish line. Then we’d get to see just how much of a beginner you really are.”

“I think I would do just fine.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Leif snaps, suddenly angry. “I’m a decent rider. You said it yourself.”

Gunnar nudges his horse a bit. “Mm-hm. But I’ve been riding all my life—actually, I have half a mind to call it off. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Why? Because you’re a god amongst men when it comes to horseback riding?”

“*Nej*. Because you’re not half as good as me.”

“*Gods*,” Leif snarls. “I bet I could run you into the ground.”

Gunnar’s lips curve. “Is that a challenge, then?”

“Of course it’s a challenge!”

“Do you, Leif Isaksen, formally challenge me, Gunnar Engelstad, to a horseback riding race?”

Leif nods curtly.

“Excellent,” Gunnar says slyly. He pulls his horse into a walk. “You see, Leif, according to the customs of the court, the challenger gets to pick the date. The challenged, on the other hand....

“Well, they get to pick the course.”

“You challenged *Gunnar Engelstad* to a riding competition?”

Leif unbuttons her coat. “*Ja*.”

“*Why*?”

“Because he was being an ass,” she says, not unreasonably. She lays the coat over the back of a chair. “I already beat him once. I could do it again.”

“You can’t. You really, really can’t.”

Sigrid is lying on Leif’s bed, propped up on her elbows. Her eyes are wide.

“Hans’t anybody *told* you about him?” she asks, tugging on one of her pale locks. Leif shrugs.

“Klara told me a bit. She said that he went away to fight, and then he came back different. Not much else. Besides,” Leif scoffs, “he rides sidesaddle.”

Sigrid groans and flops over onto her back.

“What?”

“He only rides sidesaddle sometimes,” Sigrid tells her. “He broke his legs when he was fighting, see? Both of them. That’s why he had to come back. He’ll ride sidesaddle if they’re especially painful, I heard.”

“So?”

“Gunnar was the court riding champion before he left,” the girl says miserably. “Klara *hated* him—he was always so arrogant about it. He was practically born with reins in his hands.”

Leif unlaces her boots, trying to ignore the dread slowly pooling in her stomach.

“Then when I win, it will be all the more humiliating,” she mutters. Sigrid looks at her pleadingly.

“Call it off. You still have time.”

“I’m not calling anything off.”

Sigrid huffs. “When is it, then? Maybe Klara can help you in the meantime. You’ll have at least half a chance.”

“Ten days.”

After Gunnar tricked her into challenging him, Leif had refused to set a date until he picked the course and showed it to her. The course in question is less difficult than she’d expected: it lasts about a mile in total, snaking into the forest and then out again. It’s hardly the worst trail at Lystad. There’s a lot of turns, and the terrain is rougher than Leif would like, but Gunnar could’ve done far worse.

Even so, she wouldn’t be able to ride it tomorrow. Leif will need time to prepare, to practice. Ten days seems long enough to get used to the course, but not so absurdly long that Gunnar criticizes the choice.

“You’ll have a quarter of a chance.”

Leif closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, counts to ten. “Sigrid?”

“Yes?”

“Could you shut up about it?”

It’s taking awfully long for them to find an *ashevi*.

Ashev are far more common than one might think—they can usually be found in residence at any Ruvav temple. They work alongside priests and devotees, helping their

communities in ways that most cannot. Eyal met a few, growing up. One came to heal his sister when she cracked her skull; another lived in the closest temple, and a third passed through their town once with a caravan of traveling Ruvav. Two weeks to find one is absurd.

Maybe they have, Eyal thinks miserably to himself one night. Maybe they just don't want an ashevi to teach me.

He spends his days in a restless limbo, floating from one task to the other without any sense of purpose. His pain is gone for the most part. Occasionally, though, he's seized by a great ache in his chest or his hip or his forehead, and he has to sit down and breathe before he can keep going.

Rendahl's asked him to keep studying the books, in the event that no *ashevi* can be found. Eyal obeys, but the task is difficult. A single page takes him almost an hour to complete. His lessons with Leif don't seem to be helping in the slightest.

The only thing Eyal can find joy in is his correspondence with Aryeh.

They've exchanged three, four letters since the boy first wrote him, and Eyal feels as though a great weight's been lifted from his shoulders. Aryeh knows now of the disaster at Sverhul—knows of everything that's happened. It had hurt to write, but Eyal had done it nonetheless. And Aryeh's response was nothing but kind.

I can't even begin to fathom what you're going through, he'd written. If you need anything at all, I'm here for you.

Eyal hasn't told anyone about the letters. Not Leif, not Hanna, not *anyone*. They're the only thing he has that he feels truly belong to him.

"Another one," Hanna tells him one day, smiling gently as she presses an envelope into his hands. "Who's so dear to you that they write you this often? Your family?"

"In a way," Eyal says, and disappears into his rooms to read it.

But this letter is not like the others. This handwriting is tiny, neat—not Aryeh's loping scrawl. It's much thinner than anything else. The only thing that links it to any of the other envelopes is the address and the Ruvav script.

The letter itself is short, less than a page. More of a note, really.

Eyal nat Mateh,

My brother speaks of you often. I can't think of anyone closer to him, so it is only right that I write you of this.

Aryeh has sickened. We hoped that time away from Sverhul would do him good; it did at first, but now he has gotten so much worse. He looks more like a corpse than a boy. We don't have the money for a doctor, and without one, I'm not sure how long he will live.

He wants only to see you again. I've heard that you live in Lystad, in the queen's golden palace. Surely you can spare a day to visit a dying boy.

Please. I would be more grateful than a drowning man pulled from the sea.

Chava nir Toriv

Eyal sinks to his knees, heart hammering. He reads the note over again.

Surely you can spare a day to visit a dying boy.

In all his letters, Aryeh had never said he was getting worse. If anything, he had indicated that he was getting better. Eyal shuts his eyes and tries to breathe deeply.

He will not lose Aryeh. He *won't*. He will not lose the boy who brightened his days even in the dark of the Sverhul mine, who became the most important thing in the world.

In his life, Eyal has lost over and over again. His mother, his father. His team. He cannot lose Aryeh.

Eyal chokes a sob down and presses the letter to his chest.

He finds Hanna in the hall, nearly at her door by now. Eyal catches her by her wrist and she glances over her shoulder, looking at him questioningly.

"I need to speak to the queen."

15.

The mountainside is littered with bodies. All lie still, as though sleeping. All are dressed in Vinder uniforms. The smell of death hangs heavy on Draha's tongue, and she stumbles as she walks, despite the energy thrumming through her veins.

There is a letter in her hands, written days ago by Ružena herself. It informs the Vinder that they have exactly twenty-four hours to clear the bodies before Kraznian troops will march on Frodje. Draha is supposed to pin it to the breast of the Vinder commander.

He's a distinctive man, Valentín had told her as she readied to leave. Older, with a gray push broom on his lip. Shouldn't be hard to find.

The commander's body lays in one of the tents, dressed only in a nightshirt and trousers not yet pulled all the way on. Draha falls to her knees, then attaches the note to his shirt.

It takes three tries before she finally manages to secure it. Her hands are shaking badly.

She pushes herself to her feet slowly, then stumbles from the tent and into the night air. The only sound is the wind rustling in the trees, the only light that of the moon and a few lanterns that had managed to escape Draha's rampage. Most had been snuffed out, her magic too destructive for even the tiny flames to escape.

She throws her head back, wrapping her arms around herself, and takes a deep breath. Death is thick on her tongue and thick in the air, and it smells like rot.

Something twitches in the corner of her vision, drawing her attention. She glances over. A crow is fluttering down, landing upon the outstretched hand of a fallen soldier, and it turns to stare at Draha.

It squawks once, twice. Draha exhales.

"You're just a bird," she whispers, sinking to the ground. "You can't hurt me."

The crow tilts its head inquisitively.

"Are you proud of what you have done?" it asks, voice not quite familiar. Its black eyes bulge. "Are you proud to be a murderer?"

Draha gasps. The crow's head twitches, and then it lunges at her.

She bolts upright, heart stuttering in her chest. Weak moonlight still streams through the windows, the stars still bright, and so Draha lies down again and tries not to cry.

It's been two days since Frodje. Two days since Draha used her powers on humans for the first time, ending hundreds of lives in the process. Two days since Frodje was finally claimed for Krazny, the red-and-white hoisted high over the snowy mountainside.

Two days since she became a killer.

The nightmare has plagued her ever since. Draha hasn't had a full night's sleep since she came down the mountain, and what little rest she *has* gotten has hardly been enough to keep her going over the past few days. They left Frodje for Ilazovna yesterday morning, and though Draha's been allowed to ride in a carriage the whole way, she can barely keep her eyes open.

She rises slowly, feet dragging on the ground. There's a washbasin in the corner of the room, its water long gone cold, but she cups her hands full of it and scrubs her face anyway, trying hard not to shiver. It's something Ružena taught her long ago, back when she was still young and dreamed of her mother. Wash your face when you wake, and the nightmares will be washed away.

It worked once. But over the past few days, the little ritual has done nothing more than keep Draha's face clean.

She dries her skin mechanically, then stumbles back to her bed and lies down again, wrapping herself tightly in the worn quilts. She doesn't bother to shut her eyes.

No matter how she tries, she will not sleep again tonight.

By the time morning comes, Draha has lain awake for several hours. She is weary through her entire morning routine, yawning as she tugs her clothes on, and even drops her silverware in the middle of breakfast. Valentín looks at her curiously, but says little. He himself has trouble using his left hand nowadays, thanks to the war; Draha supposes that the man thinks it's impolite to ask about it.

Her eyelids are already drooping when it comes time to leave, and she stumbles into the carriage, nearly falling completely. A gloved hand flies down to grab her wrist, yanking Draha upwards with a force rather unlike Valentín.

"Please watch your step. It wouldn't do to deliver you home with a broken nose."

Draha scowls. *Surány*.

"I thought Valentín was supposed to ride with me," she says as the two of them settle into their seats. "He did yesterday."

"Commander Tesarik has decided to ride alongside the carriage."

"Why?"

Surány sneers. "He didn't say you needed to know."

Rage flares in Draha's veins, though she tamps it down immediately. She throws her head back, drawing herself up to her full height, and looks Surány square in the eye.

“Might I remind you, captain,” she says, “that as one of the royal sorcerers, I surpass you in rank by far, no matter which commander you serve. You will answer my question.”

There is silence for a moment, both of them glaring at each other. Draha raises her eyebrows.

“Commander Tesarik believes he can best protect you by flanking the carriage,” Surány says at last, folding her arms tightly behind her back. “That is all.”

“Captain Surány.”

“Yes?”

“You will address me with my proper title, do you understand?”

Surány’s eyes flash with anger, but she nods anyway, leaning forward into a tiny bow. “Of course, *kuzichka*. It slipped my mind.”

Draha smiles. “Of course, captain. We all make mistakes.”

Captain Surány has been Valentín’s second-in-command for nearly seven years, almost as long as Draha can remember. She’s served him well in that time, apparently. Despite the fact that Valentín tends to dote on Draha like a daughter, and Surány has always held her in cold disdain.

Draha isn’t entirely sure why. She suspects that Surány has never liked the way Draha is lauded for her role in the prophecy, nor the amount of attention Valentín pays her (though, considering the way Valentín adores Iyov nat Nava, that in itself might be a lost cause).

Surány has never particularly liked Boris, either. There was an incident when Draha was thirteen, Boris little more than a puppy, when Surány hit the dog with such anger that Boris had howled and began to whine, and in the end Surány earned a bloody hand and tongue lashing from Valentín. The captain is too exceptional of a soldier to be removed from duty, however, and so she’d stayed under his command.

Draha has hated her ever since.

She does her very best to ignore Surány’s presence. It’s relatively easy; Surány seems intent on ignoring Draha as well, and the two of them remain in terse, heavy silence.

Draha also does her best to try to sleep, though it’s a lost cause from the very beginning. Valentín has decided to take the long way home, opting for a convoluted route of country roads and twisting paths instead of the train. Something about being hard to track. The roads are rocky, poorly tended in areas this rural. It’s more unusual to go over a smooth stretch than a bumpy one. Draha clutches the carriage cushions and finds herself longing for Ilazovna’s gilded halls and soft blankets.

One more day. One more day, and she will be home, able to sink into a warm bath, scrub the grime of the road from her skin, and forget the past few days have ever happened.

Well. She'll do her very best to forget, though Draha suspects not everything will be able to slip her mind.

She cannot forget just how many bodies there were, how many people fell under her hand. Hundreds of lives snuffed out in less than an hour, and all because of her.

It had been terribly easy.

That's the worst part. Even in the thick of things, when there were soldiers trying to strike Draha down, all she'd needed to do was lift her hand and they fell down dead, eyes glassy and heart still. For every life she'd taken, her own spirit had only grown, the energy that had run through their body seeping into her own.

By the time she was finished, she'd felt as powerful as a goddess, as though she could cut down all of Vinderheim in a matter of minutes.

She probably could.

Draha takes a deep breath, pulling her collar up close around her. She misses Ilazovna. She misses Boris, she misses Iyov. She misses Timotej, with his crooked smile and his nervous jokes. She misses her bed and Ružena and training and not knowing what it is like to end someone else's life.

She cannot quite keep herself from crying. Surány says nothing, thankfully, and Draha's able to curl up, wiping her face, and stare hopelessly out the window.

The day passes slowly. Draha sleeps a bit, though the rocky road always wakes her after only a few minutes of rest, and it's difficult to think of anything but Frodje. At one point, Valentín sends a young sergeant into the carriage to keep her company—he's evidently realized that Surány is the last person Draha would want to share a carriage with—and the two of them play cards for hours. Draha has, unfortunately, never been very good at card games, and this coupled with the fact that she's practically asleep on her feet means that the sergeant's won a good deal of money from her by the time night comes. Still, it's an excellent distraction until they stop for the night.

Valentín's chosen tiny, obscure inns to house them ever since they left Frodje, and tonight is no exception. It's tucked away on the edge of a small town, stable tiny and paint peeling. Nevertheless, the woman who runs it is more than willing to let them stay the night, especially after Valentín offers to pay double.

Draha is allowed her own room, considering that she's only sixteen years old, at least six years younger than everyone else on the trip. It's tiny, of course, barely big enough to hold a bed

and a mirror mounted on the wall, but it's enough. She sighs, kicks off her boots, and flops backwards onto the mattress.

They'll reach Ilazovna tomorrow evening. One more night, one more day of travel, and then she'll be home.

Something moves in the corner of her eye. Draha sits up, gaze landing on the mirror opposite her.

It no longer reflects the room. Instead the image in the glass is swirling, changing, and Draha stares at it in muted horror until the colors settle and form a face she knows well.

"The hero of the hour," Ružena says warmly, smiling. Her voice sounds slightly distorted, though it always is when she does this. Draha exhales.

"I hate it when you do this," she informs Ružena, twisting her hands in the quilts. The spell is called a reflection, a simple enough name for projecting your image onto any mirror or body of water in a hundred miles. It's a shadeblood technique, well-loved by Ružena, and Draha has never been able to get used to it.

Ružena's mouth quirks. "Until the inventors come up with a quicker system than telegrams, this will have to do." She pauses. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't *look* fine," Ružena replies, frowning. "You look terrible."

Draha makes a face. "Thanks."

"No, I... Are you sick? Is Valentín pushing you too hard? Gods, I told him he ought to take the trains home, but he—"

"I'm fine," Draha interrupts. "Valentín is babying me, like he always does. I'm just tired."

"Drahomíra."

"*I'm fine*," she repeats, putting as much emphasis on the words as she possibly can.

"Frodje took a lot of energy, and I'm still recovering. That's all."

Not quite a lie, not quite the truth. Ružena doesn't look remotely convinced, but she lets the matter drop anyway.

"Alzbeta's impressed with your performance, at any rate. She's even decided to—oh, wait a minute. Yes. Yes, Timotej, I know." She glances back at Draha. "Timotej says *he* wants to tell you about it. Would you like to talk to him, or can I tell you myself?"

"Don't be mean," Draha admonishes. Ružena rolls her eye.

"Fine."

The mirror turns cloudy again, and when it clears Timotej's face is peering back at her, black hair falling into his eyes. He grins.

“I miss you so *much*,” the prince proclaims. He furrows his brow. “It’s so lonely without you around—how long until you’re back?”

Draha smiles. “Valentín says we’ll be home tomorrow evening.”

“Wonderful,” Timotej says. He glances to his right, evidently hearing something Draha cannot. “I—all right, all right! I’ll tell her!”

“Quit bullying him, Ružena,” Draha says, leaning forward. Timotej pauses.

“She says you should—never mind.” He sniffs. “Soldiers can be so crass. I’ve no idea why Mother—ow!”

Ružena’s hand appears in the mirror for a moment, swatting Timotej lightly on the ear. He glowers and puts his own hand over it.

“I am a *prince*, General,” he says sullenly. There’s a moment of silence, and then Timotej’s pale cheeks turn pink.

Draha snickers. “What’d she say?”

“A very, ah, crude thing about her relationship with Mother,” Timotej mumbles. “Which I most certainly did *not* need to hear.” Another pause. “I will! Gods, there’s no need to be rude about it!”

“No need to be rude about what?”

Timotej rubs his ear. “Mother’s inviting you to dinner your first night home,” he says, a small smile crossing his lips. “In honor of what you did on Frodje. Ružena didn’t like how long I was taking to tell you about it.”

“Oh,” Draha says softly.

And here I’d been thinking I’d be allowed to forget about it all.

“It’ll be all right,” Timotej says gently. “Mother’s just happy about what’s happened. I’m sure it’ll be lovely.”

“No, I...” she pauses, schooling her expression into a smile. “I’m looking forward to it. It’s been a long day, that’s all. I’m tired.”

Timotej brightens. “Oh! Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

The boy pauses, glancing to his right again, then looks back to Draha. “Ružena wants to talk to you a little before you go to bed, so I’ve got to go, but I miss you. See you soon.”

He places one hand on the mirror, and Draha reaches forward, covering it with her own. Timotej smiles.

“It isn’t the same here without you,” he says softly. “I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Me too.”

He vanishes then. The mirror swirls and Draha pulls her hand back, waiting. Ružena appears a moment later, looking far more tired than she had before, but still smiling.

“As I told you, Alzbeta is very impressed with what you’ve done,” she says. “I think she wants to send you into the field more often.”

Draha’s blood runs cold.

It was so easy.

Her distress must show on her face, because Ružena’s expression softens and she leans forward, running a finger over her side of the mirror. She sighs.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Getting through all this... it isn’t easy for anyone, let alone a child. And when I think of what you did on Frodje—Draha, I’m so sorry.”

Draha closes her eyes. “Does it get easier?”

“Depends. For some it does. Not for you.”

“Why not?”

“You have a heart, Drahomíra.” Ružena sighs. “You have the biggest heart of anyone I know.”

A tear slips down Draha’s cheek and she opens her eyes, reaching for a handkerchief. Ružena’s face is solemn in the mirror.

“It was so easy,” Draha says at last, her voice hoarse. She takes a shaky breath. “I didn’t... I thought it would be hard to kill them. But it was easy. It was like I was killing animals, not humans, and it—it just felt *wrong*.”

“I know,” Ružena says softly. “I know, dearest.”

Draha wipes her eyes again, chest heaving. When she looks up again, Ružena has her chin in her hand, and she looks as though she’s deep in thought.

“Don’t tell Alzbeta,” she says at last. Her voice is low. “*Do not* tell her it was easy. I will tell her that it sapped all the strength from you, that you won’t be able to do it again for a while. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Stay close to Valentín. He’s grappled with this before, and he can offer some advice.” Ružena studies her. “And try to get some sleep, all right? You look dreadful.”

Draha laughs shakily. “All right.”

Ružena stretches her hand out, just as Timotej had, and Draha does the same on her side. The mirror is cold to the touch—no warmth can seep through Ružena’s spells, only images and sound—but it’s reassuring all the same.

“Good night, *milachik*,” Ružena murmurs. “Sleep well.”

Draha gives a small smile. "I'll try."

Ružena smiles in response. For a moment, all is still.

Then then colors of the mirror begin to swirl and twist again, taking Ružena's image with them as the glass clouds over. Slowly, it returns to normal, and Draha is left alone once again.

16.

Aryeh lives in Stasnik, a tiny little town in the south of Vinderheim. Even on the fastest train in the world, it's over a day's ride away.

It took nearly twenty minutes for Eyal to convince Solfrid to allow him the visit. In the end, he had won her over by promising that he would return as soon as possible, and that he would permit a team of soldiers to accompany him on the way.

(Personally, Eyal sees no reason to stay at the palace if an *ashevi* hasn't been found yet, and a personal guard is wasted on him, considering that he can't die anyway. But if that's what it takes for Solfrid to let him go, he'll obey gladly.)

The train leaves at just after six and takes them through the night, stopping periodically on the way. Eyal keeps rereading Chava's note, keeps thumbing through the letters Aryeh's sent him. He prays that Aryeh stays strong. That the boy makes it through this night, and the next, and every single night until he has grown well again.

Eyal barely sleeps. When he does, it's because exhaustion has overtaken him and his body forces him to rest. He is never asleep for longer than a handful of minutes before the train jostles him awake and worry descends upon him once more.

They make it to Stasnik around noon. It's a merchant town, situated halfway between the sea and the Tenguran border. The area is much warmer than Lystad, the difference in temperature no less than fifteen degrees. Even so, Eyal tugs his collar up as he exits the train. Winter is coming on quick, as it always does in Vinderheim, and it will be brutal.

Aryeh's address is in the lowest part of town. The street is more dust than stone or snow, and the houses lean precariously against each other. Dressed in a fur-lined coat, with a band of soldiers at his sides, Eyal catches more than a few stares.

The soldiers themselves are staring around, whispering amongst themselves. Likely they've never been in a place such as this before. Eyal, on the other hand, is unbothered: the place he grew up in was hardly any better than this.

This is where Ruvav live, if they settle. No one ever allows them anything better.

When they reach the address Aryeh's been writing from, Eyal knocks once, twice. He holds his breath.

The door is opened by a girl who can't be any more than thirteen years old. She's slender, with olive brown skin and Aryeh's sloping nose. Her dark eyes widen with fear at the sight of the soldiers.

“My name is Eyal nat Mateh,” Eyal says in Ruvav, stepping forward. “I came to see Aryeh nat Toriv?”

Her face brightens. “You’re the one he’s been writing?”

“Yes.”

She opens the door further, just wide enough for Eyal to squeeze through, and gestures for him to come in. He does so; then, there’s the stomping of boots and his escort follows him in. The girl’s eyes grow big again.

“Get out.”

There’s a haggard-looking man sitting at the table in the main room. From the tilt of his brow, the dark of his hair, it’s clear that he’s Aryeh’s father. He’s glaring at the soldier who’s just entered the home.

“Get out of my house,” he repeats, voice slightly slurred. “Don’t want any trouble.”

“We have orders to—” the soldier starts. Toriv cuts him off.

“No one in this house has done anything wrong.”

“Leave,” Eyal mutters. “Please. You can wait outside.”

The soldier scowls, but he does it anyway, stomping out the door and shutting it behind him with more force than necessary. Eyal watches him to make sure that he—and the rest of the guard—don’t enter again.

“You said your name was Eyal?”

He turns. Toriv is staring at him, hollow eyes pinning Eyal firmly in place. Eyal nods silently.

“The one Ari talks about?”

He nods again.

“Go upstairs,” Toriv croaks, gesturing behind him. “First room on the left. He’s been waiting for you.”

“*Toh.*”

Thank you, in Ruvav. The man simply bobs his head in acknowledgment.

He looks more like a corpse than a boy. That was what Chava had said in the letter, and now that Eyal can see Aryeh, he knows that the statement is painfully true.

When he first came to Sverhul, Aryeh had been healthy enough. Skinny, but that was a given, and it had only helped his slender features. There was still plenty of color in his cheeks. And even when he sickened, he had retained some sense of youth.

Now, he looks as though he’s already died.

Sunken cheeks, hollow eyes. Eyal can count the boy's ribs, even through the blankets. Aryeh's hair is longer than it was, starting to grow out again, but it's lank and dull.

A chair has been pulled to his bedside. Eyal sinks into it, biting back tears.

"You came," Aryeh breathes. His voice is more of a rasp than anything else.

"Of course I did."

"I didn't think... I didn't know..."

"I know," Eyal says soothingly. "But I'm here now. I'm here."

Aryeh pulls his hand from under the blankets. The limb looks like it belongs to a fourteen-year-old, not a boy who's nearly grown, and Eyal's heart constricts painfully at the sight.

He reaches out, lacing their fingers together. They're quiet for a moment.

"Chava says I'm dying."

"You're not dying," Eyal whispers. Aryeh gives a bitter, wheezing laugh.

"You're not... you're not a good liar."

Eyal bites his lip. "No," he says softly. "No, I'm not."

He rubs his thumb over Aryeh's knuckles soothingly. The skin is papery, dry to the touch. Aryeh's eyes flutter closed.

"Has an *ashevi* been to see you?"

"Yes." He takes a rattling breath. "A few times but... but he couldn't do much. He said my lungs were... poisoned."

"Poisoned," Eyal echoes.

He wants to weep.

Aryeh begins to shake, shoulders convulsing as his eyes scrunch up. He gasps, the sound ragged; a tear spills down his cheek.

"I'm going to die," he gasps. He turns to stare at Eyal. "Eyal, I'm going—I'm going to die."

Eyal has never been good with words. He's never been eloquent, never quick-witted like his sister. And for someone who's never been good with words, there's absolutely nothing you can say when the boy you love tells you, with tears in his eyes, that he's going to die.

All Eyal can do is lean forward and scoop Aryeh up in his arms. All he can do is let Aryeh bury his face in Eyal's shoulder, let him soak the fine coat with his tears and rub his back.

He's held Aryeh a hundred times. When they first came to Sverhul, Aryeh had cried easily, and Eyal had always wound up comforting him. This is a familiar routine. It even came to be soothing in its way, in time.

Today, though, it feels different.

It feels desperate. It feels *final*.

“*Aneh mitzar*,” he whispers, rocking slowly. “*Shil yaqireh, aneh mitzar.*”

I’m sorry. My darling, I’m sorry.

Aryeh gasps again and presses his face into Eyal’s shoulder, clutches at his shoulders more tightly. He’s shaking uncontrollably by now.

“I’m going to set you down,” Eyal murmurs. “I’m going to put you down real gentle, okay?”

He feels Aryeh nod. Slowly, as gently as he can, Eyal leans forward and lays the boy on the mattress again. Then he tugs the blankets up to cover Aryeh’s shivering body.

“*Aneh mitzar*,” he repeats. Aryeh laughs brokenly and takes Eyal’s hand again.

“Don’t ap... apologize,” he breathes. “You made me leave. You’re... you’re the only reason why I have made it this far.”

But how far is this, really? Aryeh is back in the home where he began, wasting away on an old cot. He’s ashen and emaciated, all because of the mines, and he hasn’t anything to show for it. He all but gave his life to Sverhul, and in return he got a cough that’s killing him. Eyal doesn’t know if he wants to scream or sob.

He reaches out with his other hand, smoothing Aryeh’s hair back. Aryeh exhales slowly.

You deserve so much better.

Aryeh doesn’t deserve to live the life he does. *No one* deserves this sort of life, and it’s the only one boys like them are allowed to have.

“If I could do anything else,” Eyal whispers. “*Anything* else, Aryeh—if I could call down the greatest healer in the land, I would—”

He stops. *The greatest healer in the land.*

“I know you would. I know you... I know you would, but there’s nothing you can...”

Eyal interrupts him. “*Loh*, there is. I told you about Jakob Rendahl, how incredible he is at healing. I can ask him to heal you.”

“He won’t do it,” Aryeh whispers.

“You haven’t even met him. I’ll get him to do it, I promise. If it’s the only thing I ever do, I will have him heal you.”

The boy is silent for a moment. Then, softly, he asks, “Promise?”

“I promise.” Eyal squeezes his hand. “Aryeh, I promise it with all my heart. He will heal you.”

Aryeh’s chest heaves. Then he reaches out, hand shaking, and pulls Eyal’s forehead to his.

“*Toh. Toh. Toh, toh, toh—*”

“Of course,” Eyal whispers. He closes his eyes. “Of course, Aryeh. Of course I would.”

“*Toh,*” Aryeh murmurs again. “Eyal, I... *toh.*”

He takes a breath, sighing; then, he begins to cough violently. He falls back to the bed. He shudders, spasming, and presses his hands to his chest with a desperate look on his face.

Eyal catches the boy’s arm. “Are you all right?”

“Am I... am I *all right,*” Aryeh wheezes, and Eyal realizes how pointless the question is.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Aryeh shakes his head. “Nothing helps, anymore.”

He looks so defeated in that moment. So sick, so—so *broken*. Eyal has to take a deep breath to keep himself from crying.

He tucks a lock behind Aryeh’s ear. “Some water, maybe?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

The girl that opened the door fetches a cup of cold water for him, filling it so high that it nearly overflows. Eyal’s sure she knows it’s for Aryeh. When he returns to the room, Aryeh is lying still on the bed, staring into space.

“Water,” Eyal says gently, and those dark eyes flick over to him.

“Can you...?”

He sets the cup down on the bedside table. “Of course,” he says, and helps ease Aryeh into a sitting position. Then he lifts the water to the boy’s lips.

