

Ashlynn and Dixie snicker from the doorway of the large hallway. Elicia does her best not to give them any attention whatsoever.

"I feel so bad for Aurora," Dixie giggles. "Imagine having to wake up and meet all the princesses and one of them also happens to be an ugly maid."

"I don't have to imagine! It happened to us." Elicia can feel the eye roll from across the room. "It's ashame Mom married her dad. He wasn't so bad while he was alive, but I hate having to call Elicia my stepsister." Elicia could also imagine Ashlynn shuddering at the thought of her existence.

"Maybe we can just make her hang out with Ilena, far far away from us and Aurora."

"Oh Dixie, you're so delusional. I wish, but you know Ilena won't be there. That girl practically disappeared off the face of the planet ever since her dad remarried."

"What even is the queen's name?"

"I don't remember, she never visited us, remember. Maybe it'll be good Aurora won't have to meet Elicia and Ilena. Remember that girl? That ugly locket and red bow in her hair," Ashlynn scoffs. "She may even be uglier than Elicia. Not to mention such a dull personality. Though, I have missed how gullible she is. We could get away with anything with her," Ahlynn sighs.

"I know, remember that one time we told her her mother was still alive and hated her guts! I can't believe she actually burst down crying."

"ENOUGH!" Elicia finally snaps, angrily walking over to them. "Snicker and make fun of me all you want, but don't talk about Ilena like that. Do you know how messed up it is, what you just said you did to her?! And why would you talk about the bow being ugly, I don't see you two dressing any different!" Elicia gestures to the bows in their hair. Ashlynn and Dixie just glare at her, looking her up and down.

"Hers was ugly," Ashlynn insists. "You wouldn't know. You've never met her. And at least we aren't the ones dressed like a maid," Ashlynn scoffs, pointing to Elicia's dress. She and Dixie give her one more judgemental look before waltzing out the room in their fancy gowns. Elicia lets out a long, exasperated sigh. She wants to believe there's some good in her two sisters, deep, deep down. But every day makes it harder to hold onto that hope.

And at least her outfit has character. She may have been tricked into helping out the maids at first, but it was her choice to continue helping. After all, this is

her home. She should help out. She always enjoys giving the maids some appreciation. Plus, it helps to put things in perspective... and live with her horrible stepfamily.

I can't believe they talked about Ilena like that.

Elicia had been so excited to meet the western princess, but she never showed up to her coronation. Ashlynn and Dixie teased her about it for months. Is she really gonna miss Aurora's awakening? Will... will Aurora really think I'm ugly?

Elicia shakes the thought away, picturing her mother's voice in her mind. I look just like my dad, and if their mother married my dad, then I can't be so bad. And Ilena has to be at the celebration. It's the biggest event happening in all the land. She's going to be there, Elicia tries to convince herself. And if Ashlynn and Dixie don't like her, that probably means I will.

-3 Weeks

"Why the long face?" Some asks late one night. Elicia sighs and pats the bed, urging her fairy godmother to come sit next to her. "Are you not excited for Aurora's awakening?"

"Of course I'm excited, Fauna, it's just... Ashlynn and Dixie have been giving me a hard time, like always. How do I even know if Aurora will like me?"

"Well, Ellie, if she doesn't, that's her loss. And you know Ashlynn and Dixie are just jealous of you." Elicia gives a small smile at Fauna's words. Fauna was one of the only good things about moving into the castle. She's always so kind and welcoming to her, and always cheers her up when her sisters and mother aren't so kind. Plus, she helps Elicia put her connection with animals to good use.

"I just don't see why they'd be jealous of me. They're gorgeous girls, and if they were a bit nicer, everyone would like them."

"Perhaps they don't think of themselves like that," Fauna sighs. "Want to go out to the garden?" Fauna asks, getting out her light blue magic wand. Elicia smiles, letting Fauna whisk them away. She loves the garden, and it's a great way to get her mind off things. As she sits in the middle of all the plants, petting one of the bunnies, she asks Fauna to tell her about the guardian animals of the snow forest, a story she often heard from her, but couldn't help but enjoy again and again.

