

Ilena glances out the window of the small attic room in the castle. Between a bunch of dusty boxes, some old mirrors that her stepmother kept shoving inside it, and a few heavy wooden chests of ancestor's belongings, there really isn't much for a fourteen year old girl to entertain herself with. Except for two things that Ilena can't help but come back to. One is the view over the area just outside the castle. It allows her to take note of the kids around the castle playing and laughing, as well as the new construction projects. That's something her stepmother had initiated several years back. She always wants to add something new to add character to the kingdom. Ilena sighs, thinking about it. Gretchen never seems to be satisfied, always changing things. Nevertheless, it always seems to give her an activity to occupy herself with. Though... it isn't her favorite part of the attic, not even close. Her favorite is the small wooden chest that used to belong to her late mother.

She decides to take a break, crouching in front of it, opening it up to find all the things she doesn't already keep in her bedroom. A few of the items are baby objects that her mother picked out. Ilena refuses to give them up, them being one of the only connections she has to her mom. She fingers one of the small cloths in her fingers, glancing over the snowflakes. She gives a bittersweet smile. Her mother loved the snow. Her father always tells her how excited her mother had been when she found out her baby would be born in the winter months. She put so much care into making sure she had everything to keep her baby warm. Yet, she never got the chance.

Why did I have to be the price for her life? Ilena thinks to herself. Her biggest desire and wish in life is that she got the chance to meet her mother. Unfortunately, due to complications... Ilena was the only one to survive. Her dad always makes sure she knows how much her mother loves her, and how it wasn't her fault... but ever since her stepmother has been in the picture, Ilena rarely hears those words anymore. Does her dad have a different opinion now? Is it really her at fault? Ilena shakes her head and hides the baby things under some other things. She can't think about it anymore without... without it ruining her entire day. Instead, she reaches for the strange snowflake that pinned into the circle just underneath it. Ilena doesn't really know what it is, but she treasures it anyway. And sometimes even creates a bunch of stories as to what it might be. It's hard to figure out, though, when the only thing she knows about it is that the snowflake part spins.

Ilena sighs, putting it away as she climbs back down the stairs. She ventures back to her bedroom, fingering the locket of the only picture of her and her mother together. Just before her mother had passed, she had managed to hold onto Ilena for a few minutes. She said she wanted the castle painter to paint the only moment she may ever have with her daughter. Now, Ilena has both a picture in her locket, as well as another version in her bedroom. She sits down in front of it and studies her mother's face. The thing that Ilena loves most about the photo is the love she can see across her mother's face. She studies her expression for a moment, thinking about her stepmother.

Gretchen never looks at me like that.

Dad barely ever looks at me like that either.

Sometimes, Ilena asks them why they never want to spend time with her. Her dad always promises to change things, but somehow, Gretchen always pulls him away. One time, Ilena even confessed that she felt she wasn't getting enough time or attention. But Gretchen was quick to remind her of Aurora over in Briar Kingdom. Aurora has never even met her parents, Gretchen always tells Ilena. You should be grateful we're able to eat dinner with you every night, that we're able to be in the same building as each other.

It sort of makes sense to Ilena, but truly seems like more of an excuse than anything. I wonder if she'll still make the same comments next month, Ilena wonders. Aurora's sixteenth birthday is next month, and after she wakes up from the evil fairy's curse, she'll be living in her kingdom with her family. Ilena's looking forward to Aurora's awakening. It's the biggest thing happening in all the land. Maybe Gretchen will finally let us go because of how big of a deal it is. Ilena hasn't interacted with another princess since before her dad remarried. And those princesses were Ashlynn and Dixie of Cybele. She had never really gotten along with them anyway, but when Elicia and her father became princess and king, Gretchen was already controlling their outings. She claims she's too shy to meet another royal family until she gets more experience, and Ilena and her father have respected her wish for years.

It's probably not like Elicia is nice anyway. Not if her father married Queen Trina.

Still... a part of Ilena wants to meet her. Elicia will probably be at the celebration next month. Dad will have to have us go. It's the biggest thing to happen to the land since Elicia became princess. He couldn't pass up something like that, right?

-3 Weeks

Ilena sits quietly at the dinner table, playing with the locket around her neck as her dad and Gretchen begin a discussion on Aurora.

"I think you're more than ready," her dad insists. "You've had quite the bit of practice, as four years will do, and it would be an insult to Queen Maria and King Simon. This day is one the kingdoms have been waiting over a decade for. I think our presence is quite necessary."

"I understand, Karter, this day holds far more importance than I do to you, I just... I don't know. The King and Queen will be spending time with their daughter. I just... I don't see how it's probable to bombard a teenager who's never been around people in her life. What if she can't even speak english? They have no idea what her condition will be."