Aryeh does not drink greedily as Eyal had expected, just sips once or twice before tipping his head back against the wall. Eyal puts the cup down again.

“When I got here,” he says, taking Aryeh’s hand in his own, “there was a little girl who opened the door for me, and she got the water too. Your sister?”

He nods slowly. “Aviva. I have three.”

“Tell me about them.”

In all the time they spent at Sverhul, neither of them talked much about their families. For Eyal, the very thought still hurt; Aryeh, always so open, had closed up whenever the subject surfaced. Aryeh spoke occasionally of siblings, but Eyal didn’t know who they were, or even how many the boy had. He himself had shared even less.

Now, Aryeh speaks of three sisters and a brother. His sister Chava is nineteen, the oldest of all of them. She works as a seamstress. Then there’s Hallel, a fourteen-year-old who’s learning

Chava's trade. Aviva, thirteen. Eli, Aryeh's brother, is the youngest at only eleven years old. Eyal remembers the boy he saw huddling at Toriv's side.

"Your parents," he says. Aryeh closes his eyes.

"What about them?"

"Tell me about them, too."

"My father is paralyzed from... from the waist down." He does not open his eyes. "There was an accident. My mother left... after that. She didn't want the work, didn't want to take care of five children and a... a husband, too."

"That's why you went to Sverhul. To find work."

Aryeh nods slowly before laying his head on the pillow again. A fine sheen of sweat has broken out on his forehead, and Eyal leans forward to wipe it away.

"Eyal."

He pauses. "Hm?"

"Tell me about your father."

He freezes, hand still outstretched. Beneath him, Aryeh opens one eye almost expectantly, and Eyal looks away from him.

"Please," Aryeh whispers. "I told you about mine."

Eyal smiles ruefully. "You did."

"Is it... is it bad?"

"It is," he says honestly. He reaches for the water cup, tilts it against Aryeh's lips again. "Here. Drink."

"Eyal..."

"Drink a little, and I'll tell you about my father."

Aryeh makes a face, but he does as asked before lying back once more, staring at Eyal with his dark, dark eyes.

He's always had the loveliest eyes. Deep brown, almost black. Piercing.

Eyal tears himself away from the thought.

"My father is dead," he says quietly, cupping his hands around the water. "Two—two years passed. Murdered."

"I'm sorry," Aryeh whispers. He doesn't ask why, because he doesn't need to. They both know well enough.

"He was a carpenter. One day he went away to repair a wagon for a group of travelers, and he... he never came back."

Aryeh is quiet. Then, slowly, he reaches for Eyal's hand, tugging it away from the water cup, and laces their fingers together tightly. He doesn't say anything, just holds on.

"*Toh*," Eyal whispers. Aryeh simply nods.

It's a small comfort, but it is enough.

They sit quietly like that for a long time. Aryeh's breathing is growing more labored, though he tries to hide it, and Eyal realizes that he's straining himself. He's done little more than speak and sit up in bed, hold hands, but even that has been an effort.

Aryeh is so, so sick. Rendahl cannot heal him fast enough.

By the time Aryeh speaks again, the shadows in the room have shifted and begun to grow long. His voice is faint, far fainter than Eyal would like.

"I'm glad you're here," Aryeh breathes. "If you hadn't come... I... You're my best friend. I needed to... to see you again."

Eyal bites his lip. *Best friend.*

He glances at Aryeh's lovely eyes, the dark hair that is beginning to grow out again, even if it has lost its luster. The bronze-brown face, so handsome even in sickness.

Eyal wishes he knew when he fell in love with that face.

When he was young, his stepmother would tell them fairytales. Ruvav tales, of course. The rabbits that sleep in the moon. Clever Shiva, who outwitted a wicked king. The boy that swallowed the sea and spat it all back out again. Eyal had loved adventures, but his sister preferred love stories, begging for them every time their stepmother sat down to spin them a story.

In every story, the lovers fell for each other as soon as their eyes met. They had to fight for their love, of course, but it was always instant. Always immediate.

Falling for Aryeh had not been so immediate. It took so long that by the time Eyal was in love, he didn't even know it.

He smooths Aryeh's hair again with his free hand. The boy sighs, content, and Eyal's stomach twists.

How can he let Aryeh believe that all he feels is friendship? It's not fair to indulge in every touch while the other boy thinks that Eyal's intentions are that of a friend. Aryeh ought to know.

But how on Earth can he admit his feelings?

"Something's... wrong."

"Yes," he admits. "But it's not your fault."

Aryeh tilts his head. "Tell me."

“I...”

Eyal breaks off, clearing his throat, and rubs a circle over the back of Aryeh’s hand with his thumb. He lets his eyes drop to the floor.

“It’s nothing,” he says quietly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Eyal?”

He lifts his gaze to Aryeh’s face again, studying the boy’s features. Aryeh’s brows are knit, drawn tight with concern, and Eyal can’t help but smile sadly.

He’s always been so sweet.

“Don’t trouble yourself over it,” Eyal tells him. He leans forward, smooths the crease in Aryeh’s forehead gently. “If one of us ought to be worrying about the other, it’s me. I’m not the one who’s bedridden.”

Aryeh simply raises his eyebrows. Eyal smooths them down again, and the boy wheezes a laugh.

He shifts under his blankets. “Come... on. I’m going to worry about it anyway.”

“Aryeh—”

“We tell each other when... when things are wrong,” Aryeh breathes. “We... promised. *You* promised.”

He did. They’d made a pact one night, so long ago. It had been the dead of winter, Eyal remembers; a group of men had just frozen to death in their tents, having nothing but their clothes to keep them warm. Aryeh had been silent the whole day after the bodies were found. Uncharacteristic for him. Eyal accosted him that night, made him say what was bothering him, and eventually Aryeh had blurted out that *he* slept on the ground, too, with nothing but his clothes. No blanket, no pallet.

What if I freeze just like them?

So Eyal looked at him a long while, and then said that Aryeh could share his pallet if he wanted. It was warmer than the ground by far, with a blanket and Eyal’s own body heat to keep the cold away.

(Eyal would be twice as warm, too. That was what had won Aryeh over.)

The only condition, Eyal had told him, is that you’ve got to tell me when you’re upset. No secrets between us.

“No secrets,” Aryeh reminds him now, and Eyal nods reluctantly. In the back of his mind, he curses that night. Curses that promise.

“It’s nothing, really,” he mutters. “Not much. It’s just... Aryeh, when I think of you...”

He trails off again. Aryeh is watching him blankly, uncomprehending. Eyal swallows.

“I’ve been dreaming about you,” he confesses. He shuts his eyes. “I missed you so much since Sverhul, I told you that, but I... I see you in my dreams, and in the good ones, you kiss me. You kiss me and I hold you, and I still want that even when I wake up. I don’t want you to be my friend, I want—I want—”

Eyal takes a deep breath, tries to steady himself. He tightens his grip on Aryeh’s hand.

“I want to kiss you,” he whispers. “On the lips.”

He forces himself to open his eyes. To look at Aryeh again. Aryeh is still watching him, but his blank expression has been replaced with one of understanding.

“You want to be sweethearts,” he says softly. Eyal makes himself nod.

Aryeh closes his eyes. “I wish... I wish you—”

The door swings open then, cutting him off, and Aryeh never finishes his sentence. He never finishes it because instead of one of his sisters or his brother standing there, it’s a soldier in full military uniform. One of Eyal’s escorts.

Aryeh pushes himself up in bed, eyes wide. His chest is heaving.

“Get out,” Eyal tells the soldier. “I said that you should wait outside.”

“Eyal?” Aryeh asks, and his voice is barely audible. Eyal squeezes his hand to comfort him.

The soldier’s face is grim. “*Herr nat Mateh*, we have received a telegram from the palace. You are to return to Lystad immediately.”

“But I’m still—”

“I said *immediately*, *Herr nat Mateh*.”

Somehow the soldier has taken Eyal by the arm, pulling him from his seat, and Eyal may be strong but he’s still hurting. He’s strong, but he’s not as strong as he ought to be, and he has no choice but to release his hold on Aryeh’s bony hand. Aryeh’s eyes are still round with shock, chest still heaving. Eyal suddenly fears he’s going to hyperventilate.

“Write me,” he calls, as the soldier pulls him from the room. “Aryeh, write me, and we can sort this all out—I promise that Rendahl will come see you, I promise that I’ll—”

The door slams shut between them, and Aryeh’s response is lost.

The soldier leads him down the stairs, out of the house. Eyal catches a glimpse of Aviva, curled up in a chair and hugging her knees, and tiny Eli, cowering behind their father. Toriv’s face is a mix of fear and contempt. Eyal’s breath catches. But no, the man’s disgust is not directed towards him; it is reserved for the soldier, the blond Vinder man in a uniform of steely gray and gold braid, with a gun at his side. The soldier who has come into his home unannounced, ignoring his authority and scaring his children.

Eyal understands. He does not begrudge Toriv his contempt.

He is hurried from the doorstep, from the street, hurried all the way back to the train station, where the soldiers practically shove him through the car door before a whistle splits the air and the train begins to chug along. Eyal leans against the window, stares out at Stasnik. He stares out until he can't see the town anymore, and even then, he keeps staring.

Surely you can spare a day to visit a dying boy.

A day. He'd barely lasted three hours before they made him leave again.

He didn't even get to say goodbye.

17.

“Why have I been called back?” Eyal asks, when Stasnik has finally disappeared over the horizon. A soldier—not the one who led him out of Aryeh’s house—glances back at him.

“I don’t know. The telegram simply said to return at once, that it was a matter of grave urgency.”

“And you’re sure it came from the palace?”

The soldier squints at him. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it?”

“If it gave no reason—”

“We do not question our orders, *Herr* nat Mateh, simply obey them.” The man’s gaze is stern. “You may do well to remember that Vinderheim is at war. The queen has reason not to share sensitive information over something so easily intercepted as a telegram.”

There are plenty of things Eyal could say in response to that, but he bites his tongue instead. These soldiers are not Christensen, with his easy smile and lazy demeanor. Their loyalty is first and foremost to Vinderheim; they will turn on him as easily as they will protect him, if that’s what Solfrid wants.

Eyal retreats to his room, and that is where he stays for the rest of the journey.

The train pulls into Lystad at just past ten in the morning. From there, Eyal is rushed back to the palace, and instead of being allowed to return to the Ovesen residency, he is hurried into the western wing.

The palace’s eastern wing houses the noble residencies, and for some reason, Eyal had assumed that the western half would be similar. Clearly, he’d been mistaken. The people he passes are uniformed, many wearing military dress, and most doors are labelled with some sort of plaque. It’s in Vinder, of course, so he can’t quite read them, but Eyal doubts that the rooms are residencies.

He’s led down several hallways, up a few staircases and then down one again. He loses track of the path. Finally, though, they come to a stop in front of a pair of mahogany doors. The doors are flanked by guards, wearing the uniform Eyal has come to associate with Queen Solfrid’s presence, and he knows exactly who’s inside.

“Eyal nat Mateh,” his escort says lowly, and one of the guards ushers him through the doors.

His first impression is that the room was designed by whoever built the *Hal av Hellmakt*. It's large but very simple, with a set of windows in the back, wooden floors, and blue walls devoid of any decoration. It feels out of place in the palace.

Eyal's second impression is that he most assuredly does not belong in this room.

A long table takes up most of the space. Around it sit countless men and women in military dress—not the drab uniforms that common soldiers wear, but the regal clothes of generals, colonels, majors. Eyal spies countless medals. These are the people that determine the army's every move. Spread on the table are maps, papers, inkwells; clearly, he has interrupted something important.

"Eyal nat Match."

Eyal's head jerks up. Sitting at the table's head is Queen Solfrid herself, occupying an ornate, throne-like chair. To her left sits King-consort Melanthios, to her right, Jakob Rendahl, in his embroidered black robe. All three are grim-faced. When Eyal chances a second glance down the table, he realizes that their gloom is not unusual: everyone around the table wears a somber expression, a solemn air consuming the entire room.

"Come here," Solfrid says softly, and Eyal does as he's told. "Karina, bring a chair for him."

A girl in servant's clothes darts forward and edges a chair between Rendahl and the woman to his right. Eyal slides into it uneasily, careful to keep distance between himself and Rendahl, but the man doesn't seem to care.

"Why did you call me back so soon?"

Solfrid closes her eyes. "*Generell* Nielsen, if you would."

A gray-haired man with a lined face and several medals on his chest clears his throat, leaning back in his chair. He folds his hands together.

"We have lost Mount Frodje," Nielsen says, quiet. "Krazny has now claimed the three westernmost peaks in the Brenfel range, and we believe they're preparing to march on Mount Himmlen, Frodje's neighbor."

"Oh" is all Eyal can think to say.

"What is troubling is how quickly Krazny managed to seize the mountain," Nielsen says, stone-faced. "Three nights ago, we had five units stationed on Frodje and in the surrounding area. Four hundred soldiers. Today, we are preparing to bury nearly four hundred bodies."

Eyal inhales. "How did—?"

"We don't know."

Melanthios. It's the first time Eyal has heard the man speak. The king-consort has what Eyal supposes is an Aiokaran accent, not too heavy but certainly noticeable. No wonder he's quiet.

Melanthios' dark eyes flick to Rendahl. "*Herr* Rendahl, if you would please explain the situation at Frodje."

Rendahl shifts, clearing his throat. Sadness has thickened the lines on his face, making him seem older than he ever has before.

"The attack on the Frodje troops was carried out three nights ago," he says. "We were unaware of it until the following morning—the commander of the Frodje troops kept up a communication with the Himmlen commander, exchanging messages every four hours. Eventually, the Himmlen commander realized that Frodje had missed the last three message times, and he sent a group of soldiers to Frodje to make sure everything was all right. Instead, they found three hundred and fifty corpses, dead where they'd stood, and a note saying that they had twenty-four hours to clear the bodies before Krazny seized the mountain.

"I have four healers on Himmlen. They've had two days to examine the bodies, and they say that not a single one bears any trace of lethal damage." Rendahl takes a breath. "No bullet or knife wounds or any other nonmagical attacks, and no trace of magic-induced injury either. It's as though four *hundred* soldiers suddenly dropped dead, and all within the span of thirty minutes."

"*Ahel*," Eyal breathes. Solfrid nods.

"Eleven of the soldiers stationed on Frodje agreed to have their corpses examined if they were killed in battle," the queen tells him. "We have seen these sorts of deaths among soldiers over the past several months, but only here and there. Nothing on such a scale. *Herr* Rendahl suspects some sort of sorcery, and he and others will be examining the eleven bodies. Hopefully they will discover exactly what Krazny's been up to, and will then be able to build a defense.

"We can no longer continue to waste any time in this war. Clearly, Krazny has stumbled upon some sort of warfare that will absolutely cripple us if we continue to drag our feet. Eyal, your role in this war has been foretold for nine hundred years. The Novomeská prophecy obviously indicates that you will help ensure a Vinder victory." Solfrid folds her hands in her lap. "Previously, I was willing to allow you the time you needed to train with the *ashev*. I felt it was only fair for you to be allowed to observe your faith. But with the Frodje disaster..."

She shrugs helplessly. Eyal's heart drops.

"Your Majesty, I—"

“I’m sorry, Eyal. But I cannot permit any more soldiers to suffer as the troops on Frodje did. *Ashevi* training takes years, and I can’t afford to drag this war out any longer than I must. You will begin training with *Herr* Rendahl as soon as possible.”

“Your Majesty, please, I can’t—”

“Eyal.”

He quiets. Solfrid’s eyes are fixed on him, hazel gaze pinning Eyal in place as firmly as a pair of irons clapped over his wrists. His heart hammers beneath his breast.

“I can’t,” he whispers. Solfrid is unaffected.

“During wartime, we must all make sacrifices,” she says steadily. “Some must be greater than others.”

Someone’s crying.

Leif halts in the hallway, frozen mid-stride. It’s very faint, but she’s sure it’s there; she’s heard her mother crying enough that she knows the sound when she hears it.

She turns towards Sigrid’s rooms, expecting that the crying will get louder—the girl’s the only person in the residency she can imagine crying at all—but the sound simply gets fainter. Leif frowns, biting her lip.

She starts walking towards her own door again, and the crying gets louder, strangely enough. Leif blinks. The only people that live on this half of the hall are her, Eyal and Ivar, and Ivar’s gone to a meeting with the inquiry committee. Which means...

Leif tilts her head towards Eyal’s door, concentrating. It’s definitely him.

She could go back to her rooms, pretend that this never happened at all. She’s sure that Eyal would prefer it that way; he’s always seemed a bit gruff to her, like he’s almost scared of emotions. Not to mention the fact that Leif is less than adept at comforting people.

But she knows from experience how awful it is to cry, all by yourself, and have no one come to comfort you. Eyal’s a stoic, and if he’s crying it probably means that something is very, very wrong.

She takes a deep breath, then turns to Eyal’s door and knocks, just once.

“Eyal?”

Silence. Leif bites her lip again.

There’s a shuffling noise on the other side, and then the door opens, Eyal standing behind it. He looks a mess—his waistcoat is missing and his suspenders are slipping down his broad shoulders, shirt half-untucked, and his eyes are red red red. Eyal sniffs, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

“What do you want?”

He tries to make it sound gruff, but it’s more broken than anything else. For the first time Leif realizes just how *young* Eyal is—his eighteenth birthday was only three months ago, according to his records, and he’s still practically a child. Leif’s two years older, and sometimes even she feels overwhelmed by their situations. She can’t imagine what it must be like for Eyal.

“I heard you crying,” she says, as gently as she can manage. “I just wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

Eyal snuffles, doesn’t answer.

“Is it?”

“No,” Eyal mumbles, and then turns and starts to walk away. Leif hovers uncomfortably in the doorway.

“Can I come in?” she asks, tapping the doorframe. Eyal glances over his shoulder.

“If you want.”

She doesn’t want to, not really. But she can’t just let Eyal keep crying all by himself and not *do* anything about it.

“Just...” Eyal pauses, inhaling. His back is still turned. “Take off your shoes, *ke*?”

Leif’s not exactly sure what *ke* means (she supposes it must be Ruvav), but she understands the rest of the sentence well enough, so she steps inside and slips her boots off, grimacing as she does so. She’s just returned from riding—practicing for the race with Gunnar Engelstad, of course—and the shoes are covered in a thick layer of mud and snow. She almost feels guilty about putting them down in Eyal’s room.

“So,” she says, straightening. “You’re crying.”

Eyal’s mouth twists. “I am.”

“Can I ask why?”

Eyal starts to hyperventilate then, chest heaving, and he buries his face in his hands and curls up in the armchair he’s sitting in. He looks more like a child than he’s ever had before, and Leif’s heart wrenches at the sight.

“There was an attack in Brenfel,” he chokes out. “They—the Kraznians killed four hundred soldiers in about half an hour and claimed Mount Frodje, and we don’t know how they did it. But they want the war to end so—so they want me to—”

He breaks off, starting to sob.

“Take all the time you need,” Leif says softly. Eyal wipes his eyes again.

“They—they—they’re gonna make me practice Vinder magic. They’re not letting me learn from an *ashevi*.”

Leif blinks, slowly, and then the implications of such a thing hit her all at once.

“But you *can't*,” she says, disturbed. “That’s against your *religion*.”

“Queen Solfrid said that in wartime, we all have to make sacrifices,” Eyal says miserably. “And that some sacrifices have to be greater than others.”

But not this great, Leif thinks furiously. She crosses the room to the chair and perches on its arm, wrapping an arm over Eyal’s shoulders. He sniffles, then buries his face in her lap.

He’s just a *boy*. He’s just a boy, and they’ve taken him from his home, from his family, from everything he loves and told him that he’s got to give up everything to save a country that hates him.

“I’m sorry,” Leif says softly. “I’m so, so sorry. If there wasn’t anything I could do—”

“There’s nothing.”

Eyal’s voice is muffled, but she can hear its hoarseness anyway. Leif runs a hand through his hair.

“I wish I could take you home,” she whispers. Eyal sniffles.

“I want to go home. I want to go home *so much*.”

He starts crying again, shoulders shaking, and Leif slides down the side of the chair and takes him in her arms, and Eyal cries into her shoulder. He’s trembling uncontrollably, crying in hiccuping little sobs, and it’s the most awful sound Leif has ever heard.

She closes her eyes and rubs Eyal’s back, ever so slightly. “I wish I could make this all go away.”

Eyal sniffles and gives a muffled *thank you*, and they don’t speak again. Leif just holds him, lets him cry. Eyal can do nothing but weep.

It’s warmed up a bit, surprising for this time of year, and the snow has begun to melt away temporarily. Snow will come again soon, but for now the palace grounds are a mess of thick, sludgy mud that squishes under Eyal’s boots as he walks and sticks to the fine leather. Hanna will have a field day when she sees what’s happened.

He swallows, staring up at the *Hal*. For the first time he notices the five faces carved over the doorway: a pair of women, a pair of men, and then an older woman in the center, the sun’s rays jutting out from around her face.

“The Divine Family,” Leif says quietly from beside him, having noticed the faces. She’s promised to walk him to the *Hal* every time he has to go. “Our gods.”

“Who are they?”

“The woman in the center is Reinhilde, patroness of the crops and the earth, and the holy mother. To her left is Jaromír, the eldest, patron of the sky and sea, and next to him is Agnete, the first daughter, patroness of the mind and soul. On our mother’s right is Soren, the second son and patron of life and death, and to *his* right is Imriska, the youngest. Patroness of strangers and the unknown.” Leif’s tone turns thoughtful. “Sorcerers pay homage to the gods with their work, right? I suppose their faces are here to remind us where magic comes from.”

Eyal studies the Family silently. Strange, the way Vinder decorate their spaces with the gods’ images. The *Sepram* specifically forbids any depiction of *Ahel*. The Ruvav can’t know their god’s face, not really, and to try to depict it and get it *wrong* would be an insult against *Ahel*.

“You have to go in,” Leif reminds him, when several minutes have passed and he hasn’t moved from his spot.

“Can’t I take a minute to admire the beauty of Vinder artwork?”

“*Ja*, you certainly can, but you’ve taken six minutes already. From what I hear, Jakob Rendahl doesn’t take kindly to lateness.”

“He didn’t put a knife through me heart because I was *late*,” Eyal retorts, but he pushes the doors open anyway and walks inside. Leif remains where she is; very rarely are the magicless allowed within the *Hal*, and she has riding practice to get to, anyway. Though Eyal thinks he’d much rather do this with her at his side than alone.

Synne Sanger is waiting inside the *Hal*’s foyer, reading a thin volume. She glances up when he enters.

“Come with me,” she says, pushing herself off the wall. Eyal follows.

“Don’t you have anything to do other than walk me around?”

“I’m the royal herald and Jakob Rendahl’s steward. I do whatever the crown or the High Sorcerer asks me to.”

They don’t go to Rendahl’s quarters or the room with black doors, rather, Sanger leads him up a staircase, down a hallway, and onto a terrace, which overlooks the forest behind the palace. Rendahl stands there ready and waiting, hands folded behind his back.

“You are dismissed,” he tells Sanger. The sorcerer dips her head, then disappears back into the *Hal*.

Eyal swallows, remembering the last time he was alone with Rendahl. But the sorcerer’s face is not nearly as manic as it was that first day, far more solemn. Similar to the expression he wore in the war meeting. Nor does Rendahl look quite as intimidating; he’s swapped his bloody clothes and robe for a trim brown coat, lined with fur, and at first glance he could be a simple Sverhul overseer.

“*Herr* Rendahl,” Eyal says quickly, before Rendahl can say a single word. “I—I have a request.”

Rendahl’s eyebrows lift. “Really?”

He takes a deep breath. “There’s a boy I know, Aryeh nat Toriv. We worked together in the Sverhul mine and we’re close, and I care about him a lot, but he’s sick. Very sick.” Eyal hesitates. “He’s dying. When I went to see him I told him about you and your... powers, and I promised him that I would convince you to heal him.”

Eyal closes his eyes for a moment, steadying himself, and then he speaks again.

“I do not want to become a sorcerer. I want to become an *ashevi*. But if it means that you’re willing to heal Aryeh, then I... I’ll learn.”

He’s been thinking about this ever since he returned to Lystad, perhaps a bit too much. Rendahl’s got to heal Aryeh—it might be the only thing that can save him—but getting the man to do so will be a bargaining game. And the only thing Eyal can bargain with is his magic.

They can’t *force* him to study as a sorcerer. They can make his life difficult, they can imprison him or threaten or torture him, but learning magic is an active undertaking. In the end, the only person that decides whether or not Eyal is going to study sorcery, not *ashev* magic, is Eyal himself.

But Aryeh is *dying*, and if Eyal doesn’t agree to study sorcery, he’s almost certain that Rendahl will refuse to heal him.

He tries to steady his breathing. Rendahl’s face is ponderous, one hand stroking his beard.

“And I assume,” the sorcerer says, “that if I don’t heal him, you will *not* comply with the queen’s orders and begin your lessons.”

“You’re correct.”

“This boy must mean a great deal to you, then.”

Eyal thinks of Aryeh’s bony hands in his own, of all the times they held each other at Sverhul. Of the way Aryeh’s eyes crinkle when he smiles, of his gasping breaths, of his awful singing and how he loved Sunny and the way his dark hair is lank now, no longer lovely. He thinks of how sick, truly sick, Aryeh has become.

“He does,” he says hoarsely. “He is... everything.”

Rendahl is silent for a long time, staring into space.

“I knew a boy like that once,” he murmurs at last. He doesn’t elaborate. Then he straightens, blue eyes boring into Eyal.

“Very well, Eyal. You’ll begin your lessons, and I’ll heal Aryeh nat Toriv, no matter how dire his illness is.” A slight smile flashes across his face. “I *am* Vinderheim’s Hallowed Healer, after all.”

Eyal stares, uncomprehending. He hadn’t expected it to be so *easy*.

“Well?” Rendahl asks. His voice jolts Eyal back to the present, makes him realize exactly what’s happened.

“*Toh, Herr Rendahl.*” Eyal catches himself. “Sorry. *Takk mange.*”

“Of course,” Rendahl says, looking a bit amused. “Now, let us begin.”

Eyal closes his eyes, preparing himself for whatever Rendahl has in store, then opens them and meets Rendahl’s gaze.

“I’m ready.”

If he must damn his soul, then he’s going to make sure Aryeh’s life is saved in the process.

18.

“We’ll begin with endurance drills,” Rendahl says. He starts to unbutton his coat. “The queen’s instructed me to teach you using protection sorcerers’ methods as best I can, but I’m going to begin by teaching you as though you were any other student. Endurance drills are designed to teach students how to control their magic—if you cannot control it, you cannot use it. The easiest drills are breathing exercises, so we’ll start with those.”

“*Breathing exercises.*”

Rendahl raises his eyebrows. “Is something the matter?”

When the queen said I was going to be a sorcerer, I didn’t think you were going to teach me how to hold my breath. But Eyal remembers that Aryeh’s life lies in this man’s hands, so he bites his tongue and simply shakes his head in response.

“They’re incredibly simple,” Rendahl continues. “You see, magic is driven by emotion; these exercises help you to regulate your breath, which in turn helps regulate your emotions. As soon as you can control your temperament, you’ll be one step closer to controlling your abilities.”

“I think I can regulate my emotions perfectly fine.”

The words slip out before Eyal can stop them, but Rendahl simply looks amused, a smile quirking beneath his beard. He folds his arms over his chest.

“Really.”

“Really,” Eyal defends, face hot. Rendahl’s eyes are bright with humor.

“You,” he says dryly, “are an eighteen-year-old boy. A teenager. There is no demographic worse at controlling their emotions.”

Eyal scowls, looking away, and Rendahl snorts. He clasps his hands behind his back again.

“The first exercise is the easiest—a child could do it. Inhale for ten seconds, hold your breath for ten, and exhale for another ten. Like so.”

He demonstrates. Eyal watches him carefully.

“And this is going to help me defeat Krazny?”

“Not this particular drill, no, but if you don’t do it, you’ll be worse at controlling your emotions, worse at your magic. For want of a nail the horse was not shod, for want of the shoe the horse did not run, et cetera, and the kingdom fell.”

Eyal frowns at him. Rendahl simply raises his eyebrows again.

“Hop to it, then. We haven’t got all day.”

A day left.

Leif would be lying if she said she wasn't nervous about the contest. The trail could be far worse, and she can say without a hint of doubt that she's got a natural talent for riding. But she only picked up the reins a few weeks ago—Gunnar's been riding all his life, and he'd been the court champion once upon a time. Winning the race back to the stables was a fluke, and Leif knows it. Her chances of beating Gunnar a second time are slim to none.

Not that she'd ever admit it to his face.

As the contest has drawn nearer and nearer, she's begun riding obsessively, abandoning other duties in favor of a trek to the stables. She's cut Eyal's tutoring sessions short, smiled instead of scowled when the inquiry committee declined to meet with her. Poor Tage hasn't had a restful day ever since the contest was first set.

And now it's all coming to a head. Tomorrow they'll ride, see who's truly a better horsemaster. Leif has a sinking feeling that she will not be earning a victor's title.

Well, she thinks ruefully to herself as she crosses over from the Hal to the stables, at least we haven't put any likke on it.

"Leif!"