"Well, as you know, the guardians are made up of seven animals. Sneider is the leopard, Selene is the owl, Baxley is the fox, Griffin is the hare, Dottie is the deer, Dove is, well, the dove, and Halston is the wolf cub. They each guard a section of

the forest, working to keep it in constant harmony. But, you already know this, seeing as you've met them before," Fauna smiles.

"It was wonderful, going on vacation there for a few weeks. Too bad Trina will never let me pick the spot again," Elicia sighs.

"Luckily for you, though, your carriage will go right by it on the way to Briar," Fauna reminds her. Elicia smiles again, realizing she's right. "And if you want to know a little secret, a few birdies told me Ilena is going to be there."

"She is?!" Elicia gasps. "Really?!"

"Yes," Fauna laughs, obviously having been waiting to tell Elicia the good news. "And even if Aurora doesn't like you, Ilena will be a different story. You've both been picked on by your sisters. I think you could each find a friend in each other." Elicia feels her smile grow wider.

"That's wonderful news! I could use a friend that isn't a maid or a fairy or an animal. Not that those aren't wonderful, but a girl who's my age... that would be so nice." Fauna gives a smile.

-2 Weeks

"How's this?" Elicia's tailor asks as she stands for a dress fitting.

"A little less tight at the waist, please?" Elicia asks, wanting to be able to breathe. It isn't too tight, but Elicia likes a little room for movement. She's hoping to walk around Briar with Ilena. Her tailor, Lyssa, nods, making the adjustment.

"Good?" She asks. Elicia tilts her head at the reflection.

"It's wonderful, Lyssa. It feels amazing. Would it be too much to ask to change a few details?" Elicia asks, feeling horrible for giving her more work. But she wants to make sure Ilena feels that she's approachable.

Lyssa gives a smile.

"Of course, princess. Anything for you, and plus, that's what I'm here for. I was very lucky to be hired for you." Lyssa makes the adjustments Elicia asks for, and by the end, it's more than Elicia could've ever hoped for.

"I love it! Thank you so much, Lyssa," Elicia gives her a small hug. "Especially the bow."

"You know, you look a little bit like Ilena with it on," Lyssa comments. "If hers had been blue."

"That's what I was going for. It doesn't look too much like it though, right? I don't want her to think I'm copying her look."

"I can assure you, princess, you look very much like you."

“Perfect. Now, did we pack extra changes of clothes in my backpack?” Elicia asks, reaching for it. Normally, her things would go in a chest, but she had learned from past experiences that if she didn’t keep her things on her and away from her sisters, it wouldn’t end pretty. Lyssa nods, helping Elicia pack for the trip.

-½ Weeks

Elicia’s making sure her sisters haven’t taken anything from her when she hears them snicker from behind her. She turns around, watching the carriage drive away. She stares, wide-eyed, calling for them to turn around, but they just wave at her, wishing her a good walk. Elicia scowls and sighs. I knew they would pull something.

The break they just took was the perfect opportunity for them to try something. She sighs, going to follow when she remembers where she is. She turns to find herself met with a snowy forest, and surprisingly, Fauna and Sneider. That’s strange. Sneider never gets this close to the edge of the forest. She runs over to say hi, but immediately sense the urgency between Fauna and the leopard.

“Fauna? Why are you two so on edge?” Fauna just glances worriedly at Sneider, who’s motioning for Elicia to follow him. He’s much faster than her, but the enchantment on her silver running shoes from Fauna pushes her to keep up. She follows the pair deeper and deeper into the forest, until finally, after what seems like forever, they stop in a small clearing. Sneider continues jogging ahead, but Elicia stops, smelling something strange in the air. She tracks it over to a bush, and digs up a cup with a strange orangy liquid in it. She sniffs it and her eyes widen. “Fauna,” Elicia calls, showing her the liquid. Fauna gasps and Elicia runs up to where Sneider went. She gasps as she sees all seven guardians surrounding an ebony-haired girl. Elicia’s senses immediately push her into rescuing mode.