"Which is precisely why we'll be prepared to stay for a week or so. It might be nice for Aurora to meet Elicia, Ashlynn, Dixie, and Ilena. Plus, it has been a while since Ilena has even visited a princess. I think it'll be good for all of them."

"I'd like that," Ilena peeps up for the first time at dinner. Gretchen gives her a sideways look, but keeps her mouth shut as King Karter responds.

"Splendid! I think it's settled then. Gretchen, I'm looking forward to you meeting Maria and Trina. If you start to get nervous, you always have me to fall back on."

"I suppose, if it really means so much to you," Gretchen sighs.

-2 Weeks

"Ilena?" She hears her dad call early one morning. "Ilena, wake up, there's something I need to talk with you about."

"What is it?" Ilena asks as he sits on her bed. By the way her dad hesitates and fumbles for a way to start, she knows this can't be good news.

"Gretchen has fallen ill. We won't be able to go to Aurora's returning celebration. I'm sorry, sweetheart." In these few seconds it takes for her dad to inform her of the news, Ilena can feel her heart sink and shatter. It had been the best news she had heard all month, and she was ecstatic to go. Finally, a trip with her father to meet the two princesses she hadn't yet. And now fate had decided it wasn't worth it. Ilena tries to keep herself together, knowing that Gretchen can't help being sick and that her dad is right to support her, but as her eyes land on the picture of her mother across from her bed, she starts bawling. This is one of

the times where all she can wish is that her real mother was right here, talking to her, telling her the news isn't real and that it's all going to be ok. "Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. I know how much you wanted to go." Ilena just nods, trying to come to terms with it, but the years of being lonely and isolated and friendless weigh on her shoulders and she can't quiet the sobs.

"Just once, I wanted to... I wanted to be a normal princess," she whispers. "Or even a normal girl," she breathes. Her dad's gaze stays on her tear-streaked face before his eyes begin to light up with an idea.

"Oh, Ilena, maybe you can go," he says. Ilena just lifts her head up and looks at him, confusion in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" She asks.

"Gretchen and I may not be able to accompany you, but you're old enough to go with a coachman and a guard or two. It's a perfect idea, I've felt horrible about you missing quality socializing time all these years, and now's your chance. It's ashame you won't be going with your parents, but I'm sure it will be a fun journey all the same. What do you say, Ilena?" Her dad asks, and Ilena just stares at him, wide-eyed. One second she thought she may be the loneliest princess ever to exist forever, and the next, all her hopes were dangling in front of her again? As soon as his offer processes through her mind, she immediately agrees. Finally, something going her way for once. She thanks her dad immensely and he smiles back at her, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

-1 Week

Ilena stands patiently by the carriage, waiting for her things to be packed inside. On the inside, she's bubbling with excitement. Not only is this her first trip out of the Aella kingdom in years, but it's to meet two princesses. Though, she really wishes her father is able to come. He's supposed to see her off in a few minutes, but as Ilena glances back to the castle, there's no sign of him. Oh well, he said goodbye to me earlier.

"Ready, princess?" The coachman asks, holding out a hand to help her board the carriage. She nods, saying,

"Yes, thank you." She gives a small wave once she's seated to her dad back in the castle, and then they're off. She entertains herself by looking out the window. Anytime a villager or subject catches her eye, she waves to them, smiling. This seems to excite them, and saddens her to realize it's the only form of socializing she's had in a while. She sighs, eventually growing tired of the game and sinks

back against the seat. Not to mention, they were exiting the main part of the kingdom already on their journey east.

She can't believe this is one of her only trips since she's been born. And her dad isn't even with her. It's a shame that he had to stay back with Gretchen. Actually... wait... Ilena glances back toward the front of the carriage through the small window.

"Excuse me, coachman, but there was supposed to be a guard traveling with us? I'm afraid we may have to turn around." Of course we forgot the guard, Ilena sighs internally. Now her trip is delayed yet again.

"Oh, that won't be a problem princess. I double as your personal guard, you are more than safe in my care," he assures her.

"Oh, alright. Thank you, sir." That is odd, but not completely improbable. Then again, she doesn't know much about how guards and coachmen are hired. But she knows her dad would ensure her safety. She continues to gaze out the window, slightly surprised as she begins to see snow. "Sir, I think we've gone too far south."