She actually freezes, startled from her thoughts. Sigrid is racing through the snow with a great grin on her face, cheeks rosy with the cold, and Leif relaxes.

"You're heading to the stables, *ja*?" Sigrid pants, skidding to a halt beside her. "Klara says you've been practicing for the race with Gunnar nearly every single day."

Leif nods. Sigrid sighs.

"You're going to drive yourself mad," she says sadly. "And you'll tire poor Tage out. Take a break."

Leif shakes her head, starting up her walk again. "The contest is *tomorrow*. If I skip practice today—"

"Take a break," Sigrid persists, wrapping her arms around one of Leif's. "Come skating with me. You're driving yourself up the wall with all this worry, and besides—we've barely gotten to see each other since this business began. Give Tage and yourself a break."

Leif sways, considering the matter. Sigrid grins up at her.

"It'll be better if you give Tage a chance to rest," she says, and this is what breaks Leif's resolve.

"Fine," she grumbles. "I'll come skating."

There's a small lake inside of the forest north of the palace, kept frozen through every season but summer by earthbloods, though they're hardly needed during Vinderheim's long winters. Today, the sorcerer sitting by the lake's edge is a young woman Leif vaguely recognizes as the sorcerer who'd been freezing the lake the first time Sigrid took her skating. The woman looks up as they enter the clearing where the lake lays, setting her book down.

"Heidi," Sigrid greets. The sorcerer smiles.

"*Fraulein* Sigrid," Heidi replies. Her eyes flick to Leif. "And... Lene?"

"Leif," Leif corrects, though she's charmed by how close the woman was. Most people don't remember her name at all. Heidi nods.

"We're just going to be skating for a little while," Sigrid says, crouching at the lakeside and unlacing her boots. "Leif's been practicing riding like mad for weeks, and I thought it best if she took a break from it. You'll save us if we fall through, *ja*?"

"Of course, *fraulein*, although you couldn't if you tried."

Heidi returns to her book. Sigrid pulls her own skates on, lacing them up, and then hands Leif a pair and helps her get them on before standing and stepping onto the lake's edge.

It has always been clear that Sigrid is a natural when it comes to skating, and today is no exception. Her movements turn fluid from the very moment she sets her skates on the ice, like a dancer entering the stage; she is almost carelessly graceful, if that's possible, not even giving a second thought to her movements. She laughs, twirling, and then begins to skate a circle around the whole lake's edge.

"Well?" Sigrid calls, as she nears Leif again. "Aren't you coming?"

Leif clears her throat. "Of—of course."

She finishes lacing up her skates, and then she takes a deep breath and edges onto the lake, legs trembling all the while.

She'd gone skating as a child, of course. Nearly every Vinder child does. But when she was seven years old, a boy from her town had gone out on a particularly balmy winter day. His friends had warned him not to skate, telling him to stay by the lakeside and hurl snowballs with them, but he'd just laughed and set out on the lake. In the end, the ice had cracked and the boy fell through, and none of his friends had been able to pull him out again no matter how they tried.

The body washed up later that spring after the ice melted, found by a group of girls playing by the lakeside. Leif never saw it, of course, but it was said the boy had still been wrapped in his scarf and mittens, rusty skates still on his feet.

After that year, she'd never gone skating again.

And it's not as though she's particularly *good* at ice skating. She wobbles and Leif can never position her legs the right way, always falling after every six feet or so. She'd much rather stay on the lake's edge, watching Sigrid dance across the ice. Sigrid, of course, has other plans. She finishes a second circle around the lake, then skates over to Leif's side and glides to a halt.

"You know," Sigrid says teasingly, "there's a reason they're called ice *skates*, not ice stands."

"I'm aware."

"Come on."

The girl takes Leif's gloved hands in her own mittened ones and starts to skate backwards across the ice, pulling Leif along, and Leif gasps. Sigrid just laughs, then quickens her pace.

"It's fun when you get used to it," she says, twisting them round. Leif snorts.

"Says the girl who's been skating since she could walk."

"I have *not*. I've been skating since I was four. And I only started taking lessons when I was fifteen."

"Still, it's—"

Leif doesn't finish, just shudders and takes a deep breath. Sigrid's expression turns soft.

"You won't fall through," she whispers. "I promise. Heidi's here for that, and even if you do she'll pull you right back out again, and then we'll take a sleigh back to the palace and you can curl up in your bed with a fire roaring and a cup of hot tea in your hands, and I promise I'll never take you skating again. But there's very little chance of that happening at all, you know. Relax."

Leif tries, she really does, but she can't quite manage it. Sigrid slows a bit, lost in thought.

"Look," she says, and takes a sharp twist that makes Leif scream. "Will you just stay with me a little bit? I..."

Sigrid's gaze drops to the ice, though she keeps skating all the same. When she speaks again, her voice is tiny.

"I really like you, Leif. You're the first girl friend I've ever had, besides Klara—everyone but Per thinks I'm too annoying, since I speak so much. I try not to. But I—I really like skating and I really like you, and I thought that maybe, we could have fun skating together and we could talk and—" Sigrid takes a breath. "You only have to stay for a little while and then we can stop and go back, and you can even go riding if you want. But could you... could you skate with me for fifteen minutes?"

"Fifteen?"

“That’s all.”

“All right,” Leif says quietly, and Sigrid smiles so brightly that she knows she’s made the right decision.

Sigrid picks up their pace, swirling around the ice and leaving beautiful patterns in their wake, only slightly marred by Leif’s own clumsy footwork. The grip between their hands never loosens a bit.

“We can talk some, if that helps,” Sigrid suggests. “To take your mind off things.”

“That sounds all right.”

They turn swiftly, Sigrid giggling and Leif inhaling sharply, but the ice stays solid and neither of them fall through. Sigrid squeezes her hands reassuringly.

“Will you tell me about your family?” she asks. Leif tenses.

Her discomfort must show on her face, because Sigrid’s smile immediately fades, replaced with a more somber expression. She lowers her voice.

“You don’t have to,” she says softly. “It’s just I don’t know much about you from before you came to Lystad—only that you were an overseer—and I’d like to know more, you see. I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

Leif coughs. “Really.”

“Really. I’ve lived here in Lystad all my life, so I’ve never had a chance to meet anyone from the mountains even though we own the mines, which I think is silly because we ought to know the people working for us, that’s only right.” She smiles again. “Please? Won’t you tell me bit of it?”

“A bit,” Leif allows. Sigrid’s grin grows, and she steers them into a tiny spin.

“Go on, then.”

“My father is a mine overseer,” Leif says, quiet. “My mother stays home, manages the household. Most mountain women do. Though there’s hardly anything to manage, now that I’m gone,” she reflects. “I’m their only child, you see. It’s a miracle I was born at all—my mother was thirty-nine when I was born, my father forty-two. They didn’t want to try for another.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Hardly.”

Sigrid startles at this. Leif simply shrugs in reply.

“My mother always wanted a son. I am not suited to her liking.”

I think that maybe, she would’ve preferred to have no child at all rather than a child like me. Leif does not voice this thought aloud; it’s too cruel for someone as sweet as Sigrid Ovesen.

“And your father?” Sigrid asks quietly.

“Gone, most of the time. Overseers live at the mines and are allotted one week per month to visit their families, so he came home rarely.”

Sigrid’s face is sad. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I would do without Mama and Papa here—I couldn’t bear it if Papa wasn’t here or if Mama didn’t like me, and I can’t imagine what it’s like for you. I’m sorry that it had to be that way.”

“It’s all right,” Leif says, mustering a tiny smile. “But could we talk about something else?”

“Certainly.”

They talk about the palace, about the dressmakers that are slotted to come before the solstice, about their favorite teas, about Sigrid’s embroidery and Leif’s ineptitude when it comes to sewing. All the little things that girls are supposed to talk about with each other. It is a conversation Leif has never had, and when she realizes what she’d had to miss, her heart twists.

But if there’s anything to have this sort of conversation with, it’s Sigrid Ovesen.

Leif learns that Sigrid abhors the color red, that her favorite food is the simple *pepperkake* cookies that commoners make, none of the palace delicacies. That if she could have any job in the world she’d be a seamstress with a little shop in Lystad and she’d sew lace onto all the ladies’ gowns and embroider all the men’s cravats and be happy with that. She envies her sisters both, Hanna for her easy charm and Klara for her easy indifference.

“Hanna is so good at making friends that she never has to worry about being lonely,” Sigrid whispers. “And Klara’s simply awful at it, but she doesn’t care at all. I got the worst of the draw, really. I hate to be by myself but I haven’t got any friends—excepting you and Per of course—because I scare them off with all my talking. Mama said once that the reason Klara doesn’t speak much is because I talk enough for both of us. Plus I’m the youngest, so everyone looks at Hanna and maybe Klara, and they forget all about me.”

Leif’s mouth twists. “Anyone who forgets about you is a fool.”

“Then the whole court of Lystad are fools.”

“To hell with the court.”

Sigrid laughs, cheeks pink, and swings them round. When they’ve slowed again, Leif takes the girl’s face in her hands.

“You, Sigrid Ovesen, are the sweetest and loveliest out of every single girl I’ve met,” she whispers. “You are just as wonderful as your sisters. Do not let anyone tell you different.”

Sigrid’s eyes are sparkling. Whether it’s with cold or tears, Leif can’t tell.

“*Takk mange*,” Sigrid says softly. “*Takk mange*, dear Leif.”

They leave the ice after fifteen minutes just as Sigrid promised, their hair windswept and their cheeks rosy. Leif fumbles with her skates, nearly ripping the lower half of her stockings off as she goes, and Sigrid cannot stop laughing.

“You,” Leif grits out, yanking the second skate off, “owe me the finest pot of tea in all of Lystad.”

“My mother’s housekeeper makes a lovely cup.”

They hurry back to the palace, drifts of snow falling lightly around them, and by the time they reach the residency Sigrid’s hair is filled with bits of white. They find Else the housekeeper and ask her to brew them a cup of warm, warm tea. When she brings it to them, there is a platter of fresh *pepperkake* cookies on the tray.

“For little Sigrid,” Else confides, smiling. Sigrid grins back just as wide.

The couch in Sigrid’s rooms is the most comfortable Leif has ever been on. The two of them curl up there, tea in one hand and *pepperkake* in the other, smiling and laughing and talking still. Leif has never been so content in her life.

By the time Eyal returns from the *Hal*, it’s nearly six o’clock, the sky outside already dark. His brow is creased when Leif and Sigrid spy him in the hall, great shoulders slumped. Leif bites her lip.

“How was the session with *Herr* Rendahl?” Sigrid ventures. Eyal glances at her.

“I have never felt worse in my life.”

With that, he walks into his rooms and slams the door shut behind him, Sigrid and Leif left to simply stare after him. He does not attend dinner.

19.

The temperature has dropped overnight, a fresh coat of icy snow coating the ground. It crunches beneath Leif's feet as they make the walk to the stables and she shivers in her boots, but when Sigrid asks the stablehands if it's wise to race horses on such a frozen day, they simply shrug and say that Gunnar has insisted upon it. Leif scowls at that, twisting her scarf tight over her mouth, and goes to stroke Tage's neck.

Gunnar is already waiting outside the stables, looking wickedly handsome in a coat of dark wool and fox fur. His lips lift in a cruel smile as Leif enters the yard.

"*Fraulein* Isaksen," he says, stretching a hand out. Leif raises her eyebrows.

"*Herr* Engelstad," she returns. She folds her hands behind her back. "I wouldn't touch you for a hundred *likke*."

Gunnar doesn't lower his hand. "It's customary for opponents to shake hands before their competitions, you know. Ignoring me would be a gross violation of court etiquette."

Leif's face tightens. She reaches out, shakes Gunnar's hand for a brief moment, then tucks her hands into her pockets. Gunnar is smirking.

"May the best rider win," he says. He pauses. "Which will be me, of course, but it's only sporting to give you a chance."

Leif feels her blood boil at that, and she opens her mouth to shoot back a reply but Sigrid settles a hand on her shoulder before she can, steering her away.

"Don't let him get to you," Sigrid whispers. "If you talk back to him it'll just make him even smugger."

Leif takes a deep breath, fuming, and straightens her back.

"Of course."

A bit of a crowd has turned out, all nobles in expensive furs and shining boots, shivering as they crane their necks to get a good look at the course. The crowd's probably half the size it would've been had the day been warmer, but Leif can't help the hot embarrassment that claws its way up her neck. She'd been cocky, too hot-tempered to resist rising to Gunnar's taunts, and now there's plenty of witnesses to watch her lose.

She tries to ignore them as best she can, keeping her eyes fixed on the snow in front of her as she walks over to Tage, who's waiting at the tip of the path. Gunnar's Kjaere is perhaps ten feet away, black tail flicking mindlessly.

Valter the stablehand has come to announce the start of the race. He stands in the center of the path, hands behind his back, and surveys Leif and Gunnar each as they mount their rides.

“The rules of the race are simple,” Valter begins, once they’ve settled in their saddles. “You may not block the other rider with your horse, and you may not taunt each other while riding. Crops are forbidden. If either horse starts before the race has officially begun, they and their rider is disqualified, and the title goes to the other competitor. Is this all understood?”

“*Ja,*” Leif replies. Gunnar gives a short nod.

“Very well. The race shall begin after the count of three.”

Valter raises his arm, holding three fingers up. Leif tenses.

“*En,*

to,

tre!”

Leif starts Tage onward as soon as the last word passes the stablehand’s lips, leaning forward in the saddle and gripping the reins hard. The crowd roars; for a moment, she sees Gunnar’s horse race ahead, and then Leif grits her teeth and spurs Tage faster. The horses reach the forest what seems like mere moments after the race begins and plunge into it without hesitation, the crowd’s cheers growing muffled and then fading out.

The world shrinks, thinning to only Leif and Gunnar and their mounts, the only sound galloping hooves and harsh breaths. Even the cold melts away. Leif finds she can think of nothing but the race, but the challenge. Can think of nothing but how sweet victory would be if she could finally grasp it.

They match pace for the longest time. Neither Tage nor Kjaere manage to pull away from the other, no matter how hard their riders drive them, and Leif allows herself to hope a bit for victory. At one point she glances over at Gunnar to find that his face is drawn tight with concentration, a bead of sweat frozen on his temple. No longer is he smirking, no longer is he boasting, and Leif cannot help but grin.

And then—

And then Gunnar grunts and digs his heels into Kjaere’s side, spurring the horse onward, and suddenly they’re pulling out in front, leading the race. Leif bites her lip and urges Tage onward, but the mare is a gentle animal, never meant to reach the speeds a true racer like Kjaere can. She cannot hope to match Kjaere’s speed.

Leif presses her onwards anyway, desperate.

Suddenly Tage jerks beneath her, whinnying. The world spins. Leif’s body tumbles out of the saddle and the reins slip from her hands, and for a moment she’s frozen in the air, heart pounding.

Then she slams into the snow with such force that the air is knocked from her lungs, pain ricocheting up her right side. Leif screams and keeps screaming.

She can't get up. She hasn't tried, but she already knows that she can't move from the utter, absolute pain flooding through her body. Her right arm is twisted awkwardly under her body, aflame despite the cold, and her leg and hip and ribs scream beneath her skin and Leif begins to sob, harsh breath punctuating the air.

Her head is spinning, her vision white. She thinks she might hear Tage whinnying somewhere, but Leif does not trust her hearing. She twists, trying to lie on her back, and the movement sparks a wave of pain that leaves her screaming again.

She tries to pull her arm out from under her, desperate. Leif hears an awful sound like bones crunching, and she whimpers.

She ends up on her back in the end, gasping for breath with tears streaming down her face. The cold has come seeping back, settling deep in her body; her coat and trousers are soaked with snow and she trembles in them uncontrollably, the movement only making the pain worse. The tears are freezing on her face, icing her cheeks in. Leif would sob if it didn't hurt so much.

No longer is the world horses and Gunnar and the thrill of the chase. It is cold, it is pain. It is the helplessness of lying immobile in a snow bank and not knowing if you'll ever get up again.

Leif closes her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. She hiccups.

When she tries to open them again, the lids have frozen shut.

Somehow, this is more frightening than anything else. Leif screams, thrashing blindly in the snow until a sharp crack of pain makes her start sobbing. She tries to sit up, to do anything, but the pain knocks her back down before she's even begun.

She thinks of the story of the frozen miners her father told her a few months ago, how last winter a group of men without any blankets froze to death in the night, the cold blotting out their lives. Leif's lip trembles.

She does not want to freeze.

She screams for Tage. The horse does not come; likely she's just as injured as Leif or worse. Leif screams for Sigrid, for Klara and Valter, for *anyone*. She even screams for Gunnar gods-damned Engelstad, because he was the closest one to her on the trail and if there's a chance of her being heard, it's if she shouts his name.

She screams for everyone she can think of. She screams until she's hoarse, and still no one comes.

By then Leif is sobbing again, despite the pain. She is blind and in pain and alone, and no one has come for her, not even now. Surely by now they must've realized that something went wrong on the path. Surely, Gunnar won and then when she never arrived after him they went looking for her, surely, surely, surely—

She gasps for breath, closing her good hand into a fist within her mitten.

“B-brother Soren,” Leif whispers, teeth chattering. *Soren, the second son and patron of life and death.* “Brother Soren, I am pained. Please keep my heart beating, for I am not ready to pass into your arms. Sis-sister Imriska, I know not what the future holds. Grant me good fortune in the days—hours—to come. Brother Soren, I am pained—”

Leif chants the prayer over and over again, curling her toes in her boots. In time she begins to stumble over the words, vowels and syllables and consonants blurring together in her mouth, but she keeps speaking anyway, keeps praying. If she doesn't she'll start crying again, and then Leif doesn't know what she'll do.

“Bro-brother S-S-Soren, I a-am—”

“Leif.”

She freezes. “Klara?”

“*Ja.*”

“Klara,” Leif breathes. She reaches out blindly, hand scraping the edge of a coat. “Klara, Klara Klara—I'm so *c-cold*, Klara, it hurts so *much*—”

“I know,” Klara says softly. “I know, I know. Sh.”

A pair of arms wrap around her and Leif quiets, breathing slowly, but then Klara tries to pull her up and she screams at the pain. Klara lets go then, calls others over, and pairs upon pairs of hands lift Leif up gently, gently, settle her into a pile of soft fur. Someone dabs at her eyes with a warm washcloth that melts the ice and Leif opens them again to find herself in a sleigh, her head in Klara's lap as the older woman wipes away the frozen tears on her face.

“Tage's hoof caught on a root, we think,” Klara says quietly. “Her leg is broken.”

Leif's heart stutters. “Is she—”

“Don't worry yourself over it.”

They take her back to the palace, lay her on a mat and carry her back to her rooms. A healing sorcerer is summoned. Leif waits silently on the bed, hand clutching Sigrid's, and then a blond, bearded man in embroidered black robes sweeps into the room.

“*Herr Rendahl*,” Leif breathes, staring. Rendahl arches an eyebrow.

“*Fraulein Isaksen.*”

This is the man who leads the sorcerers. This is the man who is teaching Eyal a craft that will force him to become a heretic. Leif shuts her eyes.

“I don’t... I don’t want...”

“*Fraulein* Isaksen, you have broken three of your ribs, your right arm, and fractured your right femur. Let me help you.”

She bites her lip, takes a deep breath. “All right.”

Rendahl moves to her side and unbuttons her soaked coat, sliding it from her shoulders. Then he leans forward, takes out a knife, and begins to cut away her shirt from over her ribs.

Leif jerks away, despite the pain that rolls through her chest. Rendahl lays a hand on her shoulder.

“I apologize, *fraulein*, but I need to touch the skin where the bones have broken. I cannot heal them without skin contact.” His brow creases. “If you’re worried about your modesty, I promise I will pry as little as possible.”

Leif still hesitates, drawing her legs up so the sorcerer can’t cut open her trousers, even though it hurts to do so. She draws her good arm around them tightly.

“Leif,” Klara murmurs. Leif swallows.

“I... Klara, would you—would you leave?”

Klara nods, ever obliging, and rises from the bedside. Leif watches her go, then turns her eyes back to Rendahl.

The man is waiting patiently, hands folded in his lap, though there’s a twitch in his jaw. Leif takes a deep breath.

“You have to promise not to tell anyone,” she whispers. “What—what I look like.”

“I never do.”

“Help me get my legs down, then.”

I don’t think I can do it myself without screaming.

Rendahl sets the knife down, leans forward and eases Leif’s legs flat again before taking her shoulders and nudging her down the bed until she’s lying flat on her back, arms at her sides. Leif steadies her breathing, clutching the sheets in her good hand as the man starts to cut the fabric away again.

Her ribs, first. Then her entire right sleeve. Her shirt will be ruined.

Then Rendahl moves to her thigh, stripping away her trousers all the way from the waistband down to the left knee. Leif clenches her eyes shut.

No one’s seen her like this since she was fourteen years old, the last time she let her mother dress her. They’d had a screaming match after, the first of many, and Leif had vowed to

never let her mother lay eyes on her body again. Even at Sverhul, where modesty was scarce and overseers and miners both bathed together, she'd been afforded some privacy. One of the few benefits of being the only woman in a mining camp. Leif was allowed to creep to the baths a full half hour before anyone else, lest the miners ogle her while washing.

Though she doubts many would've, once they realized what lay beneath her many layers. The room is deathly silent, Rendahl still. Leif wishes he'd just get this over with.

She opens her eyes. "I was seeing a healer before I came to Lystad. I... I was in the middle of treatment."

Rendahl is still quiet. Leif chances a glance at the man's face; it is neither disgusted nor shocked, as she'd expected. Simply pensive.

"If you want," the healer says softly, turning his eyes to Leif's face, "we could arrange for appointments. I do perform transitional procedures on occasion."

Her heart pounds. "The money—"

"Money is no object. I am given a monthly salary by the queen in exchange for healing the court, and you are currently a guest of the court. You needn't worry about it."

Leif stares at him, wide-eyed.

The healer in the mountains had charged a ridiculous fee, more than Leif made in a year. Before Lystad, she was facing a lifetime of scraping and saving, denying herself any luxury just so she could have the right body. And now—

"Please," she breathes. "As soon as I'm better."

Rendahl leans forward. "I'd best get to work on these bones, then."

The healing is a tedious process, and Leif grinds her teeth and clutches the sheets many times before it's over. Rendahl heals her fractured femur first, the easiest break; he doesn't need to set the bone, simply repairs the fracture, then pulls a blanket over Leif's hips to give her some modesty and begins to knit her ribs together again. Leif keeps her eyes shut the whole time through, clenching her teeth, for it feels as though a needle of fire is slowly working its way up her chest.

And then Rendahl heals her arm, and that is the very worst.

He's got to reset the bone before healing it, a procedure that leaves Leif wailing, tears sparking at the corner of her eyes. Rather than a needle of fire, this time it feels like hot coals are burning her arm from the inside out as Rendahl repairs the break. Leif bites down on her lip so hard it begins to bleed again, but she breaks more than once. Rendahl works through her screams, clearly used to shrieking patients.

At last, he leans back in his chair. Leif falls back on the bed, chest heaving, and wipes the last of the tears from her face.

“Here. Two sips should do.”

Rendahl is holding out a small glass bottle nearly filled with red liquid. Painkillers. Leif plucks it from his grip and takes a single gulp instead of two sips, ignoring the sickly sweet taste. Her eyes flutter shut immediately, the pain already starting to fade.

“*Takk mange, Herr Rendahl,*” she whispers. The sorcerer chuckles a little.

“It is my duty, *fraulein*. I’ll see you in a few days about those appointments.”

He takes the bottle from her hands, then retreats from the room. The door clicks shut behind him.

Leif lays in bed a few minutes longer, breathing deeply and enjoying the lack of pain. In the end, though, there’s a knock at the door that forces her to rise.

“Just a moment!”

She shrugs on a nightdress, sighing at the way it flutters around her calves, and stumbles over to the door. The visitor knocks again. Sigrid, Leif supposes. Perhaps Klara. She wouldn’t mind either. But when she opens the door, it’s not an Ovesen sister standing there.

It’s Gunnar Engelstad, hands clasped behind his back and expression downcast.

Leif blinks. She opens her mouth, though she hasn’t any idea what she’s going to say, but Gunnar speaks first.

“Can I come in?”

His voice is quiet, almost... sad. Not at all like the Gunnar Leif knows. She nods sharply, then steps aside to allow him in.

“What are you doing here?” Leif asks, when she’s settled on her bed and Gunnar has taken a seat in one of the armchairs. She folds her arms. “Come to gloat, I expect.”

Gunnar colors. “Not at all,” he mumbles, and Leif can’t help but snort at that. Gunnar frowns.

“*Really,*” he insists. “Leif, I... I wanted to...”

He doesn’t finish, instead dropping his gaze to the floor and fiddling with his cuffs. Leif leans back against her pillows.

Gunnar’s still clad in the coat he wore to the race, though surely he’s had time to change. Leif wonders what he’s been doing.

“Any time now,” she says, drawing one leg up. Gunnar glances up at her, brows knit with worry.

“I don’t know how to say it, exactly.” He shifts a bit. “I don’t really do this.”

“Just tell me why you came to see me.”

“*Ja, ja*. Of course.”

Gunnar looks at the floor again, face still flushes, then closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath.

“Leif, I wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize,” Leif repeats. She feels as though the breath has gone out of her chest all over again.

Gunnar nods.

“Look,” he says, leaning forward. “I—I made a mistake. I made a *lot* of mistakes. Tricking you into challenging me... I shouldn’t have done that, shouldn’t have done it at all. And now you’re all laid up and your horse is lame, and I...” He takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry for it. I’m very sorry.”

Leif stares at him.

Gunnar picks at his cuffs. “Can I explain a bit?”

“I... sure.”

He smiles a little. It’s the first time Leif has seen any sort of smile on his face that isn’t a smirk or a sneer or a snigger, and she finds she likes it quite a lot. Gunnar leans back in his chair, still messing with his sleeves.

“I don’t hate you,” he says suddenly. His hands still. “I know it must seem like I do, but I really don’t. I just... I don’t know. I just know that I don’t hate you at all, and I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you.”

“*Takk*,” Leif mumbles, still staring.

Gunnar’s expression is one of earnestness, and it really does seem like he’s being completely honest. Even so—Leif can’t quite relax, still waiting for the *gotcha* moment, still waiting for him to pull the rug out from under her and say he’s not sorry at all, for him to laugh at how utterly gullible she is.

She pulls her legs up, wrapping her arms around them tightly. Gunnar rubs the back of his neck.

“Look,” he says. “Can we start over? Try again?”

Leif narrows her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“We got off on the wrong foot. Let’s start over—I’ll go first.” He stands, crossing over to her bedside. “*Hallo*. My name is Baron Gunnar Engelstad, lovely to meet you.” Gunnar smiles cheekily, stretching an arm out. Leif raises her eyebrows.

“I could do without the baron bit,” she says. She shakes his hand anyway. “Leif Isaksen, overseer. Nice to meet you.”

“Where are you from, then?”

“The Sverhul Mountains. You?”

“The royal Court of Lystad,” Gunnar replies. He grins haughtily. “Now, pray tell, my dear *fraulein*. How did you arrive at our lovely court?”

Leif rolls her eyes. “One of my mining teams was buried in a collapse, but one man survived. The queen summoned him, and I accompanied him on his way.”

“How *very* interesting. What’s this man’s name?”

“Eyal nat Match. He—ah!”

A sudden pain flares up in her ribs, making Leif gasp. Gunnar’s brow furrows.

“Is everything all right? Did something—”

Somebody raps on the door, interrupting him, and Leif actually startles. She makes to rise, but Gunnar shakes his head.

“I’ll get it. You ought to rest.”

Such a gentleman, Leif muses as she watches him walk over to the door. She should’ve fallen off Tage sooner.

Surely this time it’ll be Klara or Sigrid standing behind the door. She pulls her legs up and hugs them, watching; Gunnar opens the door, and Ivar steps inside.

He looks Gunnar up and down, frowning. “Baron Engelstad?”

“*Ja*,” Gunnar replies. “And who might you be?”

There’s the prick I know. Ivar simply smiles wryly, folding his arms over his broad chest.

“Overseer Ivar Vangen, from the Sverhul mines. Hasn’t your brother mentioned me?”

Gunnar’s ears turn pink. “Gustav doesn’t—he doesn’t talk to me about his business.”

“I see. Then you wouldn’t really know that I’m here as Leif’s temporary guardian, would you?”

“No,” Gunnar says, dry, “I wouldn’t.”

They stand staring at each other for a moment, both wearing a righteous frown, and Leif can’t help but snicker. Ivar’s mouth twists.

“Please excuse yourself, Baron Engelstad. I need to talk to Leif alone.”

“Of course.”

Gunnar dips into a mockingly low bow before sweeping out of the room, heels clicking as he goes. Leif snickers again, leaning back into her pillows.

“Thanks, Papa,” she says as Ivar shuts the door, expression black. “I don’t know how I’d have gotten him out of here without you glaring at him.”

“Don’t call me Papa.”

“Then stop acting like it.”

Ivar grimaces and takes the seat Gunnar was occupying only a moment ago. “To think, I never married, only for Magnus Isaksen’s little girl to start calling me Papa.”

“I am not a *little girl*.”

“That’s not what the inquiry committee seems to think.”

Leif stills.

