

Chapter 15

The camp is alive with music and chatter, a stark contrast to the town you just came from. People are playing various instruments and singing and dancing all over the camp. A bonfire is lit in the middle, and two men are sitting on logs opposite each other around the bonfire. You decide to approach them. "Excuse me, may I sit?" You ask, currently wanting nothing more than to rest your legs.

"Of course, sit!" one of them says and waves his hand in a welcoming gesture. You gratefully sit down, and sigh as your legs can finally relax. The fire creates a warm glow on their faces, and they're both looking at you. It's a little uncomfortable to be honest.

"Couldn't resist the music?" the curly haired asks, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his legs.

"Couldn't resist the bonfire," you chuckle. "I'm Pernille, by the way," you introduce yourself. It would be weird to sit here with them without even having introduced yourself. "And this is," you start, looking next to you expecting to see Mira, but there's no one there. You look around, trying to spot her, worried you've lost her again.

"Don't worry, I saw her walk over there," the curly haired says, pointing to one of the larger tents. "I'm Jush, this is Thyler," Jush says, pointing to the other man.

"Otherwise known as Two-One Aeronauts," Thyler says proudly.

"Oh fun! So are you all musicians here?" you extend your arms to the fire, warming yourself up.

"Mostly," Jush says. "But there are also some actors, dancers, and some who do everything."

"Do you all perform together, or did you just happen to meet here at camp?"

"We perform independently, but we all travel and set up camp together. It's a nice community," Thyler explains. That sounds nice, having a community where you feel like you belong. You think again back to the capital. A place where you're surrounded by people: servants, guards, advisors, or just townsfolk in general. Yet, you've never felt that sense of community Thyler is talking about. Back in hometown you, your grandmother, your cats, and your neighbours were more like a community, you guess. But you wonder if there could have been more, if the community could have been stronger. As these thoughts are coursing through your mind, you swear you see the fire shrink just a bit too much to be natural. You look around, but nothing seems amiss. If Jush and Thyler noticed, they're not reacting.

"Actually, we just came from Riptide," Jush says, and he's now noticing the flames getting smaller. He picks up a long stick and pokes the logs, making them shift. The flames flare up again, and you conclude that the flames shrinking was probably just the bonfire dying out.

"Yeah, we performed for a noble there. He was a grown man, but I swear it was like performing for a child. He was very specific about what he wanted, and if we messed up according to him, he made us start over," Thyler says, moving to sit on the ground so he can rest his back on the log.

As the duo talks about their performance in Riptide, your stomach growls. You realise you haven't eaten since leaving Backslide. That's basically a whole day without food. Opening your backpack, you take out some of the food Lisa gave you way back in Castle Farm. You inspect the bread, making sure it hasn't gotten mouldy, but it seems fine. You pick up the jar of jam and spread some on the bread with a butter knife Lisa had conveniently placed in there as well. You offer some to Jush and Thyler, but they politely decline. It's been a few days since you got the bread from Lisa, and you expect your first bite to be dry despite the jam. But as you take a bite, your mouth is filled with the most delicious jam and bread combination you have ever tasted.

As soon as you take a bite from the bread, Mira sits down next to you, like a cat who immediately heard their bag of food being opened. "Where have you been?" you ask, handing her some bread and the jam jar. She happily accepts, probably just as hungry as you.

"Just over there, hanging out with Lost Children" she points with the butter knife towards the large tent Jush had nodded to earlier.

You frown at her, confused. "I'm sorry, you were hanging out with lost children?"

"Yeah," she nods, not understanding your confusion. She takes a bite of bread and looks at you. Then, she realises what you mean. "Oh," she laughs. "Not literal lost children. No, that's what they called themselves. Lost Children." She points over to a group of eight young men who are behaving in a way you can only describe as chaotic.

