Isabella Clair Marx: Before Queen’s Guild

It was the fall of her 19th year, the air crisp and fresh as the world began to change colour, the oncoming winter slowly leeching the life from the land. Up to this point, Isabella had lived a quiet life under the wing of her father’s thriving publishing company, among the many books in their lavish home. She was prim, intelligent, and well mannered, never getting into trouble and living a cushioned lifestyle, being expected to marry young and find a husband to strengthen business ties, much to her anxious Aunt Lilly’s anticipation. Her beloved older brother, Oliver, was to take over the family business when the time came, and for now was in an apprenticeship under their father, having grown into a handsome and intelligent young man. She had always accepted this way of thinking from the time she was a young girl, and had no other plans or expectations.

Isabella was currently leaving one of her father’s many publishing houses, a new bundle of books in her arms. The bell above the door jingled as she opened it, letting the fresh cool air inside as she turned, wishing her father and brother a warm farewell, “I expect to see you for dinner. Try not to be too late this time, mother will worry.”

She gave the two an amused smile as they waved her out, laughing at the idea of their mother’s anxiety. However, she hadn’t been looking ahead of her as she stepped out and managed to run smack-dab into a strong figure, a few of her bundled books tumbling out of her arms as strong hands steadied her. Collectively there were three small exclamations, one from her, one from the gentleman she knocked into, and the last from the lady accompanying him.

Without looking up, Isabella immediately apologized, such was her upbringing, and bent down to retrieve the fallen books hastily, hoping they hadn’t been ruined on the dirty ground, “Oh, I’m terribly sorry, I should have been paying closer attention to where I was going.”

Her attention was snatched away from the ground as the stranger plucked the last of the books from the dirt, wiping it clean with a rather exquisite looking handkerchief—surely something too nice to soil in such a way. She looked up to tell him so only to have her breath catch. The stranger before her was tall and astonishingly handsome; his hair a snowy white and his eyes a strange molten gold that almost seemed to sparkle in the morning light, something she had never seen before. There was a beauty mark under his left eye, the corner of his lips upturned in slight amusement, his voice gentle and as melodic as a bard’s, “It was an accident, no harm done.” She felt immediately warm in his presence.

Isabella blinked and mentally shook herself out of her short reverie; it wasn’t proper for a lady to be spellbound by a man’s looks. She smiled politely and took the book for his outstretched hand, “Excuse me, thank you.” She turned her gaze to the young lady accompanying him, she recognized her as the daughter of one of her father’s business associates. She was a picturesque girl with rich auburn curls and enchanting brown eyes, always dressed in fine, stylish clothing, her full lips always smiling. It was no doubt why this handsome stranger had chosen her as his company.

She quickly bid the handsome couple a good day, apologizing again for disrupting their morning, and trekked onward: back to the Marx’s manor house, where her aunt and mother were surely waiting for her return. Had she turned around, she would have seen how the handsome stranger’s gaze lingered on her retreating form, despite the lovely young lady chattering happily at his arm.

The next few weeks, the air was buzzing with gossip about the new handsome stranger. Young ladies and their older female relations all sighing and giggling as they conversed in hushed tones over tea or needlepoint or behind their fluttering fans. It wasn’t hard to spot the stranger as he spoke with the men or the occasional flock of ladies.

Isabella hadn’t made much effort to speak to or about this stranger among their midst. Most gossip made her head ache and never held her attention for long anyway so she tended to avoid it altogether. It wasn’t until her Aunt Lilly brought it up one afternoon at tea did it scrape her thoughts. She had been reading a book quite dutifully, lost in her own realm of knowledge when her aunt addressed her, “Isabella, what do you think of this handsome young stranger? This Mister Fairfox?”

Isabella glanced up from her pages to see the anticipated looks from her aunt and mother. Even her older brother, who had been pouring over the store’s logs glanced up, his interest perked. She decided not to divulge in their fantasies and spoke plainly, “I don’t have much thought for him at all, Aunt Lilly.”