“What happened with them?” she asks carefully, running a blanket between her fingers. She knows that Ivar and Holmsen were called to meet with the committee. She herself was snubbed, something Leif would’ve been more upset about if she hadn’t been distracted by the race.

Perhaps she should’ve been more concerned about the committee.

Leif throws the blanket down. “What happened with them, Ivar?”

Ivar hesitates.

Ivar Vangen *never* hesitates.

“Ivar, please tell me what they—”

“They’ve decided to omit your testimony from the official investigation. They said they won’t be summoning you to attend any more meetings.”

No.

Leif begins tapping her thigh, trying to keep herself calm. “Did they give any reason why? Did they say that my testimony would be flawed or something, maybe because I’m close to Eyal—it’s not, I promise, I’ve been taking notes on this as soon as we knew and he didn’t do anything, I know he—”

“Leif,” Ivar says quietly. “Take a deep breath.”

Leif does.

“I know that your testimony isn’t flawed, or biased.” He lays a hand on her shoulder. “I know that Eyal didn’t do anything wrong. And I can tell you honestly that the committee is not looking to investigate his part in the accident in any way. They *do not* blame him for what happened.”

“Did they give any reason for dismissing me? Any reason at all?”

Ivar shakes his head.

Leif bites down hard on her lip, hard enough that the barely-formed scab breaks open again and a drop of blood rolls down her chin. She wipes it away with a shaking hand.

“Take a deep breath. Leif. Take a deep breath.”

She shakes her head, wraps her arms around her knees so she doesn't start tapping again. Breathing exercises aren't going to help a damn bit. Leif snuffles, burying her face in her knees.

"Why do you think they did it?" she whispers, shivering a little. Ivar hesitates again.

"What I think doesn't—"

"What you think *always* matters. You've never been wrong once."

Ivar's as good as her father, as much as he denies it. He'd come home with Magnus Isaksen every month, since he didn't have any wife or husband of his own to visit, and one of Leif's earliest memories is reaching for his threadbare coat, crying *up, up*. Ivar had laughed uproariously and swung her through the air while her father chuckled and her mother scolded him, and he'd swung her about all through her childhood. When she was eight and Mikkel Steffensen punched her in the schoolyard, Ivar was the one who wiped the tears off Leif's face and told her that next time, she should just hit back twice as hard. He'd written her letters more often than her father had, was always the first to scowl when her mother picked and needled at Leif.

He'd been the first one to call her Magnus Isaksen's *daughter*.

"I think," Ivar says quietly, "that you already know."

Leif does.

It's because her name is *Fraulein* Leif Isaksen, not *Herr*; it's because she wears her hair tied in a bun and dressed in a lovely gown to attend the queen's ball instead of a suit and cravat. It's because she only turned twenty this year, it's because she'd only been an overseer three months before the collapse, it's because she's young and it's because she's a girl, no matter what her mother or anybody else says.

Leif closes her eyes and feels the tears slip down her cheeks.

"I don't want to go home," she whispers. "I can't—I can't go back to Sverhul, not now. I *can't*."

Ivar's voice is soft. "You won't."

"Ivar..."

She doesn't finish, just gives a ragged sob and hugs her knees tighter. Ivar lays one calloused hand on Leif's back, rubbing slowly; it's more comfort than anyone has given her in a long, long time, and it only makes her cry harder.

"I wanted to be part of it," Leif chokes out. "I wanted to show them what I could do—I wanted to show them I was just as good as you or Papa or Holmsen, that I knew what happened. That I could be a good overseer too."

“I know. I know.”

The hand moves to her hair, stroking softly. Leif shudders, the ache returning to her bones, and leans into Ivar’s shoulder.

“It’s going to be okay,” Ivar whispers. “I promise.”

The sun is just beginning to set when Rendahl releases him, Eyal’s hands shaking with exhaustion. Today’s training session began at nine in the morning and has lasted all the way since, with only two breaks. One for a midday meal, and one taken when Rendahl rushed off to heal some patient. The sorcerer was perfectly comfortable, of course; he’d spent the day wrapped up in a fur coat and gloves. Eyal, on the other hand, never got to wear anything more than his shirt and trousers.

He’s positively freezing. Rendahl had decided to take advantage of the day’s cold, starting Eyal on exposure drills, which are supposed to teach him how to regulate his body temperature and keep his blood flowing. A handy skill in Vinderheim.

Eyal absolutely sucks at it.

He’s barely been able to warm himself at all. There are prayers to Soren laced through the drills, supposedly to aid him in his magic, but he can’t bring himself to speak them quite yet. According to Rendahl, his magic will be weak as a child’s until he calls on the god.

Eyal huffs, shoving his hands into his pockets.

He remembers Solfrid’s words from the night of the gala. *Eyal nat Mateh is only eighteen years old, but he has exhibited extraordinary powers. He will be trained by our greatest sorcerers.*

Eyal thinks, dully, that he absolutely hates Lujza Novomeská.

By the time he makes it to the palace doors, he’s so cold that his teeth are actually chattering. The guards look at him curiously, and Eyal smiles back, locking his jaw shut before they can say a thing.

Down the hall, left at the corner. His movements are mechanical. Eyal can’t say if it’s from his frozen state or his melancholy.

“Eyal!”

He startles. Sigrid is at his elbow, smiling in her usual way.

“Hanna’s been looking for you,” she says, swinging her arms back and forth. “She wants to talk with you—she’s in her rooms, just down there.”

She points. Eyal’s heart sinks.

“Actually, I was going to—”

“She said it was very urgent.”

He rubs his forehead. He wants nothing more than to light a fire in his hearth, curl up in his bed, and sleep for days. Eyal has been looking forward to sleeping all day long.

He sighs, dropping his hand. “Thank you for telling me. I’ll go see her.”

Hanna’s door is at the very front of the residency, so Eyal’s forced to backtrack to see her. He knocks on it tentatively, one hand still tucked in his pocket.

“Hanna?”

The woman’s reply sounds out not a moment later. “Oh, do come in! The door’s unlocked!”

Eyal’s never been in Hanna’s rooms before, not in all the weeks he’s been living at Lystad. She’s always come to see him instead of the other way round. As such, he’s not exactly sure what to expect when he opens the door and steps inside for the first time.

Cream-colored wallpaper, a mahogany coat rack. Beautiful portraits hanging on the walls. The window across from the door reaches from the floor to the ceiling, light spilling into the room, and it’s warmer than it should be.

Elegant, tidy. Just like Hanna. Eyal wonders how stupid he is to have expected anything different.

“We’re in the sitting room!”

“All right.” He shrugs off his coat, removes his snow-slicked shoes.

The rest of the rooms are just as elegant as the foyer. The sitting room boasts three windows and some of the most expensive-looking furniture Eyal has ever seen, far nicer than what’s in his own rooms. Hanna’s curled on the settee, a cup of tea in her hand. She smiles when she sees him, though it fades quickly.

“Training was difficult?”

“I haven’t been warm since I left the palace this morning.”

She laughs a little. “Come sit by the fire, then. Warm up a bit.”

Eyal does so without question, settling into the dark blue armchair closest to the hearth and its roaring flames. As he sits, he notices the young man in the chair opposite Hanna; pale, thin-faced, with a crop of dark hair and spectacles perched on his nose. He’s watching Eyal nervously, a teacup clutched in one hand.

“This is Peter Aalberg,” Hanna says, having followed Eyal’s gaze.

“Your fiancé.”

“My fiancé,” Hanna affirms. Her voice is cold. “His family owns the Brenfel mines. Peter, this is Eyal nat Match.”

Peter sits up straight. “Oh! The boy who—”

“Survived a collapse, yes,” Eyal mumbles. His face has gone hot.

“Would you like some tea?” Hanna asks, and he simply shrugs in reply. She pours him a cup anyway. Eyal sips it politely, then sets it on the side table.

“Hanna and I have tea once a week,” Peter tells him. “We used to have it twice a week, but then I was called away to Brenfel. We’re slipping back into things slowly.”

“And what a shame that is,” Hanna mutters under her breath. Eyal winces.

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing at all.”

Peter frowns, adjusting his spectacles with a shaky hand. He seems rather sweet, if a bit anxious, and Eyal isn’t entirely sure why Hanna seems to hold him in such contempt. He’s heard that Peter is kind to Sigrid, after all. There are worse men to be betrothed to.

Not that Eyal has any experience in the matter.

Hanna reaches for her teacup. “Eyal, are we still on for the sleigh ride?”

“What?”

“The sleigh ride,” Hanna says, as though they’ve discussed this in detail. “You promised me yesterday that we’d go when you finished with daily training.”

“Ah,” Eyal mumbles. Hanna smiles.

“We ought to get going, then. There’s only so much light in the day.”

She stands, smoothing her skirts. Peter hops up from his spot in his armchair.

“Might I come along?” he asks. “We’ve barely gotten to talk at all today, and I... I was looking forward to tea. If I could join you in the sleigh, I’d be...”

He trails off, wringing his hands. Hanna smiles at him sadly.

“I’m afraid there’s only room for two in the sleigh, Peter dear, and I wouldn’t want Eyal to miss it. Dreadfully sorry.”

“Oh,” Peter says softly. His gaze drops to the carpet.

Hanna sighs. “Oh, don’t be so put out about it. You know you’ll get to see me again this week. Eyal?”

Eyal gives a short nod, rising from his seat. Hanna smiles.

“I’ll see you again, Peter dear,” she says, not unkindly. Then she glides from the room, hands tucked elegantly behind her back, and Eyal has no choice but to follow her and leave Peter Aalberg behind.

The temperature's dropped considerably when they step outside, the sun low in the sky and the shadows long. Eyal shivers and tugs his coat a little tighter around him. Hanna doesn't say anything, just leads him to the stables.

"Valter!" Hanna calls, and a burly young man with coppery hair appears.

"*Ja, Fraulein Ovesen?*"

"Get a sleigh together. Eyal and I are looking forward to a ride around the grounds."

"Of course, *Fraulein*. Right away."

They spend the next few minutes waiting outside the stable, Hanna making amiable small talk and Eyal shivering under his coat. At last, Valter and another pair of stablehands appear leading a team of black-and-white horses, a red sleigh trailing behind them. Hanna climbs into it daintily, then gestures for Eyal to follow her.

The seat is wide, large enough to fit four people at least and piled high with furs. Eyal frowns.

"Peter could've come along," he says slowly, settling in the corner of the sleigh. "There's plenty of room."

Hanna sighs and tosses her head back. "Don't you understand? I wanted to get *away* from him and that dreadful little place, not have him tag along. Honestly. Men can be so daft sometimes."

Eyal feels his mouth twist. "Excuse me, then."

He takes care to position himself as far from Hanna as he possibly can, pressing himself up against the wooden side. Hanna calls for Valter, who appears and climbs into the front of the sleigh, several feet away from the both of them. The man takes up the horses' reins, gives a command, and then the sleigh jerks forward with a start.

"There is nothing better," Hanna says, closing her eyes, "than a fine sleigh ride."

Eyal begs to differ. The cold has torn into him already, nipping at his fingers and toes and neck, unbearable after the day of training. He only hopes the ride is a short one.

He curls his fingers, trying to keep the blood flowing. "Why do you hate Peter so much?"

Hanna doesn't answer. When Eyal looks back at her, she's crossed her arms in a rather unbecoming way, staring at the sleigh's edge with a pout on her face. Eyal sighs.

"Well?" he asks. Hanna glances over at him.

"I don't *hate* him," she says, looking away. "It's just... well. He's so *nervous* all the time. I do wish my mother had picked out a fiancé for me who wasn't as fretful as a mouse. You understand."

"I understand," Eyal echoes, though he doesn't at all. Hanna smiles at him gratefully.

“How’s your training going, then? I haven’t heard much about it.”

“It’s, uh... it’s going fine.” He finds himself staring at his shoes. “Could be better. Could be worse.”

“That’s good, then,” Hanna says distantly.

Eyal gets the feeling that she didn’t listen to a word he said.

“Look,” Hanna, murmurs, sliding over a bit. “It doesn’t matter that I’m betrothed to Peter, really. Doesn’t matter that I’m going to marry him. Plenty of noblewomen take lovers after they marry—everything’s a political move here in Lystad. Doesn’t matter if you love your spouse or not; you’ve just got to have a child or two, and then you can mess around with all the stablehands and tailors you like. I don’t mind marrying him, really. I just wish he was a bit more, oh... *imposing*, so to speak.”

Eyal swallows. “Imposing.”

“Bigger, I suppose. He’s hardly any taller than me. And I wouldn’t mind him being a bit stronger.” Her eyes twinkle. “Like you, maybe. You *are* very tall. Very strong.”

“I have a sweetheart,” Eyal says suddenly. Hanna stares at him.

“You do?”

Not really. “Yes.”

“Oh,” Hanna says, voice clipped. Eyal finds himself clutching the furs around them.

“His name is Aryeh,” he mumbles. “We worked together in the mines, only he got sick from all the dust and he had to go home again. He’s very sweet. He likes to sing and he’s got the loveliest eyes and he writes me letters all the time. I think... I think I love him.”

His voice cracks on the last bit. Hanna is staring at him curiously, blonde hair tumbling in the wind.

“That’s a shame,” she says, almost to herself.

“What’s a shame? That I like men?”

Hanna glances up, mouth twisting. “No, I—no. A shame that he’s sick.”

“Oh.”

The woman looks away then. Eyal stares after her, still twisting the furs beneath his fingers.

It doesn’t seem like she’s being honest at all.

They don’t talk after that, though Hanna inches closer and closer to him as the ride progresses. By the time they come back to the stables, she’s practically on top of Eyal’s lap, hands folded daintily in her muff. Eyal almost has to shove her off of him.

“Thank you for inviting me along,” he says when they’ve climbed from the carriage, and bows. Hanna smiles warmly.

“The pleasure was all mine,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ears. Eyal nods a bit. It certainly wasn’t his.

They walk back to the palace together, silent as they go. The sun is fully gone now, the grounds bathed in twilight, and Eyal finds himself shivering uncontrollably. Damn Rendahl. Damn Hanna. Damn sleigh rides.

Halfway through, Hanna pauses, turns round. Her blue eyes are shining in the moonlight.

“You know,” she says, “I’m going on a hunting trip tomorrow with a few others. Peter was supposed to come along with us, but he detests rifles. Would you mind taking his place?”

Eyal blinks. “I’m not sure if—”

“It’ll be right fun. You don’t even have to shoot anything—Reinhilde knows I never do.” Hanna raises her eyebrows pleadingly. “Won’t you come?”

“I... I suppose.”

“*Takke mange*, my dear. *Takke mange*. I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

The woman links her arm through Eyal’s, smiling warmly, and they continue on their way.

When they come to the palace entrance, the doors open before the guards have change to move, a woman’s figure slipping outside. She looks over at the two of them, and Eyal catches a glimpse of Synne Sanger’s face.

“Your Grace,” Sanger says, nodding to Hanna. “*Herr nat Match*.”

“Sorcerer Sanger,” Eyal mumbles. Hanna doesn’t greet the woman at all, simply dips her head in acknowledgement and walks inside.

“*Nobles*,” Sanger mutters, voice dripping with derision. Eyal smothers a laugh.

“Have a good night, Sorcerer Sanger.”

“And you as well.” The woman pauses. “Though I suppose you’re already having one.”

Eyal flushes, then hurries inside.

Not at all, Sanger. Not at all.

21.

Kuzicha Vysoky, your feat on the mountain is already legendary, I look forward to hearing what you come to accomplish—

What a young girl to be the salvation of our nation! You cannot understand how blessed I feel to finally be in your presence!

You'll go down in the history books, mark my words, and perhaps the prayer books as well—

The evenings' compliments ring in Draha's ears as she drags herself back to her chambers, slumped with exhaustion. The dinner celebrating the Frodje victory began at six o'clock, nearly five hours ago by now, and Draha finds herself worn weary.

She fumbles with her doorknob, barely manages to lock the door behind her. Then Draha sinks slowly onto her bed, fumbling with her hair. It's been braided back, several golden pins woven through the dark strands, and her hands shake as she yanks them out one by one.

She cannot say why the dinner shook her so badly. It was a quiet affair, in comparison to the lavish celebrations the palace usually throws; hardly fifty people in attendance. She'd greeted most, and had to maintain conversation throughout the night, but nothing special. Nothing she's done before.

Golden plates, shimmering gowns. Mouth-watering delicacies and cognac that burned in the back of her throat. The quiet chatter of high society. All her life, state dinners and galas have been something Draha's looked *forward* to, not dreaded.

So why now?

Draha sweeps her gaze across the room, and her eyes catch on a pile of books, balanced precariously on her nightstand several weeks ago. She hasn't bothered to move them since, and she cranes her neck to look at the titles.

A Study of Bones

Life, Death, And What Lies Between

Thy Instruction

Life, Dying: Written Correspondences of the Final Lifebloods

The words spark memories, as fresh as though they happened only yesterday. Snow soaking her ankles. Gold braid on uniforms, flashing in the starlight as bodies dropped to the ground. The smell of death thick in the air.

Draha tries very, very hard not to hyperventilate.

She finds herself staring at the books, volumes that she'd spent hours pouring over. She'd been so excited the first time she drained life away, a rose's petals turning black beneath her fingers, that she'd twisted an ankle while running to tell Iyov. The spell was taken from the *Thy Instructions*, one of the lifebloods' favored handbooks. She's used the technique plenty of times since, warping it and shaping it to her own needs and soaking the life from countless plants, animals.

Humans.

Her hands tighten around her hairpins. A spell that led to the massacre of four hundred Vinder soldiers by Draha's own hand, and its source is simply sitting upon her bedside table.

She throws the hairpins almost without meaning to, simply hurling them as hard as she possibly can at the *Instructions*. They do no damage—the book hardly wobbles in its place—but a small slip of paper is indeed dislodged from where it dangled on the table's edge, and drifts down softly to the floor. Draha peers at it.

Upon closer inspection, it's not a simple piece of paper but a sealed envelope. When Draha opens it, a tiny paper covered in chicken scratch stares up to greet her. It's addressed to her, sent from Iyov, and she has no idea when she actually received it. Clearly, she'd had other things on her mind, or else she'd have opened it then and there.

Draha,

I managed to find a copy of Zora Pokorny's Applications of Power, as requested. It's not in the best condition, considering it's a first-edition copy and the book was first printed almost three hundred years ago, but hopefully it'll suit your needs.

Be careful with it.

—Iyov

Applications of Power. Draha stares at the paper for several minutes, trying to figure out when exactly she asked Iyov for the book—he's got an odd talent for sniffing out rare volumes—but try as she might, she can't exactly pinpoint the date. Sometime in the last few months, she'd wager, but before Ružena came home. And when she checks the shelves of her tiny study, the book is tucked away on one of the highest shelves. Draha has to stand on tiptoe just to brush the base of its well-worn spine.

When she finally gets it down, the book falls open to a section about two-thirds of the way through. It's in the middle of a chapter, though the pages are dog-eared and several

passages circled, notes scribbled in the margins. Clearly, the previous owner thought this particular subject was of great importance.

Draha scans the pages, chewing on her thumb. Pokorny appears to be discussing the effects of certain poisons on the nervous system, specifically the paralytic effects they produce, and how they might possibly come to intersect with lifeblood magic.

A foolish hope. Lifebloods were already in decline by the time Pokorny conducted her studies, and with so much focus on preserving the order, few after her had time to contemplate alternate applications of their powers.

Draha pauses.

Alternate applications.

She sinks to the floor and rereads the pages, though with far more attention than before. Then she reads the next, and the next, and so on until she reaches the end of the chapter.

A lifeblood like Draha, Pokorny knew well the destruction lifebloods could bring—and, like Draha, preferred to avoid death if possible.

When maiming is possible, do not kill. When fighting is possible, do not maim. And when discussion is possible, do not fight.

Pokorny meant to propose that lifebloods have study of the nervous system incorporated into their training, so they might be able to paralyze and disable opponents rather than killing them outright. Whether she ever got the chance to formally propose, Draha doesn't know, but she doubts the suggestion was ever truly taken into account. Her own studies hardly reflect it.

Still. The mere idea that there might be an alternative, a way to prevent further massacres...

Draha cannot let it slip away.

The halls are darkened when she sneaks from her room, lit only by flickering tapers. Usual for past midnight. In her stolen servants' uniform, the dim light renders Draha nearly unrecognizable, even despite the number of people she's met tonight. At the fete, she'd been dressed in a scarlet sari and golden jewelry, hair braided with a smile on her lips. Now her face is downcast, her dark locks are pulled back in a bun, and the plain maid's frock she wears makes her less than memorable.

She's used this strategy countless times before, and not once has she ever been caught. It's truly amazing how a simple change of clothes and attitude can make someone almost unrecognizable.

Not to mention the fact that when she isn't in her sorcerer's uniform or other finery, most folks tend to dismiss her entirely. Draha is short, plump, dark-skinned. Hardly the picture of the glorious, auburn-haired heroines from folklore. Rarely does anyone see her and immediately realize that she is a *kuzichka*.

She tries not to let it bother her too much. She's fiercely proud of her Jarghali heritage, inherited from her father: a spice trader who, on a trip to Krazny, had fallen for her mother and loved her so much he decided to stay. Draha inherited his height, his twinkling black eyes. One of her few, cherished memories from her life Before (because there are two halves to her life, the part before she came to Ilazovna and the part after) is of her father lifting her high in the air, swinging her round as she giggled and clutched tight at his arms. Her mother was laughing, calling his name. *Sujay, Sujay*.

Draha cannot remember her mother's name, nor the one she was born with. All sorcerers are given new names when they come to train. Their new surname represents the order they belong to, and their new given name represents their new lives. Try as she might, Draha cannot remember what her parents called her.

But she will always remember her father's name.

Sujay. She keeps it tucked close to her heart. A memory of the girl she once was. A reminder of the past and family she will never know again.

She isn't stupid. She knows what some members of the court see when they look at her, how they survey her Jarghali jewelry and customs and skin appraisingly.

She knows how they see her, and it is infuriating.

Draha has been prophesied. She has been raised to end this war ever since she was eight years old, has been trained endlessly for the day she will bring peace to all of Krazny, and yet there are still people who will dismiss her out of hand.

It certainly makes it easier to sneak around the palace, but Draha would sacrifice every secret trip she's made up and down these halls to ensure that no one ever, ever views her heritage with disdain again.

She tells no one about about the *looks*, tells even fewer about the rage it incurs. There are people who would understand—Ružena's Tenguran blood is plain to see, and Iyov's Ruvav features turn heads wherever he goes. Both know the hardships of living in Krazny when one does not look like most Kraznians. But Draha finds that this is a wordless kind of pain, a voiceless sort of anger. One she isn't quite ready to share.

The path to Iyov's rooms is familiar, one Draha's feet have traveled a thousand times before. She finds her way easily enough, and from there it's simply a matter of picking the lock.

Iyov enjoys parties, even having quit drinking, and the Frodje celebration is due to last long into the night. Draha sincerely doubts that he'll be home to find her. And when the door swings open to reveal a pitch-black, perfectly silent set of rooms, she finds her suspicions are correct.

Go to his study. Find the books. Leave quietly. Hopefully, Iyov will never notice that the volumes are missing, and she can return them at a later date.

Draha yanks the matchbook from her pocket, then sets a match between her teeth, strikes it, and lights the candle she's brought along. Sometimes the common ways are far easier than magic, and she's never had a talent for fire manipulation. Even Valentín, earthblood to the core, finds it difficult. Fire is volatile, difficult to control. Draha has no intention of accidentally burning down half the palace for the sake of a few books.

Raiding Iyov's library at midnight for any texts related to Zora Pokorny's writings is, perhaps, not the most ethical idea Draha's ever had. But if she takes the time to go back to the dinner and actually ask him, he'll not only say no but send her to bed, and she sincerely doubts that she'll be able to sleep with this particular question burning in her mind.

She'll ask forgiveness when morning comes. Iyov's likely to grant it; he's always spoiled her, no matter the subject.

The man's been her tutor as long as Draha's been at Ilazovna. As a Ruvav *ashevi*, he cannot teach her magic without breaking his religious and moral code, so Draha's learned sorcery from plenty of others instead. But Iyov is a historian and polyglot alongside being a master tactician, and has a head for numbers and the sciences as well. Valentín is the artistic side of their little pair, Iyov the logical half. He's taught her geography, history, Vinder and Jarghali and even a bit of Ruvav. His library is one of the most extensive personal collections in Ilazovna, if not the country.

And, though he may be an *ashevi*, Iyov has always been curious about the history of sorcery, if not its techniques. Especially the history of lifebloods.

He will have plenty of volumes for her to peruse.

This is clear enough from his study: the largest room in his quarters, with bookshelves against every wall and a tiny desk, crammed beneath the window. Every shelf is filled to the brim, and there are countless books stacked around the room besides.

He has them grouped by subject, at the very least. It'll make her search far easier than it would be otherwise. Draha lifts her candle, then starts looking for Pokorny's works.

Eventually she finds them. They're tucked away on a bottom shelf, wrapped together with twine and surrounded by other volumes about lifeblood practices and theories.

She crouches down and edges a slim red volume off the shelf. A quick look at the inside cover tells her that it's written by Pavol Medvedík, a lifeblood scholar who lived nearly four hundred years ago, and sought to find the bounds of sorcery. Possibly worth a peek. She cracks it open.

"What the *hell* are you doing?"

Draha spins round in an instant, the book crashing to the floor. Iyov's standing in the doorway, knife in one hand and lamp in the other, a vicious expression on his face. He relaxes visibly upon seeing her.

"Good God," Iyov mutters, sticking the knife into his belt. "I thought you were a thief or worse."

Draha coughs. "Well."

Iyov's forehead creases, and he plants one hand on his hip. "Drahomíra Vysoky, what exactly are you doing in my library at this time of night?"

"I found the Pokorny book," Draha mumbles. She stares at her feet. "And I... I saw her theories on lifebloods' powers being used for paralysis instead of death, and I thought..."

She trails off, glancing hesitantly upwards again. Iyov's expression has softened, and he crosses the room to set the lantern down and start sorting through titles. Draha stares at him, wide-eyed.

"You should be asleep, you know," Iyov remarks, yanking out a blue book and scanning it. He frowns and shoves it back.

"Couldn't. I was... thinking."

"Doesn't sound good."

Draha remembers wet socks, glassy eyes. "It wasn't."

When she looks up again, Iyov is looking back at her with a face full of concern. She feels her face heat.

"It's all right," Iyov says softly. "I know what it's like, cricket. To mourn like this."

"You don't."

I do." He's started staring at the shelves again, but his face is haunted. "I've been the Fourth a long time. Longer than you've been alive."

Ah, Draha thinks numbly. *Of course*.

Iyov pulls down three books, each of varying size and thickness. He presses them into her hands.

“Start with these. One talks about lifeblood practices, another coreblood paralyzing techniques, and the third poisons that affect the nervous system. I’ll track down a few others, but these should be a good place to start.”

Draha whispers hugs them to her chest. “Thank you. Really, I—”

“Ah-ah.” Iyov presses his forefinger against her forehead. “Promise me you’ll go to bed before you read any of them.”

She groans. “Fine. I promise.”

“Excellent. A growing girl like you needs her sleep.” He pauses. “Even if it’s hard to get.”

Iyov leans forward, wrapping an arm round her shoulders. Draha sags into his embrace easily.

“You’ll find a way,” he whispers, voice muffled. “Even if I have to sort through all the books in Krazny, we’ll find a way. No matter what it takes.”

Iyov draws back, holding her at arms’ length. He studies her appraisingly, and Draha wiggles her eyebrows, earning a laugh.

“We’ll talk in the morning. I have some thoughts about hemlock in particularly.” Iyov presses a kiss to her crown. “Now go to sleep, little cricket. Get some rest.”

Draha doesn’t sleep that night, despite her promise. Her head is still too heavy with thoughts of Frodje. Instead, she spends the hours curled in her bed, snacking on nimki and stroking Boris’ fur as she studies the book of poisons.

By the time morning comes, she has a fair idea of what exactly she means to study.

22.

The knock at her door comes late that evening. Leif is already abed, about to nod off before the sound wakes her, and she pulls herself up grudgingly.

A girl in messenger blue is waiting in the hall, envelope in hand. “A letter for you, *Fraulein.*”

“*Takk,*” Leif says with a yawn. She plucks the letter from the girl’s fingers. “You are dismissed.”

(How easily she’s adapted to the court customs.)

Leif doesn’t check for the sender until she’s back inside her rooms, the door shut and locked behind her. She yawns again, sliding to the floor, and flips the envelope over.

Her eyes land on *Hedda Isaksen*, and Leif’s heart skips a beat.

Not now, she thinks desperately. *Not now.*

She hasn’t had a letter from her mother in weeks, not since before she challenged Gunnar. The break has been welcome. And with all that’s happened today, Leif’s not exactly sure she can endure her mother’s scathing words.

She opens the letter anyway. Best to get it over with.

Except when Leif reads her mother’s words, she wonders if it was wise to get it over with at all.

The letter isn’t long, maybe a page and a half, but it hurts more than any knife or bullet ever could. Every time her mother’s written her, it’s been painful, but this time it claws at Leif’s heart. She has to choke back tears as she skims the letter, heart thrumming.

Leif’s eyes snag on a line near the bottom of the page.