You both finish eating, and you feel a sudden wave of tiredness as you stare at the fire. You gather up the courage to very boldly ask if you can sleep in their camps tonight. Jush and Thyler, tell you of course you can, and one of them gets up to fetch you a pair of blankets and some pillows. They offer to let you sleep in one of their tents for the night, not with them, but you decline and say you'd like to sleep under the stars. You don't know why, but you feel a sudden urge to gaze at the stars until you drift off to sleep. The two men retreat into their tents for the night, and you and Mira are left alone by the bonfire. You look up at the sky and see clouds obscuring your view of the stars. There are still some tiny gaps here and there, but not enough to see any stars. Disappointed, you drop your gaze, annoyed at yourself for forgetting that it's been all cloudy and gloomy for days.

"Did you notice that of all the songs being played tonight, none of them were at all related to Christmas?" Mira asks. You hadn't paid much attention to the music played around you, but you're not surprised. "Imagine the power you wield if you can curse a whole damn kingdom."

"You don't know that it's the curse. Maybe they just didn't feel like playing Christmas music." You say defensively for some reason.

"Right, we're this close to Christmas, and not one of all the performers here wanted any Christmas related songs."

"They're probably performing them a lot. Maybe they're sick of them, have you thought of that?" You don't know why you're getting so defensive over this, and it's evident in your tone. Is there a part of you that feels like this curse is your fault? Is there a part of you that feels like you're the reason a whole kingdom is now cursed with no joy and holiday spirit?

“Okay, sorry I brought it up,” she says, but in an annoying way, as if you’re getting touchy and she’s backing up.

You feel your blood begin to simmer. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Talk to me like I’m some moody teen.”

“Look, I was just pondering over the range of the warlock’s power. I don’t know why you’re getting so defensive over it. It’s not like you’re the one who cast the curse.” You can see she’s trying to remain calm, but her tone tells you she’s clearly annoyed.

“No, but I’m the reason he cast it,” you say, your voice surprisingly raised.

“Oh come on, don’t be ridiculous.”

You stand up, your blood heating up. “I’m not ridiculous! He cast it to test me, that means I’m the reason he cursed every single person in this entire kingdom!”

She stands up too, her voice raised as well. “No, that does not mean you’re the reason. He didn’t curse us because of something you did! He cursed us because he’s an ass who wanted some goddamn entertainment! Yes, he may have cast it to test you, and yes he may have cast it in light of the Christmas party, but that doesn’t mean you’re responsible for his actions!” She’s yelling now, but that’s not what startles you. Her eyes have turned completely black during her angry mini-monologue. You’ve seen her angry plenty of times, she gets easily annoyed. But her eyes have never turned black from a simple, verbal fight before.

“Mira, have you used your powers at all after Smithereens?”

She steps back, and you barely notice an almost imperceptible flinch. “What?” she frowns, confused at the sudden change of subject.

“You heard me.”

“No,” she says. You feel a strange sensation as she says that, almost like a ripple effect in the energy coming off her. It takes a second, but combined with the flinch you noticed earlier, you realise what just happened.

“You’re lying,” you say, studying her face. She doesn’t say anything for a long time, seemingly going through something in her mind.

Finally, she speaks. “I forgot the guardian gave you that gift...” Her voice sounds strange. It’s her voice, but there’s something else behind it, something that gives you the creeps.

“I thought you weren’t going to use them. I thought you were trying to resist.”

“And I thought you wanted me to use them,” her voice is now eerily calm. “Isn’t that what you said? That we had my powers and your charm? This is what you wanted.” Standing this close to her, you can see that her eyes aren’t the inky black pools you originally thought. They’re more like black shadows swirling around, completely covering her eyes until no traits of her own eyes are visible.

Her whole demeanour is making your hairs stand up, but you're also still feeling angry. Did she not see what happened to the guardian? Has she not said countless times what her curse will do to her? You had wanted her to use them earlier yes, but back then you didn't know just how bad things could get if she used them. Her words "this is what you wanted," repeat in your mind. It's a mix of everything that's happened, everything that's currently happening, that makes your blood reach a boiling point. "Not if it's turning you into this!"

The fire next to you roars to life, getting bigger and wilder. Both your heads snap in that direction, and you jump back. You frantically look around again, but there's no one else in sight, everyone else have retreated into their tents for the night. You and Mira both look at each other, your previous fight forgotten. Your heart races as you say, "Did... Did I do that?"