Oliver tried to hide his smile behind the logs as her aunt huffed, “Maybe you should start thinking about him and the other fine gentleman of this town instead of those books!” She turned her attention back to Isabella’s mother, “I overheard our husbands talking the other day with a few other gentleman of the area and apparently he isn’t just a pretty face! He’s well-mannered and intelligent and it seems he comes from quite a bit of money! All the young ladies are jumping to catch his sights—”

Isabella tuned out her aunt’s prattle as she always did and tried to focus back on her book, though, it was proving to be difficult. She thought back to the day she had first run into the stranger; at the time he had only been a handsome face, passing by. She hadn’t imagined he would be nearly so popular, though she should have suspected with such a small community and such avid gossipers. Since then she had learned that he and that young lady—she now remembered as Miss Briar Mallot—were not a couple, she had merely offered him a tour of their district. It seemed he was here on business—what sort of business she didn’t know—and every female in the district had their eye on him. And now, evidently, he went by the name Fairfox.

She began to wonder when the uproar would begin to die down or when the stranger would leave. It was definitely the largest disturbance the district had had in a long while. She hoped it wouldn’t last too terribly long. Too much gossip of one subject became easily tedious and a nuisance to hear about. It would only rile her aunt’s wishes for Isabella to marry quickly as well.

A month later in November, the gossip still hadn’t done much to die down. Mister Fairfox, as it appears, would come and go for a few weeks at a time, just enough for the gossip to stay fresh and new. And now, it seemed he would be here *and* invited to the annual ball the Marx family held for Isabella’s birthday—no doubt the work of her aunt. The source of the gossip would at last come full circle and meet her in the face.

Isabella dressed up to the occasion: she wore flowing cloth made up of pastel blues with gold trimming and a golden sash pinched at her waist, her hair swept back stylishly in curly waves and braids. Despite how her mother and aunt insisted on her wearing face powder, she refused to touch the ghastly stuff, finding it stuffy and unflattering. Altogether, she looked every bit of the fine upbringing she was.

She studied her reflection in the mirror for a moment, the gold of her gown catching her eye, her mind instantly went to the striking eyes of the handsome stranger she had met weeks before. Her mother had given it to her for the evening and before that moment, Isabella would have thought she would take no part in her aunt’s silly antics. It seemed she had been wrong and was, in fact, hoping Isabella would take an interest in Fairfox. She sighed and turned away from the mirror, shaking herself as she readied for the evening ahead.

She spent the evening acting as hostess, all sort of esteemed guests invited for the festivities that were to be held that evening: boisterous dancing, rhythmic music, delightfully aromatic food and, of course, plenty of wine and spirits to fill any seeking goblet. She was kept so busy, she hardly had time to register or recognize most of the guests that walked through the door. As she was expected, she socialized once she finished greeting arriving guests, the few stragglers greeted warmly by her mother, visiting with one group to another, and dancing with gentleman when asked—a lady never refuses a dance—giving her brother conspirators grins as he sought out his very own lady, a pretty and petite girl with platinum waves.

Two hours had gone and passed when she stepped out onto a vacant balcony to escape the pressure of social expectations for a few minutes, wanting to re-catch her bearings and composure before she went back into the tiger pit that was aristocracy. She took a deep breath and sighed as she leaned against the banister, gazing up at the clear night sky.

After a moment, she was suddenly aware of a presence behind her. Before she could turn, a tall figure stepped beside her at the banister, a familiar melodic voice reaching her ears, “Nights such as this are rare, don’t you agree? Warm, yet not humid, dark, yet not binding.”

She looked up and over at him, intending to greet him out of habit, but she paused and looked back up at the night sky. She thought carefully before answering, her tone thoughtful, “I suppose ‘rare’ could describe such a night, though ‘overlooked’ seems more befitting.” Her thoughts went to the company just behind, dancing and conversing to their hearts content. She stepped back and turned toward the gentleman, a polite smile gracing her lips, “I believe we haven’t been formally introduced, I am Isabella Marx. Might I ask your name?”

He turned to face her, an amused smile hovering at his lips, as if he expected no less of her behavior, “You, my dear, may call me Fairfox. Or Demetri if you wish.” Ever the amused smile, a cunning glint in those sparkling gold eyes. It gave him an air of intelligence, as if he knew more than he let on and was wiser than his given years. She had seen similar looks in the eyes of passing Elves, though, Fairfox was no elf that she could see.