These delusions of yours have gone on long enough. You are to return home immediately, so you cannot continue to disgrace our family name.

Leif stares at the page for the longest time, eyes wide, and then she rips the letter in half, over and over and over again. Little scraps of paper fall slowly to the floor, and when she’s finished, Leif gathers them all up and deposits them in the fireplace, so they may be burned the next time the maid lights a fire. Her hands shake as she does so; her throat is tight with tears.

She does not cry.

She does not cry as she walks to her desk, and she does not cry as she carefully takes out her notebook and an inkpot and a pen. Leif addresses an envelope to Hedda Isaksen, and does not cry as she does so, nor as she scratches out the shortest of letters.

Mother:

Do not write me again until you wish to call me your daughter.

Leif

She folds the paper carefully and slides it into the envelope with the most precise of movements. She has no wax for a seal; that will have to wait until tomorrow, when Leif can trouble the maid about it. Work done, Leif sets the envelope in the center of the desk, and retreats slowly to her bed.

Her chest is heaving. Only when she is once again in bed, wrapped in blankets, does Leif finally close her eyes and allow herself to weep.

The hunting party leaves at dawn the next morning, heading for the Gyldenaal Forest. The Gyldenaal lays just northeast of Lystad, a great pine forest where the court goes to hunt, and when they've settled in the carriages, Hanna promises Eyal once again that they're going to have great fun on the trip.

There are six others riding along with them, two young women and four men: Inger Jakobsen and her fiancé, Christen Opdahl, Katja Hald, Geir Engelstad, and then Anton Mathiasen and Theodor Anderberg. All are considerably older than Eyal himself, the youngest being Anton at twenty-three years old. Halfway through the trip to the Gyldnaal, it occurs to Eyal that the group must be childhood friends. There's no other explanation for just how *relaxed* Hanna is; she's more cutting than usual, not so elegant and prim. It's as though a second side of her has revealed itself only for these select few.

Eyal wonders what it's like to have childhood friends. He never had many himself, aside from his sister. The Vinder children shied away from him and the few Ruvav ones he knew were travelers, part of the small group of Ruvav who prefer to roam the world rather than settle in a single place. He had learned their names and faces, promising to say hello if he ever saw them again, but of course he never has.

He's silent most of the way to the Gyldenaal, speaking only when someone else directly addresses him, though the rest of the party chatters on amiably. By the time they reach the forest, the sun is already high in the sky, the air crystalline with cold. The others shiver as they step from the carriages, pulling their scarves over their noses and cursing the weather; Eyal, already accustomed to cold after the frozen mines, is unaffected.

There's a lodge at the forest's edge, occupied by three wardens who oversee the Gyldenaal. Two remain inside, while the third trudges out into the snow and instructs them on hunting protocol.

Do not shoot if there is any human in your line of vision. Aim your gun only if there is prey in sight. Be careful to keep the safety on until you are ready to shoot. Eyal listens carefully to everything the warden has to tell them. The rest of the party, on the other hand, pay little attention, whispering among themselves and even yawning as the warden continues his instruction.

Perhaps they've been here before and have already heard the protocol. Eyal hopes dearly that they have.

When the warden is finished, he tells them to remain where they are, then fetches a large chest full of rifles and begins to pass them out. Theodor, Hanna, Christen, Geir, Katja. Each smiles as they receive their weapon, and in Christen and Katja's cases, run their hands down the gun's smooth wood lovingly before laying it on their shoulder.

Someone presses a rifle into Eyal's hands.

He stares down at it numbly. Somehow, despite the fact this is a hunting trip, he had not expected to be given a weapon. He has never killed anything in his life. Has never held a gun in his life.

It is terribly light for such an awful thing.

"Gods, you look as though you're going to be sick!"

Eyal glances up quickly. Inger Jakobsen is laughing, hands folded across her chest, and the rest of the party is quick to join in. Eyal feels his face heat.

"Ever seen a rifle before?" Geir Engelstad asks. Eyal shakes his head mutely; this only results in more laughter.

"Now, now."

Hanna's voice cuts through the mockery, swift as a knife. The laughter dies down immediately.

"Eyal has hardly had the same opportunities as we," she says sharply. "We would do well to remember that as members of the court, we have far more available to us than to the vast majority of our country. It is cruel to ridicule him over something he has little control over."

"Well said," Christen Opdahl mutters, and the rest of the party murmurs their assent. Hanna smiles haughtily, looking quite pleased with herself.

"Now then. There is only so much light in the day; we ought to begin the hunt."

Others nod. Someone taps at his shoulder; when Eyal looks over, Anton Mathiasen is standing at his side.

“You look like a formidable fellow,” the man says, sticking his hands in his pockets. “I doubt it’ll matter that you’ve never seen a gun before. Care to hunt with me?”

“I thought we were all supposed to hunt together.”

Anton snorts. “Hardly. Eight people traipsing through the woods—that’d scare all the prey off. We usually split into groups of three or four when we go out, and I wouldn’t mind having you at my side. So?”

“All right,” Eyal says uncertainly. Anton smiles, then calls for a few of their fellows—Theodor Anderberg and, of course, Hanna—and the warden as well.

There are apparently hunting blinds set up periodically throughout the Gyldenaal, in order to provide inexperienced hunters the best possible chance at scoring prey, and the warden leads their little group to one such blind located a ten-minute walk from the lodge. The blind is white, so as to blend into the snow, and tiny. They file in one-by-one, Eyal being the last to enter.

The blind’s small enough—and cold enough—that they’ve got to huddle together, shoulders brushing, and Eyal finds that Hanna is the one at his side. He suppresses a grimace, then positions his rifle through one of the blind’s windows, just as Theodor did a moment ago.

And then they are quiet.

The silence lasts for hours on end, the sun climbing steadily in the sky above them. The quiet is not what unnerves him; Eyal spent nearly a year toiling in the mines, where the only sounds were picks and guns and, occasionally, Aryeh singing. He’s perfectly used to silence, although he does see Theodor and Anton open their mouths more than once, only barely catching themselves before they speak.

(Hanna is as elegant and proper as always, of course. Not once does she open her mouth at all.)

Rather, it’s the cold that eats at Eyal far more than any silence ever could.

The Gyldenaal is so cold that he could see his breath as soon as he stepped from the carriage, and an hour into the hunt his hands are beginning to tremble, his rifle twitching along with them. Hanna shoots him a look; Eyal nods, then pulls his weapon back into the blind, so no animals see it shaking. His legs went numb long ago, both from the frozen air and the awkward position he was forced to assume in order to position his rifle properly, and he takes the opportunity to stretch them out again, rubbing at his knees and ankles and calve muscles through the thick layers of wool that cover them.

Anton and Theodor and Hanna are all perfectly still, Hanna's gaze having returned to the forest once more. Eyal marvels at how unaffected they seem, for the cold must be seeping into their bones as much as his.

Eventually, when the blood has returned to his legs and his hands have quit quivering, he forces himself upright again, edges his rifle through the window once more. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hanna smiling, and it's only a moment before her side is pressing rather insistently into Eyal's own. He swallows and tries to ignore it as best he can.

It's around midday when the first shots ring out. A group of deer have crossed into their line of sight, one young-looking and the other two clearly adults. Eyal has barely laid eyes upon them before the cracks of rifles firing cleaves the silence in two, gray smoke filling the air, and when the smoke finally clears one of the adult deer lies dead upon the snow, blood leaking from its body. It has been shot twice, once in the chest and once in the hind. The other deer are gone already, likely scared off as soon as the shots rang out.

Anton drops his rifle, crows, and tears from the tent. Hanna follows close after him. An argument strikes up, and from what Eyal can make out, both of them shot as soon as the deer came into view, but neither is willing to admit that they hit it in the leg rather than the heart. Theodor sets his rifle down and files out after them, hands tucked into his pockets as he offers his own opinion on who felled the deer.

Eyal, for his part, is rooted to the spot.

He'd seen his father's body as it laid upon the road those two years ago, for no one knew who the man was, only that he was Ruvav, and Eyal had been fetched to possibly identify the body. He can still remember it clear as day: his father's broken form lying limply on the earth, the dusty road soaked crimson. Match's long hair had been chopped off, taken as a— a gruesome trophy, according to later testimony. His hands had been splayed out, as though pleading. Eyal remembers vomiting.

He remembers the red, red blood that had leaked out of his father's body, forming a dark red carpet all around him.

The deer that lies before him reminds him horribly of the whole affair. The animal has fallen on snow, certainly far white that the roadside where his father lay, and its scarlet blood is terribly, terribly vivid. Eyal chokes down bile.

He tears his eyes away from the animal's body, then sets his rifle down and forces himself out of the blind.

The argument has turned from who killed the deer to who ought to take it back to the lodge. Theodor is largely silent, scarf pulled up over his nose; Anton argues that if Hanna is so certain she killed the thing, then she might as well haul its body back.

“I’m not half as strong as you,” Hanna is saying, hands on her hips. “It’d take two hands to carry it back at least—the two of you ought to do it.”

Anton growls. “You say you felled it, you get to—”

Eyal coughs, and all eyes turn to him.

“I can take it back,” he says quietly. “I was one of the strongest men in the mines, back at Sverhul. I could carry it back on my own.”

There’s silence for a moment. Then Hanna clears her throat, smiling, and tucks her hands into her pockets.

“That’s settled, then. Eyal will take it back, and we can quit fussing about the whole affair.”

The deer’s body is still warm, blood still flowing from its wounds, and Eyal cringes as he touches its fur. He wraps a handkerchief round the wound in its leg, and Theodor offers his scarf for the bullet hole in the animal’s chest. The wrappings do little to staunch the bleeding, but at least Eyal won’t end up covered in blood. He crouches at the deer’s side, then slides his arms under its body and hauls it up onto his shoulders in one quick motion.

It’s lighter than he expected, perhaps one hundred and ten pounds or so. It still weighs on him, of course, but nothing Eyal can’t handle. For a moment, a surge of joy runs through him—Lystad has not snapped the strength from him yet.

When he turns, Anton and Hanna and Theodor are all staring at him, open-mouthed. Hanna’s eyes are wide, and there’s a faint blush on Theodor’s cheeks that cannot be simply due to the cold.

“Are you absolutely sure,” Anton says slowly, “that you’ll be able to manage it all by yourself?”

Eyal shrugs, the deer shifting on his shoulders. “I used to haul the coal carts up the mine shaft at the end of the day. This is nothing.”

Their footprints are still visible in the snow, making it easy for him to find his way back again to the lodge. The deer slows him down only minutely, and Eyal arrives after eleven or twelve minutes.

Two of the wardens greet him this time. With their help, Eyal slides the deer’s body from around his shoulders, and one informs him that he might as well return to the blind. They’ll ensure that the body, as well as the bodies of all other animals shot today, will be delivered to

Lystad, where the kitchens will prepare the meat. Eyal nods, swallowing a distinctly queasy feeling, and begins to return to the blind once more.

Fresh snow has begun to fall, obscuring the tracks from earlier and making it difficult to navigate. The unfamiliar landscape blends together in the blanket of white, and soon enough Eyal finds himself lost, staring blankly at the forest around him.

He tries to backtrack to the lodge, but the snow is coming down rapidly, covering each footprint nearly as soon it's made. Eyal doesn't try to remember the path. He's only a few minutes walk from the lodge, and if he keeps walking, there's a chance he'll only drive himself further away rather than closer.

He's seen how far the Gyldenaal stretches. He has no intention of freezing to death in its depths.

Not that you could die, a voice whispers in his head. It sounds strangely like Jakob Rendahl.

Eyal shivers as he contemplates the prospect. To freeze, without any hope of death—it is utterly terrifying.

First he would begin to slow, his arms and legs moving as though he were trapped in jelly. He would grow confused. His pulse and breath would slow as well, and soon he would be stumbling his way through the woods, shivering all the way.

He'd collapse at some point. Eyal's very sure of that. Perhaps he would fall unconscious, if *Ahel* were kind; if not, he would lie there for who knows how long, lost in a haze and cold, so *bitterly* cold.

"Ahel, watch over me," Eyal whispers, his voice terribly small.

He leans against a tree, taking a deep breath, and begins to rub his hands together for warmth. It's a small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless.

Eyal exhales quietly.

Something twitches in the corner of his eye, snatching his attention. Eyal swivels to see a rabbit's tall ears, pale and barely visible against the snow, but there nonetheless. The animal's dark eye is fixed on Eyal, its tiny chest quivering.

"Shila," Eyal greets. He crouches slowly, and the rabbit does not move. "Are you here to guide me?"

The *Sepram* says that rabbits and hares have always come to guide the Ruvav. It was a black hare that led weary travelers from the Kiroka plains, a young kit that comforted the storyteller Adva nir Rachel in her imprisonment. Even in Eyal's stepmother's tales, the animals were sent to aid his people. Perhaps *Ahel* has decided to be kind to him after all.

The rabbit twitches, then bounds away into the snow, light enough to leave tracks but slow enough that Eyal can follow it even through the trees. It's tiny, darting out of his vision every so often, but he finds he can always spot it again.

Eyal rubs his hands together once more, then tucks them into his pockets. Ahel, *I am grateful.*

He presses on after the rabbit. Suddenly, the trees drop away and Eyal finds himself in a now-familiar clearing, blood still smeared on the ground. The rabbit has frozen where it stands, quivering, and Eyal steps forward slowly.

A shot rings out.

The rabbit is no longer white as snow, no longer twitching. Eyal stumbles backwards, horrified.

Hare and rabbits are sacred to the Ruvav. We don't eat them, we don't kill them, we don't skin them—in fact, we go out of our way to avoiding harming them.

“Ahel made the hare and rabbits first,” his stepmother whispers, holding him close. “Keep them safe, and they'll guide you well.”

The Sepram says that they are some of the only animals with souls.

“Eyal!”

Someone grabs his wrist and Eyal tears his gaze from the rabbit's bloody body, swiveling round to see Hanna's face. Her eyes are wide, almost scared.

“Are you mad?” she asks. “Walking into the middle of the range like that, you could've been—are you quite all right? You've gone pale.”

“Give me a moment,” Eyal says, voice faint. He tugs his wrist from her grasp, then keels over and vomits into the snow.

23.

“I find that chamomile tea often helps when I’m feeling ill,” Hanna says softly, handing him a teacup. “My mother’s housekeeper makes the very best.”

Eyal closes his eyes and wraps his hands around the cup. The tea is still too hot to drink, so he simply rests it in his lap, letting the warmth seep through him.

The hunting trip had been cut short immediately after his reaction to the rabbit’s death. Hanna had been very concerned for him, and the trip had been due to end soon anyway. In the end, they returned to Lystad only an hour before they had originally been meant to, and Hanna hurried him out of the carriage and back to his rooms, clutching Eyal’s arm tightly all the way.

Hanna presses her hand to Eyal’s forehead, and he does his very best not to squirm. She draws it away with a frown.

“You aren’t feverish,” she murmurs. Eyal nudges her hand away gently. He hadn’t been feverish on the carriage ride back to Lystad, either, which was the first place she checked his temperature, but he decides it’s best not to voice that fact.

“I just need to rest,” Eyal replies, quiet.

“*Ja, ja*. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, I think...” he pauses, setting his teacup down on the table. “I just need to rest, really.”

Hanna nods, a smile plastered on her face, and puts the teapot down beside Eyal’s cup. “Well, if you do need anything, you always know where to find me.”

She leaves him alone then. The door shuts loudly behind her, and Eyal stands in place for several long minutes, gaze unfocused and hands trembling.

No one has told him exactly who killed the rabbit. He’s certain that it was only a single shot, for only a skilled hunter would’ve been able to parse the animal’s pale fur from the snow around it.

Eyal cannot tear his mind from how fast Hanna appeared at his side, how the rifle was still clutched in her hand when she grabbed him. How scared she looked, as though she’d nearly shot Eyal himself.

He reaches for the teacup with a trembling hand. The chamomile has long since cooled, but he drinks it all down anyway, swallowing the too-sweet tea with a grimace.

He should talk to someone. Leif, probably; she’s the only person at Lystad that he’d feel completely comfortable sharing this with. Sigrid, maybe.

Or maybe he could write Aryeh. They haven't exchanged a single letter since Eyal visited, nearly a week ago already, and his world feels empty for it. But every time he thinks of picking up his pen, Eyal remembers the last thing they spoke of and cringes.

I want to kiss you. On the lips.

Eyal lowers himself into an armchair, staring blankly into the fireplace. The maid came and lit a fire in it nearly an hour ago, and he hasn't added any wood since, the flames flickering and dying slowly. It is little more than glowing embers by now, barely heating the room as it should.

He closes his eyes, and he can see naught but the rabbit's broken body, its blood staining the snow around it.

Eyal shivers. It is not entirely due to the room's cold.

He stays in the armchair a while longer, still staring at the dying fire. He pours himself a cup of tea every now and then. For the most part, Eyal does his best to keep his mind completely clear, without thoughts of rabbits or Aryeh or Lystad to grieve him any more.

The minutes pass, turning into an hour. The hours turn into two and still Eyal does not move, gaze fixed on the fireplace before him. He doesn't register the cold, not even as it makes him shiver, not even as the fire dies at last.

His eyelids begin to droop, and slowly, Eyal succumbs to sleep.

He dreams.

He dreams that he is standing on a great sheet of ice, so vast that Eyal can see neither where it begins nor ends, and the soles of his feet burn with cold. He wears only rough trousers, the sort he had at Sverhul, except these aren't stained with soot. No boots, no gloves, no shirt or coat; his breath turns white in the air, and yet he doesn't shiver. Only his soles register the terrible, terrible cold.

He takes a single step forward, and then another, and another and another. The ice cracks beneath his toes.

Eyal does not stop.

All he knows is that he must keep walking. He has no idea what will happen if he stops, only that it will be very, very bad.

So he continues across the ice, breath shuddering in his lungs as he walks, the ice shifting beneath his feet. Not once does he fall through, but the idea is there anyway—that if he makes a single faulty step, he will fall through and be swallowed by a frozen sea.

He walks and walks for what seems like hours, though he does not tire, and the landscape remains unchanged. The ice stays hard beneath his feet, the air stays frozen, the sky stays white. He cannot see the sun, no matter how far he walks. Every so often he worries that he has simply been walking in place, his feet hitting the same grooves in the ice over and over and over again, but when he checks behind his shoulder there is a long, long line of blue footprints, and he is comforted for a while longer.

His people have crossed the earth countless times over, have lived on both the sea and the land, have moved by boat and horse and caravan and by their own two feet. No one has welcomed the Ruvav. No one has ever thrown their doors open and said *lay your weary head down, for you have been traveling for so long.*

Perhaps it is only fitting that Eyal be doomed to walk forever.

He slips, skidding across the ice. When he looks back, he sees a Ruvav word upon the ground, drawn in blood. *Mavah.*

Death.

His hands are slick, slick and red, and there is a great weight in them that was not there before. When he brings them up in front of his face, a white rabbit dangles from his fingers, streaked with blood and long gone cold.

Eyal stumbles backwards. The rabbit slides from his hands, and when he gasps for air his lips are just as slick as his hands, heavy with the taste of iron. He shudders.

“*Ahel,*” he whispers. “*Ahel,* forgive me. Forgive me, I—I—”

My son.

Eyal startles, head swiveling, but there is no one to be seen. Even the rabbit has vanished from the ice.

Eyal, my son. Eyal the strong. Listen.

The words are Ruvav. It sounds as though they are spoken by a thousand voices at once, man and woman and child alike, and Eyal kneels slowly. The ice cracks beneath him, louder than ever before.

“I am listening,” he whispers, and he bows his head.

You are young, so young, and yet a terrible choice lies before you. The words grow louder, louder. *Think of the hands that raised you, of the songs you sang as a child. Think of the boy you once held.*

“Eyal?”

Another voice, one he knows. Eyal raises his head swiftly to see a figure on the horizon, and his heart swells at the sight.

Listen—

“Abba,” Eyal whispers. He pushes himself from the ice. “Abba—Abba—”

Think of the stories your stepmother told you when you were young, think of the rabbit quivering in the wood, think of the priest’s robes—

“Abba—”

“Eyal?”

Think of your angel’s eye.

He runs.

Think of the Sepram. Think of the people that raised you, of their twinkling eyes and darkened skin, of their braided hair—

“Abba,” Eyal whispers. “Abba, Abba—Abba I’m so sorry—”

His father turns and for the first time in two years Eyal sees the man’s face, bright and alive, his dark hair swishing around his neck. Eyal cries out and reaches, reaches as far as he possibly can and his father does too, smiling, but it’s not enough—it’s never *enough*—

“Eyal,” his father whispers, and his laugh lines deepen. He reaches out, their fingertips brush, and then the man is gone.

Think of your people.

Eyal gasps. Tears prick at his eyes, and he tilts his head back, about to cry; blood that is not his own drips from his fingers.

You are so, so young, but you must carry this burden anyway.

“I can’t,” he whispers. He starts shaking. “*Ahel*, I can’t, please, I *can’t*—”

You can.

He can hear singing, the sound of countless voices raised in the song. It is a song of the Ruvav, a song of his childhood, and Eyal’s chest heaves.

He closes his eyes and for a moment, he can see his father’s face again, brown and lined and smiling, and the ache in his heart is so strong it threatens to overwhelm him. The tears are already beginning to stream down his face, and Eyal wipes them away with shaking hands.

“Abba,” he chokes out. “*Abba.*”

Eyal collapses to his knees, trembling. The ice cracks and shudders and then splits at last to form a gaping cavern, hungry and open and waiting.

He falls. The water swallows him without mercy.

24.

Someone's rapping at her door.

Leif rises slowly, grumbling to herself all the while. A glance at the clock tells her it's half past three in the morning, far too early for any sort of visitor, but the knocking continues.

"Leif!"

Eyal. She finds a candle and lights it, yawning, then crosses over to the door.

"Unless the palace is on fire," Leif begins, "this conversation can probably—"

She falters. Eyal's shoulders are shaking and there are tears dripping down his face, unfettered, and he's still dressed in yesterday's clothes.

"Can I—can I come in?"

"Of course," Leif says softly, stepping aside. Eyal wipes the tears with his sleeve, then staggers through the doorway.

He cannot honestly remember the last time he saw an *ashevi*.

There are *ashev* at every Ruvav temple, of course, but Eyal's family hadn't lived anywhere near one. The closest place was miles away, far enough that they only made the journey for the most important holidays each year; Ruvav worship, unlike the Vinder's grandiose chapels and decorated dedicates, is easy enough to complete on one's own.

His people have no homeland, after all. When you are constantly moving, your religion must be just as portable as the rest of your things.

Leif had comforted him, then found Margit Ovesen, who sent for the queen and Rendahl and anyone else who might be needed before returning to her rooms. "Anyone else" apparently means her housekeeper, Else, who's brought Eyal a cup of warm tea and some breakfast, because, according to Else, 'a growing boy needs his food, especially one as great as you'.

So now, Eyal's waiting in the Ovesens' drawing rooms, utterly alone except for the slowly cooling breakfast at his side.

Rendahl sent Leif back to her rooms when he arrived, only to turn around and leave himself when the queen bade he go find an *ashevi*. Solfrid had vanished a few minutes later; she's still in the period of her pregnancy where she sickens easily, and she'd mumbled that she needed a moment to herself to *recollect*.

Eyal picks up his cup of tea and takes a long, long sip.

The door opens and Rendahl enters again, followed by two people in simple dress. Eyal cranes his head to look at them. The first is a man of perhaps thirty, hair tied back in the Ruvav

way, the second, a woman with gray-streaked hair and tawny skin. A white scarf is draped over her shoulders—a *radyah*, priest's stole.

Eyal hasn't seen a priest in a long time, either.

"This is the boy I spoke of," Rendahl says, addressing the Ruvav. "Eyal nat Match."

The priest smiles, bows a little. "*Shila*, Eyal. I am Ilana nir Harel. This is Yosef nat Naomi."

"*Shila*," Eyal whispers.

"Please, take a seat," Rendahl says. "We're waiting on the queen, but I don't know if..."

"She said she had to step out for a moment," Eyal interjects. "Morning sickness, I think."

Rendahl curses. "I tell her, *rest, rest, you are nearly forty years old with a baby on the way*, but does she listen? *Nej*." He turns on his heel, robes fluttering. "Stubborn as a mule. Excuse me."

And then he's gone, the door swinging shut behind him.

They wait quietly for him to return. When he does, several minutes have passed, and Queen Solfrid is at Rendahl's side. She wears an expression that Eyal can only describe as somewhere between pissed and nauseous.

"So," Ilana says, when everyone has settled. "Why have we been summoned? Somehow I doubt it's for worship."

"Eyal was found weeping this morning," Rendahl replies. "He only said he needed an *ashevi*, nothing else."

Every head in the room turns to look at him. Eyal swallows.

"I had a dream," he mutters. "It was—disturbing."

"A dream," Solfrid echoes. Eyal glances up at her; clearly, both she and Rendahl are unimpressed by this.

Yosef raises his eyebrows. "Dreams can be portentous."

"Dreams are nothing," Rendahl mutters. "Just the ramblings of the mind at rest."

"Most *are* ramblings. A few are more important than that." Yosef folds his arms over his chest. "*Ahel* often spoke to their prophets through dreams—and considering that you are lauding Eyal as the savior of Vinderheim, I think it'd be unwise to dismiss his. I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"As would I," Ilana adds.

Rendahl's brows are drawn. Solfrid's face, on the other hand, has gone carefully blank.

"Of course," she replies. "That's what you're here for, after all. Can we be of aid in anyway?"

Yosef gestures to the door. “Leave, please.”

Solfrid blinks. Rendahl opens his mouth to speak, then closes it.

“You are not Ruvav,” Ilana says. “We would prefer to review the dream in privacy, before sharing it with you. You understand.”

Solfrid pauses. Then she nods curtly, rising from her seat.

“We do. *Herr* Rendahl, please come along and allow them the time they need.”

The room is silent until the door has fully shut, Ilana and Yosef motionless in their seats. Then Yosef rises, settling beside Eyal, and folds his hands in his lap.

“What did you dream, then?”

Eyal closes his eyes.

“When it started, I was standing on a great pack of ice,” he mutters. “It was so big I could see for miles, but couldn’t see its end. I was walking. I had to keep walking—I didn’t know what would happen if I stopped.

“Then I slipped, and looked down to see the word *mavah*, drawn in blood. My hands were bloody and I was holding a dead rabbit, even though I hadn’t before, and I heard someone speaking to me.” He takes a deep breath. “It sounded like a thousand voices all at once, all saying the same thing to me at the same time. They called me their son, Eyal the strong. Said that I had a terrible choice to make, and then—then they told me to remember my childhood and and Ruvav traditions.” He hesitates. “I saw my father, then, and I—I tried to—”

His voice breaks, and he pulls his legs up onto the couch, wrapping his arms around them.

“Take your time,” Ilana says quietly. Eyal nods, taking a shuddering breath.

“I ran over to my father,” he says hoarsely. “I tried to hug him, but he just... disappeared as soon as I touched him. I heard the voices again, telling me to remember my people, and then they began to sing our songs. I fell to my knees and the ice broke, and then I woke up.”

Yosef’s brow is furrowed. “Do you remember anything else?”

“No.”

The man reaches up, running his hands through his hair. Like most Ruvav men, Yosef’s hair is long, tied back in a loose bun. Eyal’s was long once, too, but he cut it off after his father’s death. A mourning practice.

“Ilana,” Yosef says, voice low. “A word.”

The priest rises, crosses the room to converse with Yosef in hushed tones. Eyal tries hard not to listen. He picks up his cup of tea instead, burying his face in the porcelain to inhale the sweet scent.

He cannot clear the dead rabbit from his mind's eye.

"Eyal." Ilana's voice cuts through his thoughts swiftly. "Have you experienced anything similar to what happened in your dream? Anything that might've influenced what you saw?"

"I was invited on a hunting trip yesterday." He swallows. "Someone shot a rabbit, and I... I watched it die."

"All right," Ilana says softly. She turns back to Yosef.

They speak in Ruvav. This is comforting, strange as it may be. Eyal's never heard his language spoken in Lystad's halls, and to hear it now makes him feel oddly at home, as though he were back with his stepmother and Meira once again.

"I," Yosef says, suddenly switching to Vinder, "am going to go speak with *Herr* Rendahl and the queen. Excuse me."

"Of course," Ilana replies. The *ashevi* bows his head, then turns to leave; Ilana, on the other hand, crosses the room to sit at Eyal's side.

"Has it been long since you've seen your father?" she asks. Then, apparently seeing Eyal's flinch, she adds, "Or would you prefer not to talk about it?"

He shrugs. "It's all right. I..."

Eyal pauses, trying to steady himself.

"He's dead," he says at last. "He... he died when I was sixteen."

"I'm so sorry."

"*Toh*," he whispers.

"I have a *tippa sepram*, if you would like to offer some prayers in his name," Ilana says. Eyal nods immediately, almost eagerly, and the priest smiles slightly and takes a tiny, hand-bound book from the depths of her robes.

It's been a long, long time since he's prayed with a priest, just as long as it's been since he attended worship. He prays for his father every single night, but somehow it feels better praying for the man alongside Ilana. Maybe it's because someone else is acknowledging his father's soul; someone else is saying, *he is gone, and I will mourn him with you*.