Fauna taught her everything about animals and plants. Enough to know that strange smell marked a poison, extremely lethal. And this poor girl had somehow found herself drinking it. Elicia immediately takes off her backpack, rummaging through it to find some mixtures she carries around in case of an emergency. She sends Sneider off to the nearest stream and as he returns, she presses the liquid to the girl’s lips, needing her to drink the antidote. As soon as she does, Elicia takes off her jacket and puts it onto the girl, hoping to stop her shivering. She digs through her backpack and pulls out the picnic blanket, putting that over the girl

too. It doesn't help that much, though, not in the snowy land. Even Baxley's attempt to lay down next her doesn't help all that much.

"Fauna?" Elicia asks, turning to her fairy. "Can you make Octavio into a horse like you did that one time? We may be able to move her somewhere warmer," Elicia suggests, taking one of her mice out of the pocket of her backpack. She holds him out and Fauna nods, the both of them explaining to the tiny mouse what's about to happen. Octavio immediately agrees, happily ready to help. Elicia attempts to lift the girl up, but Fauna waves her hand instead to place her gently on Octavio's back.

"Alright, Sneider, lead us to a warmer area."

Of course, he answers with a nod. Though, because of her mother and Fauna, Elicia has a talent for communicating with all sort of creatures and is able to translate any gestures.

"She'll be ok, right?" Elicia asks Fauna later that night. "The antidote worked?" Fauna sits next to Elicia and looks over the girl, nodding.

"You did well, Ellie."

"She's still so cold," Elicia comments. "I don't know what else to give her besides my jacket and the blanket." Elicia's eyes land on a gold locket around the girl's neck and touches it with one of her fingers. "Oh gosh, that's ice cold, no wonder she's shivering." Elicia reaches for the clip at the back and takes the locket off, promising, "I'm sorry, I'll give it back to you I promise, but your body's still recovering right now and it's making it worse."

Fauna urges her to sleep, but Elicia stays awake, wanting to be there in case something goes wrong or the girl needs someone to talk to. She also doesn't want to startle her. Despite her efforts to stay awake, she eventually loses the battle and ends up sleeping for a few hours. The girl still isn't awake by the time Elicia wakes up the next day. Sneider goes looking for food for the animals while Fauna conjures something up for Elicia and the girl when she wakes.

"I guess I owe Ashlynn and Dixie a thank you," Elicia sighs. "They ditched me in just the right spot. I hope the antidote worked." She continues to keep an eye on the girl as Fauna tries to entertain her. But it's not impossible to tell Elicia won't relax until she knows the girl is alright. The only thing that seems to somewhat distract her is talking with the animals. She gets a kick out of listening to the animals rant about the girl. "It's not her fault she couldn't understand you," Elicia reminds them. "I'll introduce you to her when she wakes up. As well as myself, actually. And Fauna." Suddenly, the girl begins to cough and Elicia rushes over to her, holding out a cup. "Spit into this," she instructs as the girl moves to

sit. Her tired eyes lock with Elicia's and she looks between her and the cup confused. "I'm a friend," Elicia promises. "Sneider came and got me to help you---- he's the leopard that saved your life." The girl glances behind Elicia to the leopard and then back at the cup. "It's ok. I just need to see something, alright?"

"With my spit?" The girl asks, her voice strained.

"Here, I'll do it first if it makes you uncomfortable," Elicia offers, spitting into the grass. "See? Please, I need to make sure you're ok." The girl reluctantly takes the cup and turns away to spit, handing it back over to Elicia, the confusion still in her eyes. Elicia sighs of relief as she looks over it. "Phew, you're alright now." The girl just blinks before glancing down at the blanket and jacket. "I gave those to you so you wouldn't be so cold," Elicia explains. "Oh, that reminds me. I'm terribly sorry for taking this from you, but it was only making you colder," Elicia informs her, handing over the locket. The girl's eyes widen, quickly snatching it back to tie it around her neck. "Here, I'll help you," Elicia offers, clipping it. "Are you feeling alright? You just went through a lot."