Isabella remembered herself, as well as this man’s many admirers merely feet away and the guests that came to be entertained by her, “I should rejoin the festivities. It was nice meeting with you—”

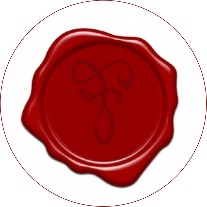
“Shall I escort you in a dance?” He smiled and held out his hand as he stepped towards the balcony entrance.

Isabella blinked, her composure slipping for half a second before she smiled and took his offered hand, a warm pleasant feeling spreading through her, “I would be honored, thank you.”

Isabella could feel more than a few pairs of eyes on them as they emerged onto the dancefloor, following his lead as he gracefully whisked her about. Whispers broke out underneath the veil of music and from the corner of her eyes she could see her aunt beaming, boasting some nonsense to the other put-out looking guardians, her brother—his date in his arms—looking surprised at the new dance partner before a sly grin grew on his face and he gave her a rakish wink.

Isabella had to look away and fight to keep the color from creeping in her face, focusing on her breathing and the dance instead. It was working until she heard a soft chuckle purring from Fairfox’s chest. Well, *this* will definitely start rumours… Isabella would see to it that Oliver got his dose of karma later. Once the dance was finished, she curtsied and thanked Fairfox for the dance, the rest of the night moving on in a dizzying blur, a rush of women crowding around her immediately after Fairfox had stepped away, that same amused smile hovering over his lips—as if he just *knew* this would happen all along. And maybe he did. Though, she felt a small satisfaction when she felt his gaze linger on her for the rest of the night. She purposely didn’t return his stare.

After the ball, Isabella began to notice that she would ‘accidentally’ cross paths with Fairfox quite often. She secretly took a small amount of pleasure knowing that it probably wasn’t coincidental, though she never let on about these feelings when her aunt would probe her about it. It was the week after when she received her first letter from Fairfox, the red wax stamped with a neat and flourished ‘F’, the letter accompanied by a beautiful blue rose. Isabella gently touched the soft petals before carefully breaking the seal. From then on after they became a strange pair of pen pals.



In public they would speak politely, often speaking of small trivial things, they often phrased their questions in such a way they came off as polite to the untrained ear, though challenging and inquiring to the more skeptic and careful listener. It almost became a small game of wits between the two. Whereas, in their letters, they spoke frankly to each other, often broaching a variety of subjects that would be deemed unsuitable in a sophisticated setting.

It wasn’t until the season began to change from winter to spring that he asked to be her escort to the upcoming annual Spring Ball, held by a business associate of her father’s. Delighted, she had immediately accepted the invitation, slyly slipping it into average conversation to her aunt and mother and running off before they bombarded her with pesky questions and details she did not wish to depart.

Come the night of the ball, Isabella was bedecked in earthly tones, her gown made up of rich browns and her hair fashioned similarly to how she had at her birthday. At her arm, a handsomely dressed Fairfox, his stunningly charismatic smile on hand. After a few hours of socializing and dancing, the two decided to slip away from the throng of partygoers and wander the vast estate’s gardens, Isabella gathering the skirts of her dress as she stepped up onto the fat ledge of a beautiful fountain, the moon and the stars high and glistening in the sky. Fairfox watched her amusedly as they talked, laughed unabashedly and stole brief kisses. It was an intimate moment that Isabella didn’t wish to end. But, alas, as it grew later, she knew they would have to return to the party, lest there be unsavory rumours.

Fairfox extended his hand up to her, offering her a charming smile in which she returned with an unrestrained warm smile, taking his hand gingerly and surely.

As soon as she took his hand, something pricked her palm, her vision then going blurred and hazy. Her balance wobbled and she dropped off the fountain to clutch at Fairfox, her voice coming out weak, “Demetri? I- I don’t feel well…”

The last thing she saw was his smile and his golden eyes glinting in the moonlight as his words repeated in her ears: “Don’t worry, all will be well soon, my dear, sweet Isabella.”

Isabella woke to darkness and pain. Her memory only came in fragments: a council of hooded grey figures, one enraged as the others watched on stonily, other strangers—ragged and delirious or unconscious, everyone’s features a vague blur.