Ilana flips the *tippa sepram* open, flattening it on the couch. The two of them bow their heads, Eyal lies his hands flat upon his thighs, and then the priest begins to read the prayers aloud softly. Eyal whispers them along under his breath as they go along.

First, a typical prayer for the dead. One for fathers. Then, a long, long verse that asks that departed souls may find rest, and that their loved ones' grief may be eased.

The door opens just as they finish the third prayer. Eyal turns his palms upwards on his thighs, then lifts his head to see Yosef, Rendahl, and Queen Solfrid reenter the drawing room.

Yosef's face is tight with anger, fists balled at his side, and Eyal folds his hands in his lap. He doubts that he should be in any position of prayer for what is about to follow.

"Ilana—" Yosef begins, but Rendahl cuts him off.

"We understand that Eyal's faith is deeply important to him," the man begins. He tucks his hands behind his back. "Your faith is deeply important to all of you. But Vinderheim is in a difficult, *difficult* position. The *only* way that Her Majesty and I can envision this war ending any time soon is if Eyal begins training with me."

Eyal's heart drops.

"This is ridiculous," Yosef says, voice tight. It's clear he's trying to keep his anger under control. "Do you know just what you're—"

"Yosef," Ilana says calmly, and the *ashevi* quiets. Ilana tucks the *tippa sepram* under her arm, then rises from her seat.

"*Herr* Rendahl, you say you understand that Eyal's faith is important, but I don't believe you truly know what it would mean for him to practice your magic." Her face is hard. "The Ruvav have no home of our own. Our faith and our customs are all that connect us to each other. Our religion is just as much a home to us as Vinderheim is to you."

"*Fraulein* nir Harel—"

"You will address me as *Avat* Ilana."

"*Avat* Ilana," Rendahl says, "with all due respect, I don't believe you are aware of the situation in Brenfel. Our soldiers are dying by the hundreds. If Eyal studies sorcery, he could save an untold number, far faster than if he studied *ashev* magic. I cannot allow thousands of young men and women to die for a war that could be avoided."

"And what of the Ruvav?"

"What of them?"

"We are citizens of Vinderheim, just as you are," Yosef interjects. "We have a right to practice our faith just as much as you do."

"For Eyal to perform sorcery would be blasphemy," Ilana says. "Our faith has few hard and fast rules—it is in our very nature to debate philosophy, and how they intersect with our religion—but one of them is that we cannot worship a god other than our own. It is one of the few things that would truly condemn us."

"*Avat* Il—"

"He is *eighteen years old*. How much can he do for your armies? By forcing a boy like him to renounce his god and commit blasphemy, you are telling every single Ruvav in Vinderheim exactly what you think of us." The priest's voice has turned angry, her hands

shaking. “You are telling us that you will allow us our worship only if it is convenient for you. Do you truly understand what that means?”

“*Avat—*”

“It means that you do not respect the Ruvav as a people, and you do not respect our rights. It means that you are fine with our beliefs being trampled, as long as it is beneficial for you.”

“*Avat Ilana. Ashevi Yosef.*” Solfrid takes a heavy breath. “Please know that I mean this with all due respect. I *do* respect the Ruvav as a people, and I respect your right to practice your religion as you please. My mother promised you that, and I promise it to you as well. But hundreds of Vinder soldiers are dying in Brenfel *every single day*. Eyal’s role in this war has been foretold for nine hundred years. To put it bluntly, he is very much our only hope. I refuse to allow to drag out this war by years when there is a quicker option available.”

“I told you that I would teach Eyal the ways of the *ashev*,” Yosef says icily, “and I said that I was willing to cut down the time as much as possible. It would take only a month or two longer for him to complete *ashev* training this way, and yet you—”

“I would rather have a handful of Ruvav lose faith in me than lose thousands of soldiers,” Solfrid interrupts. “*Avat, Ashevi*, you are no longer welcome at Lystad. I ask you kindly to leave.”

“Your Majesty, we—” Ilana begins, but Solfrid interrupts her as well.

“I ask you kindly to leave. Next time, it will be an order.”

“I understand,” Ilana mutters. She bows slightly, *tippa sepram* in hand. Yosef does not move.

“I would like a word in private with Eyal,” the *ashevi* says. He glances at Solfrid. “Don’t worry, I’ll bring him back. I would simply like to speak with him a moment.”

“No harm in it,” Rendahl mutters. Solfrid glances at Yosef, eyes narrowed, then nods once.

“Five minutes. No longer.”

Yosef takes Eyal by the arm, pulling him from the couch and leading him into the hallway. Once there, he opens his coat, then removes a slim volume from inside. It’s handwritten, the cover inscribed with Ruvav.

Lemiv’dam Ashev

The Study of Magic

“This is an *ashev* tome,” Yosef says, voice low. “It and books like it are studied by every *ashev*. I cannot teach you myself, but I recommend that you study these techniques, if possible.”

“*Toh*,” Eyal whispers.

“It’s all I can offer. I’m sorry.”

“It’s enough.”

They return to the drawing room then, Yosef’s arms folded tightly over his chest and Eyal clutching the book against his own. Ilana is standing just beside the door, hands behind her back.

“Thank you for speaking with me,” she says to Eyal softly. “I will continue to offer prayers for your father.”

“Thank you.”

The priest nods, then glances at Yosef. The two of them bow their heads to Eyal in traditional Ruvav goodbye, hands folded over their hearts, then exit the room silently. Rendahl watches them go.

They do not bid goodbye to him or Solfrid.

When the door shuts, Solfrid takes a seat in one of the armchairs, grimacing as she does. Even so, she manages to retain a sense of regality about her, and Eyal feels a bit afraid as he sits opposite her.

“You have been living at the palace for a month and a half,” she says, folding her hands. “At my husband’s gala, I promised my people that *Herr* Rendahl would train you in the ways of sorcery, and yet you have learned little in the time you have been at Lystad.”

Eyal says nothing, simply staring back at her. Solfrid’s mouth twists.

“The winter solstice is in one month’s time. This is one of our most important holidays, and I believe it will be an excellent opportunity for you to showcase what you have learned as *Herr* Rendahl’s student. I expect that you will perform, at the very least, a basic lifeblood ritual. Is this understood?”

“It is understood, Your Majesty.”

“Good,” Solfrid mutters. She massages her temples. “Lystad expects skill from you, and I expect you will present it.”

Eyal nods stiffly, the *Lemiv’dam Asheh* clutched tightly in his hands.

25.

“Go away.”

“No.”

Eyal groans.

“*Herr* Rendahl is expecting you,” Sanger says, voice not at all muffled by the door and several rooms between them. “And after what he’s told me, I think it would be a very bad idea to disappoint him.”

Eyal grunts, swinging his legs off the bed. He’s had a few precious hours to himself after Solfrid gave her ultimatum, and he’s spent most of that time trying to sleep, futile as the effort was. He sees a bloody rabbit every time he closes his eyes.

“I need to get dressed,” he says dully.

“I assumed.”

“I hate you.”

“I assumed that as well.”

He manages to find some suspenders, a crumpled shirt. He doesn’t bother to look for a crisp one. Dressing takes far longer than it ought; his pain is back again, having settled in his heart today. It’s running up and down his ribcage too, and Eyal can find little love in his heart for dear old Jakob Rendahl.

He traces over his heart absentmindedly. The wound there is nearly healed, though it’s left an ugly, three-inch scar marring his sternum. Eyal has an awful feeling it’s not the last one he’ll get from the High Sorcerer.

“I’m ready,” he says, upon opening the door at last. Sanger is standing there with an amused look on her face that makes Eyal’s blood boil, and he slams the door shut behind him when they leave.

“No need to be petulant,” Sanger says mildly. Eyal snorts.

“I think I’ve got plenty of need to be petulant.”

Rendahl’s waiting for him in one of the *Hal*’s courtyard’s today, dressed in black bear’s furs. Eyal is careful to keep himself at least four feet away from the man.

“Have you seen Aryeh yet?”

Rendahl’s eyebrows rise. “Why?”

“Have you?”

“No.”

“I’ll be going then,” Eyal says swiftly, and turns to leave.

A strange force suddenly takes over his body, freezing him in place. He grunts, trying to walk away, but his bones and flesh move without his permission and he's turning round again, turning to look back at Rendahl, who has a lazy look on his face and one hand stretched out. The man twists his fingers, and Eyal's body jerks forward.

"No," Eyal spits, and grounds his feet in the snow.

Rendahl's brow turns furrowed, lazy expression gone, and he grunts as he yanks his arm backwards. Eyal feels his legs twitch, but he simply digs his heels in further. His tendons are twitching beneath his skin and it hurts like hell, but he will not let this man move him about like a puppet on a string.

"Strange," Rendahl grinds out. He yanks his arm again, and Eyal's feet slide forward almost imperceptibly. "I've never met someone who could resist me like this before."

The coreblood suddenly balls his hand into a fist, and pain erupts in Eyal's left leg. He cannot hold back his scream.

"The tendons of your calf have been turned to mush," Rendahl says calmly as Eyal drops to the ground. "I will heal you, of course. You wouldn't be much use on a battlefield with only one leg. But you are *going* to learn from me, and you are going to practice magic when I tell you to. Understood?"

Eyal doesn't answer. Rendahl's hand flicks out again, and Eyal wails as one of his canines tears itself out of his gums, landing in the snow beneath him.

"Well?"

He whimpers, spits blood into the snow and reaches up to his mouth with a shaking hand. "Put my tooth back."

"What was that?"

Eyal shuts his eyes. He can feel hot tears dripping down his face, and his mouth hurts and his leg hurts and his heart hurts and *Ahel*, it all hurts so very, very much.

He thinks he might scream.

Ahel, he thinks, body trembling, *protect me; Ahel, keep me safe.*

"Heal Aryeh," he works out. "Promise you'll go—you'll go see him. Promise."

"I have already agreed to heal Aryeh nat Toriv."

"But you haven't," Eyal snarls. "He's *dying*, I don't even know if he's alive anymore and it's been over a week since I asked you—it's all I want, all I asked for and you haven't even done it—"

He breaks off, chest heaving, and opens his mouth to let fresh blood pour into the snow.

"He's dying," Eyal spits. "And you're going to heal him. Understood?"

“So full of fire,” Jakob mutters. His fingers twitch, and the tooth spins a little, bloodying the snow further. “I would’ve thought the mountains froze it all out of you.”

“*Is that understood?*”

“Perfectly,” the man replies. “And I assume you will learn from me, as promised?”

Eyal spits more blood into the snow. “I will.”

“A pact, then.”

Rendahl yanks on of his sleeves back, crouching, and traces a line over his forearm. His skin splits in half as soon as his fingers leave it. Scarlet blood pours from the wound and down his arm, snaking into the snow; his expression remains as unbothered as ever, as though his flesh hasn’t suddenly opened up.

“Your blood and mine,” he says quietly. “To make sure we each do good on our promises.”

Eyal runs his tongue over his bloody gums. “You heal Aryeh as soon as possible. I learn magic.”

“Fine.”

There is no need for Rendahl to split Eyal’s flesh open as well. He simply lowers his arm to the red, red snow, his own blood dripping into it, and begins to chant under his breath in a language Eyal cannot quite name.

“*Unser blut mischt, und unser schwur ist gemacht stark. Kummer zu er welche bricht es.*”

Our blood mixes, and our vow is made strong. Woe to he who breaks it.

Eyal cannot explain where the words come from, only that he knows they are exactly what Rendahl is saying.

For a moment, the air is thick around them, trapping them in place, and Eyal feels as though he’s suffocating under the Sverhul stones again. Then Rendahl moves, straightening, and the spell is broken.

“My tooth,” Eyal says, without preamble. “And leg.”

“Of course.”

It takes longer than Eyal had expected for Rendahl to mend his body. The leg is easy, if painful, enough; the sorcerer simply has to rest his hand upon Eyal’s bare calf, moving his fingers ever so often in order to knit the muscle back together. But Eyal’s gums have to be washed of blood, Rendahl’s hands must be purified of any and all grime, and the very tooth itself has to be cleaned before the canine can be put back in his mouth. The process in itself is

mind-rattlingly painful, and in the end, Rendahl has to shoot Eyal's gums full of a doctor's numbing agent before the procedure can be completed.

Eyal screams too much for his tooth to be properly replaced otherwise.

"It won't come out again," Rendahl says once the whole ordeal's over, wiping his hands down. "Not unless someone yanks it out. If you worry about it, however, you might like to stick to soft foods for the next few days. Breads, soups. Creamed potatoes."

Eyal spits blood at the man's feet.

"I'll take that as a no, then."

The sun is high in the sky by now, several hours having been spent on returning the tooth to Eyal's mouth. When the two of them return to the courtyard, the morning's cold has lessened noticeably, and Eyal nearly considers removing his scarf.

Only nearly. He remembers his last session while Rendahl well enough, and he'd prefer to stay warm for as long as he possibly can.

But the man does not instruct him to remove his coat and shoes, as he did last time; rather, he asks Eyal to assume the grounded stance he took earlier, when he tried to resist Rendahl's magic.

"Lifebloods were often able to form fields of protection around themselves," Rendahl tells him. "Some were even able to cast spells that created permanent protections that lasted until well after their deaths. I'd like to see if your ability to resist magic is a form of that."

So that is how they spend the rest of the day: Eyal grounding his feet in the snow, determined not to be moved by any force other than his own, and Rendahl trying relentlessly to move him.

It goes worse than probably expected. Earlier, he had been driven by a very real fear of losing control over his own body, a very real hatred of the man before him. But now, he is tired and pained, and now that Rendahl has made a blood pact to heal Aryeh as soon as possible, Eyal doesn't hate him quite as much as before. By the time they finally finish for the day, Rendahl's managed to move him several feet across the courtyard, and Eyal is trembling from pain, exhaustion and cold combined.

"I had hoped for better from you," Rendahl remarks as they finish up. "Your performance this morning was quite astonishing."

Eyal says nothing.

Rendahl sighs, tugging his collar up against the cold. "I'll leave for Aryeh nat Toriv's home this evening. If you would remind me where he lives?"

Eyal lists Aryeh's address, then points out that the place is in Stasnik. Rendahl nods sharply.

"*Takk*. I'll see to him soon—you are dismissed for the day."

Not that there's much time left in the day, Eyal thinks wryly to himself as he makes the trek back to his rooms. The sun's nearly set by now, the shadows long. He's likely missed dinner. It's just as it was at Sverhul, where he had to work from dawn to dusk on a task no one enjoyed.

At least at Sverhul he got paid.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to bed?" Leif asks, tapping the edge of the desk. Eyal simply shrugs and turns a page.

He'd found her as soon as Rendahl released him, then asked if she could work on his letters with him. They've been at this for not quite fifteen minutes, and Eyal has already nodded off twice and yawned more times than Leif can count.

She closes the book. "Eyal."

"What?"

"You're too tired for this."

Eyal sniffs, reaching for his pen. "I'm perfectly—" he yawns "—perfectly fine. Just a little tired."

"Too tired." Leif plucks the pen from his fingers. "You won't retain anything, not now. Take a break."

"I..."

"*Take a break.*"

Eyal's been working with Rendahl for the past week, and it's truly worn him down. There are permanent circles under his brown eyes, a perpetual slowness to his step that can only come from weariness. He has appeared at dinner once since his nightmare. Leif has to wonder where he's getting his food.

This is the first tutoring session they've had in a very, very long while.

"I don't want to take a break," Eyal mutters. He stares at the floor. "I want to learn."

"You're not going to remember anything you learn."

"I have to try."

"Eyal—"

"I have to try," Eyal repeats. His hands are curled in his lap. "Do you—do you have any idea how *humiliating* it is not to be able to read? How frustrating it is?" His voice trembles.

"Rendahl puts a book in front of me and I can barely remember how to pronounce each letter,

let alone string them together. It takes me five minutes to read a sentence you can put together in five seconds, and I hate it, I hate it so *much*—”

He breaks off and pulls his legs up onto his chair, wrapping his arms around them. His chest is heaving.

“You can read,” Leif says quietly. “I’ve seen the letters in your desk.”

“But I can’t read *Vinder*. That’s what matters.”

“You’ll learn.”

“Not soon enough.”

“You’ll *learn*,” Leif repeats, but Eyal just shakes his head viciously.

“When I was a kid,” he says hoarsely, “everyone thought I was stupid. I didn’t start talking until I was five years old, and even then, I... I didn’t do it a lot. Words were hard for me. They still are. So I didn’t talk until I knew exactly what to say, because I was just so *sure* I’d get made fun of for it. And I was if I wasn’t careful enough.”

He pauses, taking a deep breath. Leif waits.

Eyal’s voice is miserable. “It didn’t help that I was big. Maybe if I was smaller it would’ve been easier, but I was just so *big*. I was taller than my stepmother by the time I was twelve. So I was big and quiet and it—it made me the stupid brute.” He laughs bitterly. “The village idiot.”

Leif doesn’t say anything, just reaches out and offers her hand. Eyal glances over at her, then takes it tentatively.

“I hate feeling stupid,” Eyal whispers. He closes his eyes. “I *hate it*.”

“I’m sorry,” Leif says, quiet.

She swipes her thumb over the back of his knuckles. A smile flickers across Eyal’s face, if only for a moment, and then his expression returns to one of utter dejection.

“Let’s take a ten-minute break,” Leif says quietly. “Then we can come back and finish the session.”

“What’ll you do?”

She shrugs. “I’ll figure something out.”

Eyal seems to hesitate, mulling the matter over in his head, but at last he nods jerkily and gets up from the table before disappearing into his bedroom. Leif watches him go, then pulls her pocket watch out and sets it face up on the table.

First she rearranges the setup of her supplies. Straighten the books, stack the papers (one pile for used and one for unused), cap the ink bottles, lay the pens flat and in a neat line. Leif checks her watch periodically all the while, and by the time she’s finished, less than two minutes have passed.

She exhales, running her hands through her hair, and resolves to simply sit and wait until the ten minutes are up. After what feels like an eternity has passed, she glances back at the clock.

Three minutes.

Leif taps the edge of the desk restlessly and as quietly as she can. She's *not* going to disturb Eyal; he needs to take a break more than anything else, but he'll only do it if Leif makes him. Reinhilde, the boy needs to learn how to take care of himself.

Leif reaches for her notebook, which she's positioned at the end of the table. She might as well spend the time backtracking through records. She's been doing it ever since she came to Lystad—it helps keep her mind sharp.

Something slips from the inside of the cover as she opens it, a small white envelope. Leif blinks, then reaches for it.

Ah.

The envelope hasn't been sealed yet, and the letter inside is written in her own hand. It's dated several weeks ago. Leif addressed it to her father, and the letter first thanks him for his congratulations, then tells him of everything that's been going on at Lystad. Of the ball, of Sigrid and Tage, of the inquiry committee. She neglected to include the fact that the committee snubbed her. The letter also mentions Eyal and his studies, though not in great detail.

Leif stares down at the paper, a knot working in her throat. The letter is four pages long, all written in a minuscule script she only uses if she's taking down notes. She barely remembers writing it.

She thinks of her father's note, how short it had been. It's the only one he's sent in all the time she's been here.

He doesn't deserve this.

She folds the letter back up hurriedly, stuffing it into the envelope again, then walks over to the fireplace and crouches down. The flames are small, though they still burn. Leif reaches for the bellows, stokes the fire a bit, and then tears the envelope in half and tosses it into the flames.

She watches the paper curl and blacken, her words vanishing under the heat of the flames, and something like sorrow stirs in her chest. Leif ignores it.

"He doesn't deserve it," she whispers to herself. "He doesn't deserve it."

Leif stands there a long time, watching the flames flicker even after the envelope has crumbled to ash. She doesn't think. She's tired of thinking. She simply lets herself breathe, fingers curling and uncurling round the bellows' handle as she does so.

The grandfather clock in the corner chimes suddenly, snapping her from her reverie. Leif's heart pounds as she remembers the pocket watch, her promise of a ten-minute break, and scrambles back over to the table to check the time. A quick glance confirms that, yes, she's spent far more than ten minutes staring at the fire.

Leif swallows, then creeps over to the bedroom door, knocking on it softly. "Eyal?"

"Mm?"

The sound is muffled, barely there, but Leif pushes the door open a crack anyway. Eyal is sitting on the edge of his bed, palms resting upwards on his thighs as he looks her way. A tiny book is resting in his lap.

A candle, lit upon his bedside table, is the only thing beside the moonlight that illuminates the room. Eyal looks more weary than ever.

"I wanted to see if you wanted to continue the lesson," Leif says carefully. "I, ah... I lost track of time, though. It's about ten o'clock."

Eyal shrugs, eyes flitting back to the book in his lap. Leif follows his gaze.

"What's that?"

"A *tippa sepram*," the boy replies, voice rough with exhaustion. "A miniature prayer book. We use them when we go on journeys. It's Aryeh's, actually. He brought it to Sverhul and hid it in the mattress."

The stones of that boy, Leif thinks, surprised. Religious articles of any kind are forbidden in the mines, of course. Fights over faith are not unheard of in Vinderheim, and it was decided long ago that the best way to keep disagreements among miners to a minimum would be to ban all religious items. If Aryeh been discovered, he likely would've been removed from the camp and sent home again at once.

"Are you praying, then?" she asks softly.

Eyal nods.

"Would you like me to leave you alone?"

"I think that would be best."

Leif smiles, reaching for the doorknob. "Goodnight, then. We can continue our lesson tomorrow."

She pauses for a moment outside the door, listening. Eyal is whispering the prayers aloud. They're all in Ruvav, of course. Until now, Leif has never really heard it spoken aloud, only caught Eyal murmuring bits and pieces under his breath that she has a feeling are curses.

Strung together, the language is actually quite lovely. It's full of soft consonants, as opposed to Vinder's hard ones, the vowels slightly foreign-sounding. The words seem perfect in Eyal's deep voice, as though it was designed to speak them. Leif supposes it has been.

Maybe someday, when this is all over, she can ask Eyal if she might learn the language.

26.

They don't get a chance to finish the lesson.

Rendahl keeps Eyal late every single day, drilling new concepts into him relentlessly. Over the next few days, Eyal only sees Leif when she walks him to the *Hal* in the mornings. Sometimes they talk. Sometimes they don't. Eyal gets the sense that Leif dislikes Rendahl nearly as much as he.

He envies her for her freedom. Leif seems to have no responsibilities here at Lystad, now that the inquiry committee has dropped her testimony, and she spends most of her time either with Sigrid or with her horse. Apparently, Gunnar Engelstad has arranged for Leif to take formal riding lessons, taught by a Tenguran man who instructed Gunnar himself as a child.

"Tengurans are some of the best riders in the world," Leif tells him one day as they make their way to the hall. "They're nomads, so they depend on their horses. Some people think they were the first to domesticate the animals."

She seems happy enough, though Eyal doesn't bring up the inquiry committee. Leif's face grows dark whenever the subject is mentioned, a somber look in her eyes, and Eyal has decided it's best to leave it alone.

He wishes he could be happy the way she is.

He's living at *Lystad*, for *Ahel's* sake. He has beautiful clothes and a suite bigger than the house he grew up in. His food is the finest in Vinderheim. He ought to be happy with his lot.

But no sum of money can keep him from screaming in the night. No one can heal the pain that builds in his bones, even though his wounds have long since healed.

No amount of fine cravats or fancy silverware can save Eyal from Jakob Rendahl.

The training is eating away at him. There are prayers to Soren to be said throughout all the spells, and try as he might, Eyal cannot bring himself to say them. Rendahl is growing increasingly irritated, though Eyal doubts the man will hurt him again. Eyal is far too precious to Solfrid for that.

He prays. He listens to Rendahl, even if he doesn't quite obey. He stays alive.

Though really, if there's anything Eyal is certain he can do, it's living.

The letter comes nearly a week after Rendahl tears his tooth out. Eyal isn't quite sure who delivered it; when he comes back to his rooms after a long day of training, it's sitting on his desk, unremarkable except for the fact that it is written in Ruvav in a very, very familiar handwriting.

Eyal stares at it for longer than he cares to admit, then pulls his chair out shakily and opens the envelope with as much dignity as he can muster.

Dear Eyal,

I hope you're doing all right.

Right now, it's been about two weeks since you left. (I don't know when this will reach you. Hopefully soon.) I would've written you sooner, but I hardly had the energy to feed myself, let alone hold a pen.

It's okay that you didn't write me. I suppose you have a lot on your mind.

Jakob Rendahl visited three days ago. It took nearly all day to heal me, and when he was finished he said it was one of the most difficult healings he's ever done. He also said I was very, very lucky to be alive. I told him I had my angel's eye to thank for that.

He didn't like that much. Makes me wonder what you've been doing to him.

I'm still in a lot of pain. My lungs still hurt when I breathe, especially when I inhale, but it lessens every day. This morning I was able to get out of bed, something I haven't been able to do for weeks. I was able to listen to the birds again.

Chava still makes me stay in bed most of the time, though. Says she doesn't want me straining myself too much while I'm still weak. It's a fair point, I suppose, but I still don't like it.

The only upside of staying in bed all the time is that I get to think without anyone bothering me, so I've been thinking a lot. About you, mostly. About how our visit ended, and what you said.

Why were you so nervous? Did you think I might reject you?

I care about you more than I've ever cared about anyone. You were the only person who cared about me, back at Sverhul. You were the only one who was kind, the only one who looked after me. I miss you so very, very much. I've missed you ever since I had to leave.

You said you dreamed of me. I don't dream, not anymore, but when I'm awake I think of you often. I think of your eyes and your laugh, of your hands holding mine. I think of how gentle you are, even though you were one of the strongest in the mine. I think of the way you duck your head down when you smile, as though you're embarrassed.

Oh, yaqireh. I would want no one else for my sweetheart.

I'm getting stronger every day. We're going to see each other again, no matter how long it takes, and I'll write you in the meantime. I hope you'll write me as well.

I've been praying for your father. May his soul find rest.

Love,

Aryeh

Eyal feels as though his heart is stuck in his throat. He spreads the letter out on the desk and rereads it, his pulse pounding. His hands are shaking too badly for him to hold it anymore.

Aryeh wants to be sweethearts. Aryeh nat Toriv wants to be my sweetheart.

Eyal takes a deep breath, calming himself, and then reaches for a pen and inkwell. He'll begin a letter as soon as his hands stop shaking.

"Excellent form today," Kepek says, as Leif guides Tage into the yard. Kepek's already dismounted, his horse waiting at his side. "It is surprising how quickly you have improved."

Leif blushes. "Thank you," she mumbles, and the man's lips lift in a smile.

Sukegei Kepek comes from the eastern region of Tengur, where he first learned how to master horses. He came to Lystad eighteen years ago as an ambassador's stablehand, and Queen Rikke had been so impressed with his skill that she convinced him to stay. Since then, he's taught nearly all noble children how to properly ride.

Gunnar is—or was—one of his favorite students, which means that Kepek has no issue doing favors for him, and Gunnar apparently can't be bothered how to teach Leif to ride. Kepek's been her teacher instead.

Leif figures that she much prefers his instruction to Gunnar's.

"Tage's to thank for part of it," she says. "She's been well-trained."

"A well-trained horse only accounts for so much. You have a natural talent." Kepek's dark eyes sparkle. "If I didn't know you, I'd think you'd been riding for a year, at the very least."

Leif blushes again. Kepek offers her a hand to help her dismount, and then the two of them lead their rides into the stables.

Kepek had been disturbed to learn that Leif had no idea how to properly saddle a horse on her own, and had spent a good twenty minutes teaching her how. Now she can do it well, though it takes her longer than it probably should. By the time she's finished, Kepek has been standing in front of his horse's stall for a good three minutes, doting on the animal.

Leif pauses by him. "*Ba ayar*," she says, hoping she's not butchering the words completely. It means *thank you* in Tenguran, and it's one of a few phrases she's picked up while riding with Kepek.

Kepek grins. "By all means. See you tomorrow, then?"

She nods, turning away, and then stops.

Gunnar's at the end of the stable, coming towards them. Only—

He's got a cane in one hand, and he's leaning on it heavily. His brow is furrowed in concentration.

Leif hasn't seen him since the day of the race, but even so, she's never seen him with a cane before. It seems so utterly unlike him that she cannot help but stare.

What on earth could've happened to him in the time since? And wouldn't it have been healed, considering the amount of sorcerers Lystad has on hand?

"Quit staring."

Gunnar's voice is a growl. Leif startles a little bit, face heating. The boy's glaring at her now.

"Haven't you ever seen someone with a cane?" he snaps. "It's perfectly normal."

Leif composes herself. "Of course. I just hadn't seen you with one, that's all."

Gunnar sniffs.

"Thank you for the riding lessons, by the way. They've been very helpful. Kepek's great."

"You've got that right," Kepek says, grinning briefly. He surveys Gunnar. "Good to see you, Engelstad. It's been a while since you've been around."

That *is* strange, come to think of it. It's been weeks since the race. Leif would've expected Gunnar to show up at the stables by now, and given how much time she herself has been spending here, she ought to have seen him at least once.

Gunnar simply shrugs, shifting his grip on his cane. "Legs've been acting up. And Greta's been on my back."

"Ah, but that's what sisters are for."

From Gunnar's expression, he clearly doesn't agree, but he says nothing and simply glances over Kepek's shoulder, neck craning. Leif steps to the side to let him pass, and an odd smell wafts pass her.

It's strange. It's familiar enough that she should be able to place it, but she can't quite name it.