"I'm just sore..." the girl answers before adding, "and I have a bit of a headache. What happened, miss?" Elicia goes back over to the original cup and holds it out to the girl.

"If someone offers you this ever again, and it smells like this, you say no, understood? It's poison," Elicia informs her. The girl's eyes widen and she gasps.

"That's why it burned!" Elicia just blinks at her, nodding slowly.

"You shouldn't follow strange women either," Elicia adds. "Not everyone will want to treat you right, unfortunately. You're lucky Sneider came and got me. Oh, another thing, if the guardian animals of the forest don't trust someone, you probably shouldn't either."

"Guardian animals?" The girl asks, looking behind her. "Do they all have names?" She asks and Elicia takes the opportunity to introduce her to everyone. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I couldn't understand them."

"It's ok, now you know. And I could teach you."

"I'd like that, but first I need to get to Briar."

"Oh, I'm heading there too. Would you like to go together?" Elicia asks and the girl's eyes light up.

"I'd love to!" She agrees. "The animals trust you, right?" Elicia laughs, nodding, confirming that yes, they do trust her.

"Good, you're learning," she smiles. "Are you excited for Princess Aurora's return?"

"Yes! I haven't seen a princess in ages."

“What kingdom are you from?” Elicia asks. The girl blinks at her, realizing something.

“I haven’t told you my name, have I?”

“Oh, right! I haven’t told you mine either.”

“I suppose we were a little preoccupied with making sure I was no longer poisoned,” the girl sighs. “At least now we’re actually on our way to Briar, where I can finally meet Elicia... anyway, I’m Ilena.”

“Princess Ilena?” Elicia asks, curtsying, excitement bubbling up inside her. She saved Princess Ilena?!

“Yes,” Ilena smiles. “What’s your name miss? And is there anything I can do to thank you for so ever kindly stopping to save my life?” Elicia smiles, shaking her head.

“No, that won’t be necessary. And I believe I can actually help you with another thing. I’m Elicia,” she informs her. To her surprise, Ilena displays the same feeling Elicia had as she discovers who she’s with.

“You’re Princess Elicia?!” Ilena asks, this time curtsying for her. “It’s an honor to meet you! I’ve been wanting to for ages, but my stepmother won’t ever let us go anywhere. I was lucky to even go to Briar in the first place, since she got sick right before. I was supposed to travel with a few guards, but my coachman said he was also a guard and then went to find firewood, and that’s when my carriage fell, and Sneider saved me, and then we were trying to figure out where we were, and then I got poisoned, and...”

“That’s two attempts on your life,” Elicia breathes. “And coachmen don’t double as guards... is that who your parents sent you with?” Ilena nods and Elicia starts to worry. “Ilena, stay with me, alright? Something very wrong is happening and I think you may be in danger.”

“Really?” Ilena breathes. Elicia nods, hating to break this news to her. “Why would someone be trying to kill me?”

“I don’t know, I’m sorry. But I should probably teach you how to communicate with the animals so that they can warn you if something bad is going to happen again.” Ilena nods and they spend the afternoon with animal communication lessons, until Ilena finally knows how to make out their gestures and motions to match with words.

“Do you know why they all seem interested in my locket?” Ilena asks her. “I don’t know how’d they be able to communicate that answer.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m not sure. We’d probably need Fauna for that.”

“Who’s Fauna?” Ilena asks.

“My fairy,” Elicia explains. “Fauna?” She calls, but the fairy doesn’t respond to her calls. “Fauna?” She asks, looking around. “That’s strange, she never ignores me.”

“Do you think something bad happened to her?” Ilena asks.

“No...” Elicia says. “Sneider, where did Fauna go?” She pauses, listening. “What do you mean she can’t help us anymore?” Sneider doesn’t know, so Elicia tries to think of a reason that would seem probable. “This is so weird, she’s never left before. She was here earlier, right before you...”

“Right before what?”

“Right before you woke up.” Elicia furrows her brow. “Ilena, who’s your fairy?”

“Me? I don’t have a fairy?” Dottie, the deer, immediately nudges Ilena’s locket. “My locket has to do with a fairy?” Ilena asks, confused.