She remembered thinking *Why am I here? Where am I? Who are these people? Where is Fairfox?* Before she could search for an answer, her memories shifted to painful flashes: a burning pain spreading through her body until it was suddenly taken away, leaving a floating feeling as if she were underwater; a calm blackness surrounding her.

Quite suddenly, a searing light and a sharp prickling feeling stemmed from her inner right wrist, bringing her out of her confusing reverie.

Her eyes snapped open and she tried to clutch her injured wrist but there were bindings holding her back. She laid back, panting and sweating, biting her lip to keep from crying out. She managed to open one of her eyes slightly to peek up at the person standing above her: it was Fairfox, his figured draped in a purple cloak and his odd gold colored eyes trained on her wrist. She wanted to call out to him, to ask him why she was here, what he was doing to her, but the pain was too great, swallowing up any words that might escape her lips.

She could vaguely see a magical glow surrounding the source of her pain in a pale blue light, Fairfox muttering under his breath as he worked, “You’re one of a kind. My perfect Isabella.” His gaze then drifted up to meet her eyes, he gave her a warm smile and laced his fingers through hers, “It may hurt now, but it will all be over soon, my sweet Isabella.” That was the last thing she saw and heard before she drifted back into unconsciousness.

She woke in her bed back home. She jolted upright and looked around frantically, looking around for Fairfox, only to find her worried and tired looking mother sitting at her bedside. Isabella opened her mouth to speak, her voice coming out hoarse and broken, “Mother—”

Her mother jumped up and pushed her back into the pillows gently, her voice soothing and soft, “Shhhh, it’s okay now, you’re home now. Everything is okay now.”

Isabella tried to sit up again, “What happened? What—”

Her mother cut her off quickly, pushing her back once again, “You were kidnapped a few weeks ago at the Spring Ball. We found you unconscious on the doorstep this morning, unharmed and healthy. We were worried sick but just so glad to have you back…”

Isabella’s throat tightened, “Fairfox…”

Her mother gave her a confused look, “Who dear?”

Panic overtook her, “Mr. Fairfox, the handsome stranger who’s been here for months. He was courting me—!”

Her mother simply shook her head and patted her hand gently, “I’ll go get you some tea, just lay back and rest.” She left and quietly shut the door behind her with a soft click.

As soon as she was alone, Isabella threw the coverlets off of her and staggered to her feet, feeling weak and strange. She looked around frantically, for what, she didn’t know. Something, anything. That’s when she spotted it: an unopened letter and a blue rose on her vanity. She stumbled over and ripped the seal open, her fingers trembling as she pulled open the letter, immediately dread dropping her stomach and turning her blood to ice, her chest constricting at the single line of words written in the looped handwriting she had come some familiar with:

Now and forever: you are mine.

She crumpled the letter in her fist, sagging to the floor as her chest constricted, dry sobs wrecking her body. She was confused. Heartbroken. What had Fairfox *done* to her? Why had he hurt her so and then abandoned her? She remembered the burning pain in her wrist and snapped her attention to her inner right wrist. She paled, almost blanching as she gazed at the new pale scar gracing her skin: The same flourished ‘F’ Fairfox had used on every one of his sealed letters. She slumped over, pressing her hand to her mouth to muffle her sobs. Why? *Why?*

It wasn’t long after that Isabella learned he had left a far greater mark on her than just a scar. No one in the district remembered a man by the name of Fairfox with white snowy hair and shining golden eyes. She didn’t sleep but for four hours each night, and nothing deep enough that she could really consider sleep. She was different, that was for certain. It was made evident to her and everyone when she didn’t age over the course of ten years.

Ten years she agonized and threw herself into study, scouring every book, every shelf in every library for something, anything that would tell her what she was; what Fairfox had done to her. It wasn’t until years later when she went to one of the many neighboring cities’ library and back archives where she found an old unaccountable journal, a lump seizing her throat and her breath catching when she saw familiar loped handwriting.

The journal spoke vaguely of a race called Elan and something called the Elan counsel, explaining merely what an Elan was generally and how they were created, but nothing more. No whereabouts of this elusive Elan Counsel, or who was in it. Fairfox’s name wasn’t mentioned either, but she knew it was his handwriting, there was no doubting it.