Leif sniffs again. "You smell weird."

"Oh, because you smell like lilies and roses every day of your life," Gunnar shoots back, but he's clearly unsettled. Kepek frowns.

"Have you been taking something?" he asks, and Gunnar's frown deepens.

"Just something for my legs. Nothing much."

"Engelstad."

"It's *nothing much*," Gunnar repeats. He shifts again. "I'm fine. I just—I wanted to come see Kjaere, all right? It's been a while. I suppose she's been missing me."

“I’ll join you,” Kepek says suddenly. “It’s been a long time. We ought to talk.”

Gunnar’s brow furrows once more, but Kepek simply smiles wider and claps the boy’s shoulder with one large hand, shooting a warm look Leif’s way.

“Same time tomorrow, Isaksen. I expect you to be just as excellent as you were today.”

Leif snorts. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Kepek and Gunnar walk away then, Kepek’s hand still on Gunnar’s shoulder, and Leif exits the stables. The walk back to the palace is a cold one, but she doesn’t mind it. Not today.

Only when she’s back in her rooms does she finally remember that strange smell that had trailed Gunnar. This time, she’s able to place it.

Opium.

How unsettling.

“Another day, another disappointment.”

Eyal says nothing, flexing his fingers to get the feeling back into them. Today, he and Rendahl focused on body temperature once more, only this time Eyal’d had to plunge his hands first into flames and then a bucket of frozen water and attempt to fend off burns or frostbite. He’d done particularly well with the fire, his magic fueled by fear, but the water had been uneventful. Though steam did rise from its surface when he first touched it.

“We made an oath,” Rendahl reminds him. “I kept my end of the bargain. You’ve got to do the same, or you’ll face the consequences—and I assure you, you do not want to learn what they are.”

Eyal nods jerkily, tugging his gloves on. “See you tomorrow.”

“Ah.” The man holds up a hand. “Tomorrow is holy day. We won’t meet.”

A day of reprieve. Eyal nods again, then makes his way from the *Hal* and back to the palace. The sun set some minutes ago, and the sky is already dark with twilight. He hasn’t missed dinner—it’s usually served at six o’clock, and the sun sets far earlier than that—but he doubts he will attend anyway. His appetite fled the moment Rendahl announced Eyal was going to have to put his hands into a raging fire.

He makes it to his rooms without trouble. Once there, Eyal flings off his gloves and his shoes and his coat, then makes his way to his bed and curls up under the sheets.

He closes his eyes, settling his hand over the tattoo on his sternum. *Ahel, watch over me.*

The blood oath hovers in the back of his mind, try as he might to forget it. Rendahl would heal Aryeh, Eyal would learn magic. Only one of those promises has been made good upon.

A thought strikes him suddenly, and Eyal’s eyes snap open. He sits up, mind whirring.

He'd simply promised to learn magic, not sorcery. The type of magic had never been specified. And if Eyal has the chance—

His eyes flick to his bookcase. The *Lemiv'dam Asheh* is tucked away upon its shelves, just as he'd expected.

Traditionally, *ashev* wait until they've finished their studies to truly practice magic. Eyal doesn't have time to wait.

His hands shake as he lifts the book from the shelf. It looks to be made entirely by hand, the script inside written as carefully as can be, and a strange feeling inside Eyal's chest as he opens the front cover.

He knows what that feeling is. It's the feeling he gets whenever he's around Sanger or Rendahl, the strange sensation that washes over him every time Eyal steps into the hall. By now, it's as familiar as breathing. It is the taste of magic.

Only this time, it is Eyal's own power that thrums through his veins.

The book seems to be written in chronological order, with the simplest spells at the beginning and the most complex at the back. Eyal thumbs through it, heart pounding, and then eventually returns to the very first pages.

"An *ashevi*'s power does not stem from themselves alone," he whispers, reading from the *Lemiv'dam*'s pages. "*Ahel* blesses us with it. As such, it is only right to give thanks for our power as we use it."

Prayers. Of course.

It takes a few minutes of searching to find a spell to regulate temperature, but Eyal finds it in the end. It's very simple. First, an *ashev* sigil, the four-pointed star, must be drawn over the heart; fully trained *ashev* have the star tattooed on the backs of their hands, but the book says that students may simply draw it in the air before them.

The book tells him to steady his breathing and close his eyes. Then, he ought to reach for either the heat or the cold that surrounds him, and fill himself with it.

Vague. But somehow, he understands.

Eyal sets the book on his desk, then slips off his stockings and waistcoat, hangs them up carefully, and extinguishes the fire. Cold creeps into the room almost immediately, and Eyal does his very best not to shiver.

He draws the four-pointed star with *Ahel*'s name on his lips, index and middle finger slicing through the air, and shuts his eyes. He breathes.

The cold is easy enough to find, already seeping into him through his bare, bare feet. Heat is harder, but he finds it anyway—it curls through his entire body, flowing out from his heart and through his veins, and Eyal reaches out and soaks himself in its warmth.

His pulse is singing. Slowly, he presses a hand to his chest to find his skin burning as though fevered. He reaches for the cold, plunging himself into it, and his body cools almost immediately. Eyal laughs a little.

This is *ashev* magic. This belongs to the Ruvav and the Ruvav alone, to Eyal himself, and no one can take it away from him.

For the very first time, Eyal rejoices in his power.

27.

The back of Draha's shirt is soaked with sweat despite the cool air, chafing against her skin. It's nearly impossible to keep a good grip on her sword. Across the courtyard, Valentín looks nearly as exhausted as Draha feels, his own shirt discarded long ago and his pale chest gleaming with perspiration. Even so, he moves with a swagger Draha struggles to replicate at her best, and she cannot help but envy him for it.

Valentín lunges suddenly. Draha does her best to parry his blade despite the way her muscles scream with protest, and she grits her teeth at the screech of metal on metal.

"How long have we been at this?" Valentín pants between breaths, sidestepping a blow. Draha frowns, trying to remember.

"Hours," she says at last. Valentín grimaces.

"You really ought to take a break."

"I," Draha grits out, "am perfectly fine."

"I highly doubt that," Valentín says, eyebrow arched. Draha rolls into a dive and swings at his legs in response, clipping just above his ankles. Valentín jerks backwards, cursing under his breath. The blow didn't draw blood, of course—Draha's blades are always dulled—but it'll leave a nasty set of bruises.

"Tired, old man?" Draha taunts as she jumps back to her feet. "So quick to rest?"

"I'm hardly *old*," Valentín retorts. He parries her next strike easily. "And we've been at this for hours. Though if anyone needs a rest, it's you."

She ignores this last comment, instead slashing at Valentín's right wrist, the one still made of flesh and bone. Valentín shouts, curls the limb against his chest, and his blade comes clattering down upon the cobblestones.

He stumbles backwards, chest rising rapidly, and throws his left arm out to the side.

Valentín was made lieutenant general after the Battle of the Ridge, the bloodiest battle of the war to date. He lost his left arm on the fourth and final day, the limb severed just above his elbow by a cavalryman's bayonet; had he been standing a few inches to the left, he'd have lost his life. Yet somehow Valentín had managed to keep fighting and lead the troops to victory, and had been well lauded for his bravery.

For most, such a loss would have meant retirement. Valentín, however, has replaced his arm with a prosthetic made of solid iron, easily controlled thanks to his earthblood abilities. He can reshape it at will, turning it into a hand, a pike, a hook; anything he needs.

And right now, the iron is lengthening, sharpening, and taking on the form of a gleaming gray broadsword.

"Cheater," Draha accuses, tightening her grip on her own weapon. Valentín smiles briefly.

"It's not cheating to use what you have available."

Draha rolls her eyes. It's a familiar saying, one Valentín spouts every time he melds his prosthetic into a sword during their sparring. It doesn't mean she has to like it.

The man's been her teacher as long as Draha's been at Ilazovna, just as Iyov has. Only instead of language, geography, and culture, Valentín specializes in fighting tactics. He's taught her how to wield every sort of sword they can find, from his beloved broadsword to a scimitar to a Jarghali talwar. She's learned shooting, boxing, and even a few reconnaissance techniques. Thanks to him, Draha can scale a wall in fifteen seconds flat, outrun the fastest palace guards, and disarm a lesser opponent in a matter of moments.

Ružena, ever eloquent, once said Draha has been instructed in the ways of combat because magic and diplomacy are 'like torches, *kuzichka*; sometimes they fail when you need them most.' Valentín, on the other hand, says that the reason he's taught her how to fight is because sometimes people don't like to listen to reason, and you need to kick their ass when words fail.

Today, Draha fights with her own favorite: a steel longsword, which she loves for its long reach. Being rather short herself, most opponents would have an advantage over her when it comes to height—an advantage eliminated when Draha has a longsword in hand.

Valentín swivels on his heel, going low, and Draha shrieks as his remaining blade slices across the backs of her calves. Her own blade may be dulled, but Valentín's is not. She can sustain any injury she's dealt while sparring (with the potential exception of decapitation, but no

one's exactly eager to test that particular possibility) and Valentín is of the mind that if Draha's missteps earn her true pain, she'll be more careful when fighting.

She groans, doubling over to press her palms against the wounds. "You'll pay for that one."

"You're sure you don't want to take a break?"

"Absolutely not," Draha replies, and takes up her sword once more.

And so off they go through the courtyard, blades shining and chests heaving, Valentín wiping sweat from his brow as they stagger around. Draha stumbles more than once, both from weariness and pain, and Valentín pauses to ask if she wants to stop each and every time.

"You know," she mutters, the third or fourth time he stops to check on her, "I used to prefer sparring with you. Maybe I'll find another partner if you keep this up."

Valentín grins a little. "You prefer me?"

"I said I *used* to."

She does prefer fighting with him, though, no matter how she denies it. And not for any obvious reason.

Draha's been heavyset all her life, with soft cheeks and a generous build as long as can remember, while most sorcerers she's met are noticeably trim in contrast. The few times she's sparred with them, Draha has always found herself self-conscious about her weight, even if they left her alone about it.

Valentín, however, is large in every sense of the word. He scrapes six feet and has ample bulk, limbs round and belly anything but flat. Once, he joked that his chest-flattening surgery had been useless; his pectorals were nearly the same size as the breasts he'd once had. Draha is far more comfortable training with him, a man whose weight has never been slimmed despite his rigorous exercise, than any slender opponent she could have.

Besides, she's been training with Valentín for years. She knows his tells by now, and that tips the scale slightly in her favor.

She darts forward, then stumbles as pain shoots up her legs. Rather than using this to his advantage—as he ought to do—Valentín grabs her by the arm, steadying her. She glares at him.

"You all right?"

"I'm *fine*," Draha grumbles. "And if you ask if I want to stop one more time, just *once*, I swear I'll—"

"Draha!"

She stops immediately to glance over her shoulder. Timotej is standing in the doorway to the courtyard, smiling and waving wildly.

“I brought you kolache!” he calls, hoisting a paper-wrapped package into the air. Draha imagines the pastry’s familiar taste, the sweet nut filling and the buttery crust, and her stomach rumbles audibly at the thought.

“Still want to keep sparring?” Valentín asks. He’s set his sword down, has already started wiping the sweat from his skin with an old towel. Clearly, he’s not going to start fighting again any time soon.

Draha bites her lip. “Can I stop for a bit? Just to have the kolache?”

“You’re the one insisting we keep this up, not me.” Valentín grabs a medical bag, which he’s conveniently brought along. “Let me patch up those legs of yours first, *áno?*”

“*Áno,*” Draha echoes, and immediately flops to the ground.

Timotej has reached them by now, the package of kolache clutched to his chest, and his face goes white at the sight of her wounds. “Gods, Draha. What happened?”

“Is it really that bad?”

He nods, eyes round. Draha glances down at her legs.

The pale cloth of her loose trousers has been completely soaked through, red as can be. Even her feet, usually a warm umber color, are stained dark brown with blood. She shivers, touches a hand to the back of her calf. Her fingers come away dripping.

“Valentín—” she starts, voice a whisper, but the man’s already peeling the cloth away from her wounds, brow furrowed in concentration. Timotej sits down at Draha’s side.

“Here,” he says after a moment, offering her a piece of kolache. Draha takes it with shaking fingers.

“Thank y—”

A stinging pain races up her legs and she cries out, dropping the kolache. Valentín glances up at her with an apologetic expression, and Draha takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

Healing stings. She knows this well; she’s had more than her fair amount of scrapes over the years, likely multiplied by her recklessness and the knowledge that nothing can end her, not a sword through the gut or a broken neck, and she’s always been patched up as soon as possible. And yet she’ll never be able to get used to the sensation—tiny pinpricks racing through her skin, aggravating an already injured area. Like a numb limb. The sensation is only amplified by Valentín’s shortcomings with healing. He can manage it, like all sorcerers can, but his strengths lie in earthblood techniques rather than coreblood ones.

“Here.” Timotej tucks a second piece of kolache into her palm. “I tried to find sandesh, but there wasn’t any to be had.”

Draha manages a smile. “Kolache’s wonderful.”

Sandesh has always been her favorite dessert, with its soft texture and sweet, sweet taste, but it's only made by the palace kitchens when Jarghali ambassadors come to visit. The rest of the year, one must venture into the city streets to find it. Draha's made the trip plenty of times. But for Timotej, the sheltered prince who never leaves the palace grounds without plenty of guards, sneaking out to find a Jarghali vendor is simply impossible.

Still, kolache happens to be Draha's *second* favorite dessert, and its nutty sweetness is a welcome distraction from Valentín's work. She takes a generous bite, then shuts her eyes as she savors its taste, the buttery crust nearly melting on her tongue.

Delicious.

Valentín sits back on his heels, wrapping up excess gauze. "All patched up."

Draha nods, then sticks the kolache in her mouth. "Fank you."

She leans forward, yanking what's left of her trousers over the freshly bandaged wounds. They're still soaked with blood, irritating even through the gauze; Draha flicks her wrist absentmindedly, and the scarlet leeches from the fabric and soaks into the ground below.

"I don't think I'll ever quite get used to that," Timotej murmurs, blue eyes wide. Draha flashes him a grin.

"Hey."

She glances back at Valentín. The man's holding out a tiny cup, barely the size of her thumbs and filled almost to the brim with a thick amber liquid.

"It'll help with the pain today," he says. "And it'll be gone tomorrow."

Draha eyes the cup disdainfully, though she takes it anyways. "And you're keeping this from Iyov?"

Valentín snorts. "Don't worry. If he was going to fall back into his old ways again, I doubt he'd start with slush."

She finds she has to agree. Slush—the common name for the half-magic, half-medicine she's about to consume—has a bitter, off-putting taste that sticks to your tongue and haunts your tastebuds for hours afterwards. It's popular anyway, because it's the closest thing magic can come to taking your pain away. The medical component numbs pain, and the magic part makes sure you don't feel it again.

It comes at a price, though: the more slush you take, the more sluggish you feel, your senses dulled just as much as your nerves. It's called *slush* because addicts say that moving around after taking a dose feels like wading through a day-old snow bank.

Draha plugs her nose, tipping her head back, and swallows the concoction as quickly as possible. It still tastes disgusting enough that she strongly doubts she'll be relying on it anytime soon.

She hands the cup back to Valentín, then tears off another bit of kolache from the roll in Timotej's hand. "Thank you for these. Truly."

The boy's mouth quirks. "It was an honor to bring them."

Draha tips her head back, closing her eyes as she savors the kolache. When she opens them again, Timotej is holding out another piece; she reaches for it gladly, but Valentín snatches it away before Draha can grab it.

She glares at him. Valentín simply shrugs and pops the kolache in his mouth, looking ridiculously pleased with himself.

The familiar sound of boots clacking against stone suddenly distracts her, drawing her attention away to the mouth of the courtyard. Ružena and Iyov have appeared in the doorway, each wearing full dress uniform.

Draha frowns. They only ever wear dress uniform for meetings of the Five, gatherings so confidential that even Draha herself is uninvited, and so rare that one hasn't been held in nearly a year.

"Valentín," Ružena greets. The two of them embrace briefly. "I've barely seen you since you've been home, man. What've you been doing?"

"Sparring, for one thing," Valentín rumbles. "I think Draha's trying to work me to death."

"And what a sorry thing that would be," Iyov murmurs.

Draha pauses, staring, as do Valentín and Timotej. Iyov is by far the cheeriest of the little trio, always the first to crack a joke or make a snide comment, seemingly perpetually grinning. And yet now his face is grim, his expression solemn. She cannot remember the last time she saw him like this.

"We need a word with you," Iyov says quietly, taking Valentín's hand in his own. "It shouldn't take more than a minute."

Draha frowns. Valentín's dark eyes flick between the generals, confusion written across his face.

"I don't—"

"Understand?" Iyov asks. He gives a bitter laugh. "I don't either, trust me."

Ružena clears her throat. "We've obtained new intelligence from the Lystad spy. Siroky called a meeting, and we've had to make a—difficult decision."

"Difficult doesn't even begin to describe it," Iyov mutters.

Draha stares at the three, feeling as lost as Valentín looks. Ružena glances at her, then crouches at her side.

“We’ll tell you soon,” she says softly, so utterly unlike herself that it is not comfort at all. “But we need to tell Valentín now.”

Draha swallows. “Ružena—”

“She’ll find out soon enough.” Iyov’s voice is a rasp. “Why not tell her now? Why pretend like she has any choice in the matter?”

Draha’s skin prickles.

“Iyov—”

“They’ve already made the decisions. It doesn’t matter anymore, now that—”

“*Iyov*,” Ružena says, gently but firm. “The Five have made a decision. We may not like it, but three beat two, and so we’ll refrain from telling Draha until the proper time.” She glances at Valentín. “Though we still need to tell you, Val. I warn you that you may disagree.”

Valentín’s face is unreadable, posture rigid. A moment passes. Then he takes a deep breath, throwing his shoulders back, and suddenly he is the picture of an obedient soldier, ready to follow any command his officer gives him.

“All right, then,” he mutters. Ružena gives him a nod, and then the three of them turn back towards the doorway to leave.

A sudden burst of anger flares in Draha’s heart. If it’s something that rendered Iyov solemn, and if it affects her too, then she has a right to know. No matter what Siroky and Marek and Zeman say.

“Wait.”

The generals turn immediately, almost in sync with each other. Draha takes a deep breath.

“I want to know,” she says.

Ružena closes her eyes. “Draha, the Five have made a decision—”

“A decision that affects me too, because every single decision in this damn war seems to affect me.” She balls her hands into fists. “I’m a *kuzichka*, I have a right to know and I have the authority to—”

“And I am the Queen’s First, and I outrank you,” Ružena replies. Her voice is quiet, not harsh or commanding, and Draha knows she’s doing her best to be kind. It doesn’t help.

No one tells her *anything*.

She glances back at Timotej, who’s rolling a piece of paper through his fingers with a thoughtful expression. He meets her gaze, and silent understanding passes between them.

“Generals,” he says levelly, getting to his feet. Ružena groans audibly; for the first time, a tiny smile forms on Iyov’s face. Timotej tucks his hands behind his back.

“Timotej Musil—” Ružena starts, glowering, but Timotej cuts her off.

“I am Prince Timotej Musil of Krazny, son of Queen Alzbeta and her King-consort Dominik. I thus outrank you all.” To most, Timotej’s voice is mild, but Draha has known him long enough to recognize the edge of smugness in it. “I command you to share with us what Drahomíra wants to know.”

Ružena pinches the bridge of her nose, muttering something that sounds like *this is what happens when you give children unlimited power*. Valentín looks exasperated. Iyov is staring at his feet, keeping his face carefully blank.

Timotej looks to each of them. “Well?”

“Fine,” Ružena mutters. “Draha, at attention.”

If you want to act like a soldier, you’ll be treated like one. Draha shoves herself upright, ignoring the way her numb legs wobble beneath her, and the fact she’s dressed in sweat-soaked training clothes rather than a uniform.

“We have opportunity for a reconnaissance mission in Vinderheim,” Ružena says, voice low. “The throne cannot be inherited by a male heir, and we’ve known for a long time that Queen Solfrid’s had trouble having a daughter. Next in line to inherit is her cousin, Margit Ovesen.

“Ovesen’s lived her life as a duchess, however. She’s not nearly ready to take over, and if someone... got Solfrid out of the way, so to speak, and Ovesen ascended the throne... Vinderheim would be incredibly weakened. It would be the perfect opportunity to win this war once and for all.

“We also recently received information that Ovesen’s eldest daughter, Hanna, is ambitious, but hardly has the temperament of a ruler. Solfrid is pregnant with her fourth child, and likely final based on her age. The Five has decided a reconnaissance mission is necessary.”

Timotej frowns. “You’re going to—”

“We are not going to kill a newborn,” Ružena says. “We’re going to make sure that Solfrid dies before she can give birth.”

Timotej looks shocked. Draha supposes she should be shocked as well, given that Ružena has just revealed that the Queen’s Five intend to assassinate a world leader, but she’s far more preoccupied with something else.

“You said *we*,” Draha says slowly. “Who exactly is going to complete the mission?”

“The Five have selected myself and Valentín. Valentín still needs to agree, but—”

“I shall,” Valentín says quietly. “It is my duty to serve my country.”

Ružena shrugs helplessly. “Then it’s decided. The two of us will be leaving for Vinderheim immediately after the solstice.”

Draha feels as though someone has ripped her heart straight from her chest.

“No,” she breathes, hands curling round empty air. “*No*. You’ve both been gone for what? A year? A year and a half? And then you come home for a month just to tell me that you’re going straight back into the field?”

Valentín’s shoulders are rigid. “The Five have selected us. It is our duty to—”

“*I don’t want to hear about duty!*”

Draha’s heart is pounding in her chest anew, veins full with adrenaline once again. Her eyes burn as she blinks back tears.

“All my life,” she snarls, “I’ve been told about our *duty*. Our duty to Krazny and to the queen and to the army. We’re supposed to sacrifice everything in the name of duty. Who of us chose it? I didn’t ask to be a lifeblood, but that’s what I am anyway and because of it I have to *massacre* people, I have to watch you go on a suicide mission without so much as flinching, I have to—I have to—”

She breaks off, chest heaving. She wants to scream, to run, to leave Ilazovna behind and never come back.

Such a thought is treason. She wants it anyway.

“I didn’t choose this. I didn’t choose *any* of this.” Draha jabs a finger in Ružena and Valentín’s direction. “And you didn’t either.”

Kraznian sorcerers are not given a choice as to whether or not they develop their powers. Every child in the country is tested at age eight, and if they carry that telltale spark of magic, then they’re torn from their families and sent to a school some miles west of Ilazovna, the *Skola Kuzelny*. There they sharpen their skills, honing their talents and preparing for the day they will inevitably serve in the queen’s army, for sorcerers are required to complete four years of service. Draha is the only sorcerer since the war began who did not attend the *Skola*, for Alzbeta wished that she be taught at court, so a better eye might be kept on her.

Sorcerers are stripped of their homes, their families, even their names. Ružena was born on the border, gifted with a Tenguran name she can no longer remember. Valentín was renamed two times over, first when he was brought to the *Skola* and second when he declared that he was male, never female. Draha’s own name was picked with care; Drahomíra, an ancient name, meaning *peace*. For that is her destiny as Novomeská decreed it so long ago: she shall bring peace to Krazny.

Draha finds she is very tired of destiny.

Ružena is stony-faced. Color is high in Valentín's cheeks. Iyov alone is smiling, but it is hardly his usual grin. It is sharp and toothless and angry, and Draha remembers that of the magic-blessed gathered here, Iyov alone is no sorcerer but an *ashevi*, having fled Krazny with his mother at seven years old to escape the school that would have ignored his faith to bring him up in the way of sorcery.

"She hasn't even told you the worst bit, you know," Iyov says humorlessly. Ružena suddenly jolts, spinning around to face him, but he keeps speaking. "Do you know, Draha, what the Five have planned for you and I?"

The anger in her veins melts away, replaced instead by icy fear. She stares at Iyov in horror.

Iyov's voice is bitter, low. She has never heard him this way before.

"Queen Alzbeta was rather impressed with your performance on Frodje. She's decided that you shall begin your military service early, as you've always wanted. I'm to accompany you to the front, and then you'll spend your days cutting down Vinder troops."

In all the time she's spent at Lystad—nearly two months, by now—Leif has rarely had cause to visit the city itself. The most she's seen of it has been from the carriage windows on that long-ago ride from the train station to the palace, as well as a few glimpses caught while visiting the Great Chapel on holy days. The royal palace itself is far more secluded than one might imagine, sat high upon a hill at Lystad's very edge and ringed by forest on three sides. According to the city guidebook Leif's managed to get her hands on, it's to ensure the queen's protection, but she can't help but wonder if mere security isn't the only reason. It's very easy to separate noble from commoner if you keep their living spaces separate as well.

Today, though, she finds herself in a carriage yet again, Sigrid rambling excitedly at her side. The solstice is approaching, and with the solstice comes Vaerkalt, perhaps the most important holiday in the Vinder calendar. Vaerkalt marks midwinter and the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The sun sets at only three in the afternoon. And yet, despite its long night, Vaerkalt is a joyous occasion: it may be the shortest day of the year, but every day after it will be a little longer than the last, every night a little shorter than before. It marks a new beginning, a rebirth for the icy north. A promise that spring shall come again.

It's traditional to give gifts on Vaerkalt. Before now, Leif has always scraped and saved to make sure she can buy the very best presents, determined to make her parents happy for once in their miserable lives, and to give Ivar something he'll truly enjoy. (Usually a bottle of whiskey, which always earned a deep laugh from him and her father and a sharp glare from her mother.) This year, though, she doesn't have to worry about funds. Sigrid has insisted on covering the costs, no matter how expensive the gifts happen to be.

"We have plenty of money," she'd said simply, when Leif said she couldn't possibly accept. "It isn't any trouble, and I can assure you, it'll hardly make a dent in our fortune. Sometimes I think we've got too much money for our own good."

So here they are, wrapped in furs and tucked together inside a carriage, Sigrid talking endlessly while Leif listens. At the moment, Sigrid is focused on Vaerkalt gifts, a subject Leif hardly minds.

(In fact, she's found that the more time she's spent with Sigrid, the more she loves listening to the girl chatter on about whatever topic strikes her fancy. Leif doesn't even have to add anything to the conversation. To be heard makes Sigrid ecstatic, and that in itself makes Leif herself happy.)

“Hanna and Klara are both excellent at finding gifts,” Sigrid’s saying. “I’m not the best at it, though, not like they are. It’s so funny—they always know exactly what I’d like, even if they hardly spend any time with me. Klara gave me a new box of embroidery threads last year, imported from Jarghala and dyed in the most beautiful colors. I’ve no idea where she found it. And Hanna got me a new pair of ice skates. They didn’t fit me perfectly at first—I had to go to the cobbler’s to fix them—but they’re some of the loveliest things I’ve ever seen.” She grins. “You’ve seen them, I think—they’re decorated with bluebirds and ivy, and there’s a rose on each heel. I wear them often.”

Leif nods. She has indeed seen these skates.

“My gifts weren’t half as perfect. Klara likes riding, of course, but she’s always had a hand for sketching, so I found her a little notebook and a set of charcoals, and for Hanna I found a golden necklace with a sapphire pendant and matching earrings. She likes jewelry, you see.” Sigrid pulls her legs up. “I thought they’d like them. Klara did, I think, but Hanna hardly ever wears what I gave her. I’m hoping I can find something even better this year.”

“What did Peter Aalberg give you?”

Sigrid’s face brightens. “Oh! He managed to find me a set of dress patterns, and all in the latest fashions! It was excellent. I spent months sewing gowns for myself. He likes sewing too, of course, so I gave him a set of fabrics. I think he liked it; he used them all, and he made himself a waistcoat out of one particular red fabric and he wears it all the time. It matches well with his hair.” The girl pauses, glancing out the window, and smiles even wider.

“We’re here,” she announces. She straightens. “I worked out what we might do this morning. Would you like to hear?”

“Of course.”

Sigrid beams. “Well, you see, I thought we could each go off on our own. It’s a bit scary, I know, and we don’t have to do it, but this way we won’t see what we’re giving each other. It’s about noon now, and we could come back to the clocktower—it’s right over there—at four.”

Leif tries to imagine four hours of shopping and winces. “What about three, instead?”

“That sounds excellent. Oh, I nearly forgot!”

Sigrid reaches into her pockets, then pulls out a tarnished signet ring, wrought of gold with a tiny crest in its center. She hands it to Leif. Upon closer inspection, the crest it bears is a pair of stags with their antlers interlocked. It is exquisitely detailed for something so small.

“That’s our family crest,” Sigrid explains as Leif continues to marvel at the workmanship. “When you need to pay, simply show it to the shopkeeper and they’ll know to charge the expense to our account.”

Leif slides the ring onto her finger. “Thanks.”

Sigrid nods, beaming once more, and then the two of them step out of the carriage. Two guards in blue-and-white livery are already waiting outside, hands folded behind their backs. Leif eyes them curiously.

Sigrid’s cheeks have turned pink. “Queen Solfrid is Mama’s cousin, remember,” she tells Leif quietly, as though embarrassed. “We’re her closest relatives. If anything were to happen to her before she has an heir, the crown would go to our family. Mama likes me to have an escort when I leave the palace grounds, even though I’m the youngest.”