“Everyone is supposed to have a fairy. Every princess, I mean,” Elicia explains. “I’ve never heard that before.”

“You haven’t? You should’ve gotten a fairy to watch over you when you were born.” Ilena’s face falls and she looks down at her locket.

“When I was born, the castle was preoccupied. I can’t imagine why I never knew this later... but perhaps... maybe it was something my mom was supposed to take care of.” Ilena looks over at Elicia. “Would you like to see the picture in my locket?” Elicia nods, watching as Ilena gently opens it up. “It’s the only time she ever saw me,” Ilena says, blinking. “I’m sorry, when I think about my mom... I---”

“I know how you feel,” Elicia whispers. “It’s awful to lose a parent. If you need to cry, I won’t judge.”

“Thank you,” Ilena says, reaching to wipe her eyes. Elicia feels a few tears fall from her own eyes too.

“You miss her, don’t you? It must be awful for you since you don’t even remember her. I had my parents for the majority of my life, and it just hurts so much when they’re gone.” Ilena nods.

“At least it wasn’t your fault,” Ilena whispers.

“It was not your fault,” Elicia tells her firmly. “Understand? It was not your fault, you need to believe that. Your mom wouldn’t want you to think like that.”

“I never even met her,” Ilena refutes.

“No, but I know my mom would’ve never wanted me to think like that, and your mom was a wonderful person. People used to talk about her all the time in the kingdoms. She was an amazing queen. So I know she would’ve been an amazing mother, and that means she would hate to see you so miserable.”

“Really?” Ilena asks and Elicia nods, pulling her in for a hug.

“Really,” she promises.

“How do you summon a fairy?” Ilena asks later that night.

“I’m not sure, Fauna approached me when I was coronated,” Elicia explains.

“But it must have something to do with your locket.”

Ilena looks down at it, fingering it in her hand.

“It’s one of my most prized possessions... it may be the most prized possession I own.”

“We should try a few things out tomorrow, but it’s late and we’ve been traveling all day. And your body still needs to fully recover from that poison.”

“Thank you so much, Elicia. I’m so lucky you found me. And I’m so lucky that you’re actually... nice.”

“My family doesn’t have the best reputation, do they?” Elicia sighs. “Well, I’m glad I’m nice too. And I’m glad you’re alright, and that we’re friends now.”

“We are?” Ilena asks. “Oh my gosh! I’ve never really had a friend before!” Elicia gives a small smile before agreeing with that statement.

“We should turn in so we can start early tomorrow,” Elicia decides, laying out some of her things they can sleep on.

“Elicia, would you like your jacket back?” Ilena asks.

“No, please, keep it. It suits you more, anyway.”

“Really? Thank you so much.” Ilena watches as Elicia continues to set up a makeshift bed. “Why do you carry around so many things?” Elicia pauses, realizing she forgot to mention that part when they discussed how she ended up ditched in the forest in the first place.

“Oh... well, I like to be prepared in case anyone needs my help, and my sisters love to mess with my things, so I keep them on me at all times instead.”

“That sounds like them. They tried to steal my locket once.”

“That’s horrible!” Elicia agrees. The two begin talking and learning more about each other, discovering just how much they have in common. Eventually, they decide to go to sleep, but as Elicia’s mind begins to drift, she hears Ilena sniffle from beside her, trying to quiet her tears. “Ilena?” Elicia asks softly.

“I’m sorry, Ellie, I just... everything that’s happened... I’m scared.”

“That’s ok. But we have the guardians of the forest to protect us. And I’ll protect you too, alright?” Ilena nods and Elicia reaches out to rub her arm, humming one of the songs her mother used to sing to her. It seems to calm Ilena down a bit, so Elicia moves her things closer and lays back down, singing some of her mother’s songs.

“Those are pretty,” Ilena comments.

“My mother used to sing them to me,” Elicia explains.

“Your voice is lovely, I think your mother would love it,” Ilena tells her and Elicia smiles at the compliment, continuing to sing until they both drift off to sleep.