"Sorry, did I forget to mention, princess? We're taking a shortcut." Ilena frowns, glancing out her window again. A shortcut? But why would that involve going further south? Still, the coachman must know more about directions than her. She sits patiently, but starts to grow worried as it begins to near nightfall and they still aren't out of the snow. "You stay right here, alright princess? I'm going to go look for firewood." Ilena nods and watches as he starts preparing camp for the night. Dad said that we would reach a checkpoint tonight. What kind of shortcut is this? Dad had to have made a change last minute to the route, right?

Suddenly, the carriage begins to sway. Ilena shouts for coachman and goes for the door, but is horrified to find it won't budge. It must've gotten stuck, somehow. She yells for help, but as she glances around frantically, there doesn't seem to be another way out. She switches to trying to tug the window down, but her weight only seems to persuade the carriage to tip more. She tries to back away, but it's too late. She holds on tight to the sides of the carriage as it leans all the way to the side. She expects it to collide with the ground, but a scream bubbles inside her as she sees the long drop beneath her. Paralyzed with fear, she shuts her eyes tight and hopes the impact isn't enough to kill or injure her. Everything seems to slow down as the carriage plummets to the bottom of the cliff. It must be only seconds, but truly feels like hours as she waits for the inevitable impact. And then there's the piercing sound of glass shattering and she expects to be thrown against the debris of the carriage. Instead, a few glass shards graze her legs as a strong force

pushes her sideways and a sharp breeze blows against her face. A second or so later, she's toppling into the grass, breathing heavily as she feels something wet begin to lick her leg. She's sore and bruised, and cut up from the glass, but besides that, she's alive and well. She has enough strength to sit up and gasp at the broken carriage several feet away. And enough strength to panic at the sight of the large animal catering to her wounds. It glances over at her face indifferently and continues to work. She wants to scream; she knows nothing about the danger of snow leopards, but as the adrenaline leaves her body and she studies the animal, she realizes she isn't in any danger.

This snow leopard, at least, is friendly. And not only friendly, for this animal saved her life. Ilena finishes lifting herself up and watches curiously as she begins to catch her breath. Eventually, the leopard nudges her shoulder, and does so until she turns onto her stomach. He sniffed the back of her legs and worked at a few more wounds before trying to force her to stand up. Ilena can feel the ache of the cuts and the bruises, but is still able to walk around. The leopard seems to give a satisfied nod, and leads her deeper into the trees. Ilena follows for a while, eventually finding herself in a warmer spot of the terrain. The leopard lays down on a patch of long grass, and moves his head, asking her to do the same.

"There's no snow here," Ilena marvels, sitting down, also surprised to find the grass slight cushioning. "Have we traveled farther north?" She asks the leopard, as if he could answer her question with words. Still, he seems to understand her and shakes his head. "That doesn't make sense... neither does the fact we're surrounded by all this snow but there's none here." The leopard stands back up, moving closer to her to tap her locket with his nose. Ilena just watches, confused. "I don't understand what you're doing, leopard. It's late, we should probably get some sleep. That's why you brought me here, right?" She asks, and the leopard seems a bit hesitant, but eventually lays back down, nodding.

Ilena follows suit and thanks the leopard once again for saving her before trying to drift off to sleep. It's much harder than she expected, though. She's so used to her large canopy bed back at the castle, that even the cushiony and warm grass makes it hard to sleep. Eventually, after what seems like forever, rest finds her and she wakes up the following morning to find a large pile of fruit in front of her. She looks at it peculiarly, where had the leopard found all of that? Actually, as she looks around, she begins to wonder---where is the leopard, exactly?

She's tempted to get up and look for him, but her stomach growls with hunger. She hasn't eaten anything since lunch the previous day. She reaches for the fruit and cherishes how good it feels to get some food back in her system. As she

finishes the breakfast, she stands up, looking around for the leopard, instead, she finds a strange face in the trees. She tilts her head and marvels at the gorgeous snow owl. Just then, a twig snaps behind her and she turns around to see the snow leopard. He looks up at the owl and motions for it to come down. It perches on the leopard's back and the leopard just stares at Ilena, as if he's waiting for her to realize something.

"Leopard, has the owl been there this entire time?" The leopard holds her gaze before nodding. The owl, however, seems to be looking down at her scraped up legs. "The owl was there too?" She asks, sensing something in the owl's gaze. The leopard nods again. "Oh, owl, thank you for helping me. The both of you are so kind." The owl flies up and flaps in front of her locket, touching it with its beak. "What is your obsession with my locket?" Ilena scoffs, shaking her head. "Is it because it's shiny?" The two animals just stare at her, almost in disbelief. "Well, I don't get it. I am very grateful to the two of you for saving me, but I must be on my way back north and east to get to Briar." Ilena begins to walk in one of the directions, but the two animals are quick to block her. "Fine," Ilena sighs. "You're right. I don't know where I'm going, and I have no coach. Will the two of you help me find my coachman?" She asks and they shake their heads. "Why not? Are you going to take me instead?" She asks, putting a hand on her hip. The leopard and owl look at each other before the leopard eventually nods.