Leif taps the girl’s nose. “We wouldn’t want anything to happen to you, though, would we?” she asks playfully, and Sigrid giggles.

“Of course not.”

Then, suddenly, she straightens, raising her head high and wiping her face of all emotion. Leif realizes with a sickly feeling that she is looking at a portrait of Hanna Ovesen at sixteen: Sigrid has the same heart-shaped face, the same delicate features, the same alabaster skin and pale blue eyes. It’s almost eerie how closely they resemble each other.

And then Sigrid smiles, and the spell is broken.

“We’ll meet at the clocktower at three?” she asks, and Leif gives an affirming nod. “All right, then. See you soon.”

The girl gives a little wave and melts into the crowd, her guards following her closely. Leif watches her go.

After a few minutes, she realizes she’s been staring blankly into the crowd at the spot she last saw Sigrid. She gives herself a shake, then looks around, eyeing each of the shops that line the square.

Leif’s written a list of people she’ll give Vaerkalt gifts to, along with possible gift ideas. It’s short (though considerably longer than lists of previous years, which had consisted solely of her parents and Ivar): Sigrid, Ivar, Klara and Hanna, and her parents as well. Eyal and Sukegei Kepek are included as well, though she’s not quite sure if either of them celebrate Vaerkalt. She’d also considered adding Peter Aalberg and Gunnar, but she doesn’t know Peter quite well enough, and though she and Gunnar seem to have made peace since the race, Leif isn’t sure that he wouldn’t simply throw a gift from her into the fireplace.

She tackles the gifts for Klara and Hanna first. Hanna is easiest; the two of them have never truly gotten along, and their lack of relationship waives any fears about accidentally choosing a poor gift. Indeed, Leif spies a sapphire-studded diadem in a shop window, imagines it pinned in Hanna’s white-blond hair, purchases it, and gives no more thought to the matter.

Klara's gift is a bit more difficult, but in the end, Leif finds a fine pair of riding gloves in a shop that supplies such gear and buys them as well, though she winces at the cost. The same shop has a fine Tenguran-make saddle on display, and she reserves it with Kepek in mind.

Whiskey for Ivar, as always. It's become something of a tradition. She settles on a box of foreign chocolates for her father; he's always had a sweet tooth, but it was hard to indulge on an overseer's salary. Hopefully this will satisfy him.

Perhaps it's unimaginative to buy Sigrid more sewing supplies, especially when she's sure to receive plenty of them for Vaerkalt. But Leif has never seen the girl's eyes light up quite so brightly as they do when she talks about stitching, has never seen her more excited about anything else. So upon seeing a set of supplies meant for making lace, Leif hardly gives buying it a second thought. Hopefully Sigrid will be pleased.

Eyal is next. For his gift, Leif takes the time to ask around, wondering whether or not there are any Ruvav shopkeepers in Lystad. She's directed to an area at the edge of town populated almost solely by the Ruvav. There, she finds a row of shops, almost identical to the market in Lystad's center only much smaller, all run by the Ruvav. Countless pairs of eyes follow her as she wanders down the street, but this had been expected. Gray-eyed, fair, and sandy-haired, Leif hardly blends into this area of the city. She simply squares her shoulders and does her best to continue shopping. This is what Eyal experiences every day of his life; she can bear it for few minutes or two.

Eventually Leif finds herself in the bookshop, staring helplessly at the volumes she cannot read. The shopkeeper comes over to assist her, and when Leif's explained her situation, he does his very best to help her find the right book for Eyal.

They do, in the end. This Leif buys herself.

When she's finished, she looks back at her list and checks off names in her head, narrowing it down. It's past two by now, and fortunately, she only has one person left to shop for.

Unfortunately, that person is her mother. Leif swallows, squares her shoulders again, and returns to the main market.

She has always given careful thought to her mother's gifts. As a child, she'd been desperate to make her mother happy, yearning to see the woman smile and know Leif was the reason for that happiness. As a teenager, it had been a concentrated effort on finally earning some sort of approval, even if it was fleeting.

This year Leif has friends, a home, a purpose in life beyond eventually escaping the place she'd been raised in. But she'll find the perfect gift anyway. She'll still send it. No matter how cruel her mother is, Leif can at least be kind in return. She can at least show that she still cares.

She does, really. She *does* still care about Hedda Isaksen, no matter how many times the woman has driven Leif to tears, no matter how many times her mother has made her feel empty inside. Perhaps that is the most awful thing about this situation: she still loves her mother, still yearns for the woman's approval and love in return, no matter how often she's been kicked in the teeth.

When she returns to the main square, Leif catches sight of a tailor's shop. On display in the window is a woman's winter coat, made of a maroon velvet and lined with sable fur. She sees it and thinks of her mother's slender figure, of her sandy gray hair against the velvet, and Leif knows it is exactly what she needs.

It's ridiculously expensive, but she's spending the Ovesens' money, not her own, and Leif's family has served theirs for generations. Leif asks for it to be packaged and posted to the mountains, just as she did with her father's chocolates. This time, the shopkeeper asks if she'd like to attach a note. Leif simply shakes her head in response.

Her mother will know who it comes from.

She finds Sigrid waiting beside the clocktower, guards still at her sides. As they're led to the carriage, Sigrid explains that she'd finished her shopping early than expected, that she's glad they'd cut the time by an hour.

"I actually found all my gifts rather easily," the girl confesses once they're in the carriage. She pauses. "Would you like to know what they are?"

"Of course," Leif assures her, and Sigrid smiles.

"A whalebone pipe and tobacco for Papa, a set of perfumes for Mama, new stirrups for Klara, bolts of silk for Per, tickets to the theater for Hanna and a music box for Eyal—it has a little dancing rabbit, which is silly but I thought he'd like it. I'd say what I got for you, of course, but I think that'd ruin the surprise."

Sigrid pauses, staring at her mittened hands in her lap. Then at last she raises her head and asks, "Do you think they'll like them?"

"It all sounds like lovely gifts," Leif replies. "I don't know how they *couldn't* like them."

Sigrid smiles, white teeth flashing, and leans into Leif's shoulder.

The ride back to the palace is a short one, and in no time at all they're back in the residency once again, sloughing off their layers and heading for their respective rooms.

"Tea?" Leif offers tentatively, upon reaching her own room. Sigrid nods.

“Give me a moment to put my things away, and then I’ll be right over.”

She hasn’t made tea in months, not since she left home, but there’s a pot and cups and a box of teabags in the cupboards of her rooms, and Leif has always felt distinctly guilty about calling on servants for things she could very well do herself. So when Sigrid comes through the door, Leif’s kneeling in front of the fireplace, tending the teapot hanging above it.

“I’ve never seen anyone make tea that way,” Sigrid remarks. Leif glances over at her.

“It’s how we do it in the mountains. Why burn coal for a stove when you have a fire already roaring at your side?”

“You’ll have to teach me more about life in the mountains, then. It sounds fascinating.”

From anyone else the words would be mocking, but Sigrid has never been anything less than earnest. There’s sweet rolls in the cupboard as well, usually saved for late-night snacks when Leif’s been working and doesn’t want to trouble the kitchens, and she directs Sigrid to first get them out and set them on a platter, then retrieve a trivet for the teapot.

Tea is finished faster when it’s made over a fire rather than a stovetop, she’s found, and in no time at all Leif is preparing to take the pot from the flames. It is then, of course, that a knock comes at the door, startling her badly enough that she nearly falls headfirst into the fire.

“I’ll get it,” Sigrid offers, as Leif dusts herself off while cursing under her breath. “You have plenty to do at the moment, and I’m just sitting around being useless.”

“You aren’t—” Leif begins, but the girl has already darted away.

She takes the teapot from the fire, and is about to set it down on the trivet when Sigrid’s footsteps returns. Leif glances over her shoulder.

“Who was that?”

“Messenger,” Sigrid replies. “There’s a letter for you from your mother.”

Leif freezes a moment, still holding the teapot aloft. She collects herself, clearing her throat, and turns swiftly around.

“Give me it.”

“Gods, you look as though you’ve seen the devil. Surely it can’t be that terrible.”

“It can,” Leif counters. She crosses the room, reaching for the envelope, but Sigrid simply laughs and ducks out of the way.

Leif grits her teeth. “This isn’t a game, it’s—”

“It can’t be that bad!”

“It really, really can, now give me that—*thing!*”

She misses the envelope by an inch, Sigrid twisting out of her grip. Leif’s blood runs cold. Sigrid’s always had kind parents, even if they’re a bit absent; she doesn’t know what it’s like to be

terrified of your mother, to have to hide and conceal, not really, she doesn't know how *serious* this is—

There's the ripping of paper. Leif's eyes grow wide, and she snatches at Sigrid's gown.

"Sigrid, give me the damn letter."

"She's your *mother*," Sigrid says, and she's taking the letter out—*dear Reinhilde, she's taking it out*, "she can't be that horrible. Look, I'll show you, I'll read it."

"No."

Leif's voice is a whisper, a terrified little thing. She grabs for the letter again, heart hammering in her chest, but Sigrid swivels again and then jumps up on the desk, the wood creaking under her weight.

"*To Leif*," Sigrid begins. "*I hope this letter finds you in good health.*"

"*I hope in vain, however. If you receive this, you are still carrying on with your delusions, your... deceptions.*" Sigrid pauses, brows furrowing. "*Do you truly think that you just have to put on a dress and the... the world will see you as a woman?*"

Sigrid drops her hand, looking at Leif over the top of the paper. Her face is drawn, confused—but not angry. Not angry at all.

Leif darts her hand out, snatching the letter out of Sigrid's grip. It rips a bit. She doesn't much care.

"I don't understand," Sigrid says softly. She slips into a sitting position, legs hanging off the edge of the desk. "Why did she say you're deluded?"

"My *mother* is deluded," Leif mutters. Her face is hot, her throat is tight, her heart is pounding. She clutches the letter close to her chest and tries to breathe.

"Leif?"

A hand reaches out, settling on her shoulder. Leif doesn't look up.

"Can you explain?"

"I—I—"

She can hardly find the words, let alone form them. This was never supposed to happen. She was supposed to get the operations and supplements and then she'd be *right*, her body would fit her at last and then this would all be a charming anecdote, a story about her crazy mother, the life she left behind. It wasn't supposed to be like *this*.

Her story was supposed to be shared on Leif's terms, not her mother's.

Sigrid reaches out her other hand, placing it on Leif's shoulder. Sweet Sigrid. Sweet silly Sigrid, who nearly begged Leif to be her friend, who loves skating and embroidery and commoner's cookies. Sigrid, who is one of the first true friends Leif has ever had.

Leif crushes the letter in her hands and takes a deep breath, and then another, and another, and another.

The knocking startles them both. Sigrid rears back, hands dropping away, and Leif jumps in place. The door opens a moment later and Hanna Ovesen sails through, draped in a dress of rosy satin with pearls in her ears, waist cinched and expression annoyed.

Look at her, a terrible voice whispers in Leif's ear. *A duchess, a true lady. She's what you'll never be.*

Leif chokes down a sob. Hanna glances at her, then looks to Sigrid.

'I've been tearing the palace apart looking for you, Sigi,' she says. Somehow her voice still manages to be kind, despite the look on her face. "We've an appointment with the tailor, don't you remember? We're nearly late."

"Apologies," Sigrid whispers. She slides off the desk. "I'll get my coat."

Leif's blood runs cold. "Sigrid, wait, I—"

"I'm very sorry, but Sigrid and I have a prior engagement," Hanna interrupts. She does look sorry. "The tailor's very exclusive, hates when we're late. She'll be back as soon as possible, *ja?*"

"*Ja,*" Leif whispers. Hanna smiles, then settles a hand on Sigrid's shoulder, steering her out of the room, and Leif can already hear her talking about colors and fabrics by the time the door shuts. Strange, that Sigrid is silent and Hanna is the one prattling on.

How long Leif stands there, staring into space, only Reinhilde knows.

She does not read the letter, in the end. She smooths out the wrinkles, then folds it up carefully and slides it into her desk drawer. She may read it, someday.

Leif is shaking.

She collapses into her chair, head hanging, and begins to cry.

"Leif."

She's still clutching the whiskey bottle in one hand, albeit loosely. Someone slides it from her grasp, and she lays her head down on her arm.

"Leif," the voice says again, and her eyelids flutter. She turns onto her side.

"Where'd you get the whiskey?"

"Bought it for Ivar," Leif mumbles. She has a terrible, terrible headache. "Drank it m'self."

"Oh, you silly girl."

"M' head hurts."

“I’m sure it does.”

Someone takes her by the shoulders gently, lifting her into a sitting position. Leif blinks blearily. She’s in an armchair, though she can’t quite remember how she got here, and Ivar is crouching in front of her. Her ribs ache.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly midnight.” Ivar brushes a lock behind her ear. “You’ve been crying. And drinking.”

Leif nods slowly.

“What happened?”

“I don’t—”

The memory hits her like a punch to the gut, and all Leif can think is *oh* before fresh sorrow flares up in her heart and new tears begin to course down her cheeks, hot and dripping.

Ivar’s eyes widen and suddenly, suddenly he’s pulling her into his arms, Leif’s face pressed to his shirt. He smells like woodsmoke and coffee, the way he always does, he smells like home, like the mountains, and Leif cannot bear it any longer.

She weeps.

She weeps and the sobs wrack her body, ugly-sounding things that make her shake. She weeps and her tears stain Ivar’s shirt but Leif presses her face into it anyway, because Ivar’s the only person who ever truly raised her, the only person who has loved her unconditionally, the only person who defended her when her mother raged and her father said nothing. She holds him as close as possible, choking on her tears, and Ivar says nothing and simply holds her tight, rubbing gentle circles into her back.

“Mother sent a letter,” Leif whispers, when she’s calmed down enough to talk again. “It was awful, she said that I was delusional and deceptive and that—that putting on a dress didn’t make me a woman, and Sigrid read it by accident and she *knows*. She knows now and I—I—”

She sobs again. Ivar runs his fingers through her hair, just the way he used to when she was a child.

“What if she doesn’t want to be my friend?” Leif chokes out. “What if she hates me now?”

Ivar draws back, hands on Leif’s shoulder. “Then she is the most foolish girl I have ever known.”

Leif stares at him, chest heaving. Ivar takes her hands gently.

“Leif Isaksen, I have no children of my own and I am glad of it, for no daughter of mine could be half the woman you are. You are clever, and you are kind, and you are selfless. I am truly honored to have seen you grow up.

“Your mother is cruel for the way she has treated you, and your father is just as cruel for letting it happen.” Ivar hangs his head. “I am not implacable. I told you to make peace, but that was not your place. It was *their* duty to make amends, not yours. I am so, so sorry for telling you otherwise.”

“It’s all right,” Leif whispers, voice shaky. Ivar shakes his head.

“It’s not. You cannot help being who you are. We could certainly help the way we treated you for it.”

She closes her eyes. Ivar raises a hand, cupping Leif’s jaw, and she leans into the touch.

Her father has never been gentle with her; it is not in his nature. She cannot remember the last time her mother touched her kindly. It has only ever been Ivar.

“When this is over,” Ivar says softly, “I’ll take you away. Anywhere in Vinderheim, anywhere you like. I’ll take you somewhere you can be happy.”

Leif heaves a breath. “And we don’t have to go back to the mountains?”

“Not if you don’t want to.”

Ivar has always loved Sverhul. The mountains are his home, the place he belongs. He is a man meant for the edge of civilization, meant for a tiny cabin that smells of smoke, surrounded by snow two-thirds of the year. She knows exactly how much he would sacrifice to leave that behind.

“I’m tired,” Leif whispers. She feels like a child again, ready to fall into her father’s arms—only this time it is not her father waiting to catch her, but Ivar.

Ivar reaches out, wrapping his arms round her. “I know.”

Leif buries her face in his shoulder once more, knitting her fingers in the back of his shirt. She does not want him to see her tears.

Eyal's face is tired, dark circles stark beneath his eyes, and his shirt hangs half-unbuttoned. Even so, he smiles when he sees her. Though that smile fades as soon as he takes in Leif's expression.

"What's wrong?"

"I..." Leif hesitates. "Can I come in?" she asks, and Eyal nods immediately.

The two of them end up on the couch, Eyal curled at one end with Leif at the other, the two of them turned to face each other. Leif finds she's tapping her fingers on her hands rapidly, and so she sits on them instead.

"Did something happen?" Eyal asks slowly, brows creasing. "Something with Rendahl, maybe, or Solfrid—"

She forces a laugh. "No. None of that. It's just..."

Leif swallows, closing her eyes. Her face suddenly feels very, very hot.

"There's something I haven't told you," she whispers. "It's... There was a letter from my mother yesterday. I don't know how many people know, if anyone will talk about it, and I—I wanted to tell you myself. I need to tell you about it myself."

A hand touches her wrist for a moment, light as a feather. She opens her eyes. Eyal's holding his hands out, offering them to her, and Leif makes a choked sound before taking them in her own.

"I," she begins, then swallows. Takes a deep breath.

"I'm *feilodsel*."

Eyal frowns. "I don't—I don't know that word."

"You wouldn't." She's tapping again, this time against the back of his hands. "It's new. It's a combination of *feil*, 'wrong', and *fodsel*, 'birth'. 'Wrong birth'."

"Wrong birth," Eyal says softly, realization starting to dawn on his face. Leif squeezes her eyes shut.

"It means I was assigned male at birth," she whispers. "It's why I'm named Leif. Most *feilodsel* folks take new names, ones that fit them better, but I... I never wanted to. I've always been Leif and I've always been a girl, even if I didn't know it for a while."

She holds her breath, waiting for his response. If Eyal doesn't accept this, if he's upset by it—

But suddenly he's wrapping his arms round her, pulling her close to him in a tight, tight embrace. Leif squeaks a bit, then brings her own arms up to circle Eyal's back.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” he whispers, voice low. “I am honored that you chose to tell me.”

Leif blinks. “You... You aren’t upset?”

Eyal draws back, shaking his head. “You’re my friend. If you say you’re a girl, then you’re a girl, no matter what anyone else says.”

She smiles shyly, ducking her head down, and takes a deep, deep breath. She thinks she might cry.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Really.”

Eyal just squeezes her hands in response.

They sit like that for a while, simply reveling in the quiet and each other’s presence. For the first time in a long, long time, Leif feels like she can suddenly breathe again, like a great weight has been lifted from her chest.

“There’s a phrase for people like you in Ruvav,” Eyal says after a while. “*Adah zaqil*. Most folks just say *adaza*, though.”

“What’s it mean?”

“Literally? ‘New caterpillar’.”

“Excellent,” Leif says, feeling slightly green. “I love being compared to larvae.”

“No, it’s—” Eyal pauses. “It’s more of a metaphor, I think. Like—butterflies aren’t born as butterflies, you know? They’re caterpillars first.”

“And eventually they figure it out,” Leif murmurs. “That they’re actually something else.” She looks up at him. “I see. I’m a butterfly. I like that.”

Eyal smiles. “I’m glad.”

The grandfather clock across the room suddenly chimes, startling them both. Eyal’s eyes go wide.

“I need to go,” he says, shoving himself off the couch. He grabs a waistcoat and shrugs it on. “Oh, *Ahel*, Rendahl’ll kill me—” he laughs darkly “—well, not literally, but I’m still—”

He sighs, grabbing his coat. “Do you want to walk with me, or would you rather stay here?”

Leif stands. “I think I’ll stay. You’re already late, and I’d just slow you down.”

The two of them step out together, though Eyal of course turns left to leave the residency, and Leif goes right to return to her rooms.

As she reaches for her doorknob, she catches a glimpse of white-blond hair, a lovely pink gown, and her stomach plummets.

Sigrid.

Leif hasn't spoken to her yet. Not since the letter.

She takes a deep breath, then turns round, forcing a smile on her face. "Sigrid?"

Sigrid freezes, eyes wide. "Oh. Hello."

"Would you like to go ice skating today?" Leif offers. "I think I might want to try it again."

Sigrid is staring at her shoes. "I'm, ah, busy today."

"Sigrid, yesterday you told me your entire schedule leading up to Vaerkalt, and I know for a *fact* you have nothing to do today."

The girl sputters, face turning pink. "I—it's just—"

Leif closes her eyes, takes another deep breath, and opens them.

"If you don't want to be my friend anymore," she says quietly, "then please tell me. But I would like to explain my mother's letter to you."

"No, it's—it's—"

Sigrid tugs on her braids, chest heaving visibly. Leif bites her lip.

"Hanna says that I shouldn't spend time with you anymore because you were lying to me about things and lying is bad. And Mama says that I have to listen to Hanna when she isn't around because Hanna always knows best so I have to go and I'm really sorry about it," Sigrid gasps out, and she turns away, and suddenly the weight is back on Leif's chest, suffocating her all over again.

Somehow she manages to dart forward, to grab Sigrid's wrist. "Sigrid, *please*."

"I have to go!"

"How old are you, Sigrid?" Leif presses. "How old?"

"Sixteen," Sigrid whispers.

"If you're sixteen years old, should your older sister still be making all your decisions for you? Should she be dictating who you can see and who you can't?"

Sigrid tugs her hand away, wrapping her arms around herself. "I have to go. I'm sorry."

"Please," Leif chokes out, but the girl is already running down the hall, too far to reach again.

Leif stares after her, her throat thick with tears. She tries very, very hard not to cry.

"You're my friend," she whispers after Sigrid's figure. "You're my very best friend."

Why can't you stay?

She turns, slowly, and returns silently to her rooms.

Today Sanger is waiting for him for the first time in weeks. She motions for him to follow, then leads Eyal up to Rendahl's workshop, stopping silently beside the door. Eyal eyes it warily.

"He's waiting for you," Sanger says at last. He glances at her.

"I know." But he still doesn't go in, not until the herald sighs, yanks the door open, and shoves Eyal inside with surprising strength, slamming it shut behind him.

The first room is empty but for a pair of corpses—at least, he assumes they're corpses—lying on the operating tables, a thin white sheet thrown over each. The makeshift morgue is even more unsettling when empty: the light plays tricks on Eyal's eyes and the wind outside plays tricks on his ears, making it seem as though the corpses are moaning and creaking softly, moving slightly beneath their coverings.

He swallows, throwing his shoulders back. He's survived a lot in his life, short as it's been. He can make it through Rendahl's workshop.

Rendahl isn't in the second morgue, either, and the door to the study is locked. Eyal's heart is hammering in his chest. For a moment, he almost considers walking out of the apartment, but the punishment for that would probably be far worse than whatever Rendahl has in mind for him today.

He wouldn't stab Eyal *twice*, would he?

Eyal takes a deep breath, then raises his hand to knock on the door. A beat passes. Then the lock clicks and the door swings open, revealing the study behind it.

Even now he hesitates. The last time he was here, Rendahl stuck a knife through his heart. He still can't wash the fear of that day from his mind.

"You're not going to wait there all day, are you?"

Rendahl's sitting at his desk, legs propped up on the wood with a book in his hands. He looks remarkably casual, dressed only in shirtsleeves and trousers, his eyebrows raised.

"Well?"

I will not be scared of this man.

Eyal raises his chin high and strides into the room, hands folded behind his back. A smile appears on Rendahl's face, if only for a moment.

"What do you need?"

"The solstice is barely two weeks away," Rendahl says, setting his book down. "I've decided to turn your attention to the ritual."

"Oh," Eyal says, very faintly.

"Sit down; this'll be a long conversation. Would you like some tea?"

“No.”

“Coffee, then?”

Eyal simply shakes his head.

He is not going to sit down. He wonders distantly if there's still blood on the settee.

“Stubborn boy,” Rendahl mutters. He clears his throat. “We celebrate the winter solstice with the festival of Vaerkalt, which begins at sundown on the day of the solstice and lasts until sunrise. Rites, however, begin at midnight.

“Traditionally the solstice rites have been celebrated by lifebloods; the solstice represents the end of one cycle and the birth of another, lifebloods have domain over the cycle of life and death, and so on. You understand.” Rendahl's mouth quirks. “Of course, we haven't had a lifeblood to celebrate them in about three hundred years, so Solfrid is... excited about you, to say the least.”

Eyal shuts his eyes. “What do you need me to do?”

“Straight to the point, aren't we? You have no care for tradition?”

He has plenty of care for tradition. He cares for his own traditions, for the mornings spent in temple and the angel's eye upon his sternum, for the warm bread his stepmother used to make and the skullcaps he once wore during prayer, but he says none of that. Eyal is simply silent, staring straight at Rendahl, and at last the sorcerer sighs and continues.

“The solstice is Brother Soren's holiday. Naturally, it is the dedicates who will prepare the sacrifices for the feast—it's far too much work for you to do all on your own—so you'll only have to deal with the magpies. There are two, one for the old year and one for the new. You will first kill one and drain its blood, which you will pour upon a statue of Brother Soren whilst saying the proper prayers, and then—”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

His chest is heaving, his lungs aching and his heart pounding, no longer in fear. He is too angry to be afraid.

Rendahl pauses, looking up at him. “Is there a problem?”

“Is there a *problem*,” Eyal mocks, face hot. His hands are tight fists at his sides. “I am not Vinder. I am Ruvav and I worship *Ahel*, none of your gods, and I will never, *never* perform blood magic.”

“It is not blood magic.”

He laughs bitterly. “I do not deal in blood.”

“It is an ancient tradition,” Rendahl says, voice dangerously low. He rises from his chair, hands braced on his desk. “It is what the queen wants, and it is what you'll do.”

“*I do not deal in blood,*” Eyal repeats, voice little more than a hiss, and suddenly he feels heat running through his veins, the same familiar heat he felt while buried in the mines and when Rendahl stuck a knife through his heart, the heat of magic.

He ought to tamp it down, snuff it out. He finds he does not care.

“What can you do to me?” he whispers, voice ragged. “You can’t kill me. You can’t hurt me, not anymore. What the hell can you do if I say no?”

Rendahl jerks his arm suddenly and there’s a great tug on Eyal’s chest, but he grinds his feet into the carpet, lungs straining in his chest. He closes his eyes.

A cold weight in the drawer, its shape and sharpness so familiar to him. He shudders involuntarily.

“Reach for that knife and I’ll snuff your life out before you can even grab the handle.”

A laugh. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, but I do, Eyal nat Mateh.”

Something snatches his chest, vise-like and suffocating, and Eyal’s eyes fly open as he clutches at his shirt. Rendahl has one arm stretched out, a look of concentration rigid on his face.

“I know exactly who you are,” Rendahl says softly. “You are the boy who saved another from the depths of the Sverhul mines and who vomited over a dead rabbit. You could not kill me if you tried.”

Eyal’s hand twitches over his heart. Up left, down right. Back again.

Ahel, *I am* drowning.

For a moment he sees the room not as it is, but as a map: the nerves that run beneath Rendahl’s skin and the ones beneath his own, branching and blossoming like tree roots, and then he sees veins and bones and—something else, something he has no name for.

(The closest he can come is *soul*.)

He pulls his arm back as best he can manage, envisioning Rendahl’s own in his mind’s eye. Rendahl gasps and slowly, slowly the man’s body stiffens, arms dropping to his sides once more, and Eyal can suddenly breathe freely again.

“You’ve learned a lot,” Rendahl gasps out. “Though I doubt it’s enough.”

Eyal grits his teeth. “I will not perform the rite.”

“You will.”

“*I will not!*”

The words tear from his throat, broken and vicious, and Eyal feels hot tears pooling in his eyes. He wants to drop to the floor, to release Rendahl and curl into a ball and simply cry, to never face the world again. He wants to run and never come back.

“I will not,” he repeats. He releases his hold on Rendahl. “I will not perform your rites. I am Ruvav and I worship *Ahel*, and I will never perform a rite of Soren.”

“Yes,” Rendahl says raggedly, “you will.”

“And how will you make me?”

The man’s at his side in a moment, so fast Eyal can’t stop him, and suddenly there’s a hand gripping his jaw so tightly Eyal nearly screams, his knees giving out beneath him. His feet scabble at the floor and he grasps at Rendahl’s shirt fruitlessly, unwilling to grab hold.

“You have teeth,” Rendahl says quietly. He is not smiling, but his eyes are bright and wet, the eyes of a raving fanatic. He locks eyes with Eyal. “You know the pain of losing one. If you do not perform the rites, I will tear them out, one by one, until you are begging for forgiveness. Do you understand?”

“Please, I—”

“*Do you understand?*”

His nails dig at Eyal’s skin, sharp as nails, and Eyal nods frantically. Rendahl drops him unceremoniously, and he lands gasping on the floor, massaging his jaw and throat.

“You would not understand the way war has ravaged this country,” Rendahl says softly. He’s already turned away, shoes clicking. “When misery is all you know, you can believe you are happy. But I saw this country flourish once. I remember when there was peace between us and Krazny. *Peace*, can you believe it?”

He turns, sighing. His features are as hard as ice.

“The Novomeská prophecy says you are the only hope for our nation,” Rendahl breathes. “That peace comes with the lifebloods’ return. The people yearn for a hero, Eyal nat Mateh, and you are the hero. You *will* learn that.”

Eyal looks away from him, down at the floor, but Rendahl simply crouches and takes his chin in hand, drawing his face up. Fear flares in Eyal’s veins.

Rendahl looks ancient, the weariness of an old, old man in his features. His grip is almost gentle, but there is no gentleness in his next words.

“I will beat it into you if I have to.”