Ilena spends the rest of the day following the pair, noticing the owl seems to stay on the leopard's back while he walks. Right, she reminds herself. Owls are nocturnal. Is it sleeping? Abruptly, the leopard sneezes, which causes the owl to startle. I guess so. Eventually, the leopard finds a spot for them to rest for the night, before going out to find food. The owl perches in the tree and watches her, and she begins to walk around the little clearing before feeling something brush her leg. She jumps, before looking down at a small white, fluffy, creature. Ilena finds a smile light up her whole face, kneeling in front of the tiny fox. He backs away a little shyly, but she assures him he can trust her. His ears perk back up and he nudges Ilena's hand so she's petting him. He even curls up next to her that night as the three animals and her turn in for the night. Or well, two animals. The owl has been resting all day.

As they continue to travel to Briar, they gather more and more animals into their group, until they have a total of seven: the leopard, the owl, the fox, the hare, the deer, the dove, and the wolf cub. For some reason, all of them seem to have interest in her locket. Ilena fingers it in her hands, trying to understand. There's nothing special about it, at least not to them. She sighs, catching up to the

leopard as he scouts out a place to rest for the night. I hope we're really close. Aurora's returning is only a few days away now.

The next afternoon, the leopard decides to stop the group, sniffing around. Ilena watches, wondering if they're lost.

"Should I go to the edges of the forest to see what town we're in?" She asks, wondering if she'll be able to recognize if they're in Briar. The leopard exchanges a look with the dove and eventually nods, giving her a long look before she leaves. "It'll be ok. I'll be quick," she promises. The leopard sends the dove and the owl after her, but she approaches the edge herself. Something she's noticed about the animals the past few days is that they never go too close to any villages. We must be really far out, Ilena thinks to herself. She's already been walking for nearly twenty minutes and all that surrounds her are trees. I wonder if I went the wrong way.

"Are you lost, miss?" Someone asks. She whirls around to see a young woman in front of her. "I'd be happy to lead you to the village, if that's where you're going?"

"Would you mind telling me where we are?"

"That would be Briar, miss," the young woman informs her.

"Thank you, ma'am. Would you mind leading me? I took a wrong turn a little ways back and ended up deep in the forest," she explains, leaving the part out about her carriage out. She doesn't need to trouble the woman with all the details. The woman nods, walking in front of her, and Ilena glances back to the two animals following her. "Would you mind giving me just one moment? There was this really pretty flower I wanted to pick up." The woman, nods, shrugging as she turns back to the path on the way out of the forest. She runs back to the dove and owl and thanks them but says she'll be on her way now. Instead of letting her go, however, the dove tugs on her locket, trying to pull her back. "Let go, dove! I need to go to Briar. I was supposed to be there yesterday and this kind woman is helping me. I appreciate all your help, but I've got to go." The dove tugs on her locket again and Ilena angrily takes it back. "I'm going. Thank you," she snaps, running back to the woman. She can feel the birds following her, but makes sure to tell the woman to try to bring them to the kingdom as quickly as possible. She eagerly agrees, but stops them at some point to take a rest. Ilena looks around for the birds, glad to see they stopped trailing them. The woman pulls out a canteen and two cups, handing one to Ilena.

"What's that?" Ilena asks and the woman smiles.

"This is my special recipe. It's honey and apple flavored. I got them from one of

the best honeycombs in all the kingdom. I think you'll enjoy it," the woman says, handing her a cup. "While you settle here, I'm going to go fix one of the wheels on my carriage. That's why I was in the forest in the first place, looking for wood to repair it. Don't go anywhere, now," she waits for Ilena to promise before taking off in one direction. Ilena looks down at the drink, grateful for something other than water from rivers and streams. She puts it up to her lips and drinks, immediately coughing as she finishes. That is a weird flavor. Perhaps she added another ingredient and forgot to mention it? Strange... Ilena shakes her head as fuzziness begins to cloud it.

All of the sudden, she isn't feeling so well. She tries to get up to find the woman or even one of the animals, but her body refuses to cooperate. Instead, her vision starts to go blurry. The drink burns in her throat and she begins to cough again, wishing she never decided to drink it. This woman is a horrible drink maker, and now Ilena is getting sick because of it.

Ilena starts to panic a bit as her vision begins to dim. She tries to yell for help, but no sound comes out and she can feel as her body shuts down. That couldn't have been a normal drink... is the last thought able to pass through her mind before she collapses.