She kept the journal and returned home. By now, she had long since overstayed her welcome, her immediate family now having either grown too old or having died. Isabella couldn't stand her unchosen fate. Taking enough money to buy equipment and food that she might need along her journey, she left her hometown behind. She vowed she would find Fairfox. She didn't know how, when, or where, but she was determined. She would do whatever it took to find this council and Fairfox.

She traveled to Brund, where she began a governess job under the Noro family and their newborn son, searching for any scrap of information while she was there before deciding to go to Nenril. Once there, entering the city under the guise of an Elf, she began her work as a maid and regularly visited the libraries, learning the Elvish language with the help of a baker’s handsome son, Rowan Fenrir. Over the months of working and studying, becoming increasingly frustrated with her research and increasingly closer to Rowan, she decides to end her search for Fairfox and pursues a new life with Rowan instead. Things are going will with Rowan and Isabella is truly happy again until suddenly Rowan dies mysteriously, the tell-tale mark of Fairfox’s seal left behind near his body. Utterly devastated and crushed, Isabella vows bitter revenge on the person she once loved over the person she grew to love, leaving Nenril behind after scouring every inch of the city’s libraries one last time.

Over the years Isabella's personality hardened and she became quiet and observing—unlike her old demure self, taking on shady jobs along her travels in order to get money. She traveled across the entire country, searching for any sign of the council, picking up languages as she went. Upon seeing the shady workings of the world around her, she decided she wanted to stick to the shadows where she felt she belonged. She eventually began officially training as a rogue under the teachings of an ex-guildmaster of a shady and notorious criminal guild.

Nearly a century later she found her path leading to Era, where she was kidnapped by Gnolls and met a young Grey Elf Bard named Jeffers, who annoyed her immensely and stubbornly followed her almost everywhere. It was him that asked her to join the Queen's Guild. After a small amount of deliberation, Isabella decided joining a guild would be beneficial towards her search and help her not only heighten her rogue skills but to earn more money along the way. She had her magic guild tattoo, a crown with black wings, placed on her upper back between her shoulder blades, officially becoming part of the Queen's Guild and starting a new chapter in her journey.



**NENRIL:**

Isabella pulled the hood of her cloak tighter around her. Even with the potion she had bought to change her appearance to that of an elf, she was still worried she would be caught and exposed as a human. She reminded herself that she only need to keep calm and she would be fine. She only needed to get over the bridges and security. She had heard plenty of stories of how very few humans were ever allowed into the capital, though, she figured she wasn’t human any longer… But she looked human, which is why she took the precaution of disguising herself as an Elf.

Currently she was nearing one of the bridges that lead into Nenril, the peaking buildings gracefully silhouetting against the brightening sky, surrounded by bustling travelers also hoping for entry into the magnificent city. The sight of the city over the large glistening lake was breathtaking and serene, the slim spires of the distant buildings stretching up into the sky, as though ready to touch the clouds with their delicate points.

Isabella had decided months ago that she would travel to the great Elven city, desperate for any information she could find on Fairfox… The image of his face flashed through her mind and sent a chilling pain through her chest, her hand instinctively going to touch the glove-covered scar on her wrist. It had been over fifteen years now since she woke up in her bed, branded and clueless to why or what Fairfox did to her, wiping the memories of those around her of his existence.

She took a sharp intake of breath, battling away her darkening and painful thoughts and focusing on the task at hand instead. She was nearing the entrance of the bridge and needed to do everything she could to ensure her entrance into the city. She removed her hood and tucked her blue hair behind her ears, to show her ‘pointed’ ears clearly, rehearsing the basic elvish she had learned and practiced over the last year of working under the Noro family in Brund in order to prepare herself for any questions.

When it was finally her turn to be questioned she took a deep breath and gave the taller elven guard a polite and easy smile—after all, she had done as much during her human years, it was practically a second nature to her now to fake such ease and happiness—as he inspected her carefully.

His eyes raked her cloaked figure, a shiver threatening to snake up her spine as she forced herself to stay calm and cheery, “*Why is it you wish to enter Nenril*?”

Elvish it was then.

Isabella continued to smile politely, her tone coming out smooth and natural as the Elvish language rolled off her tongue, “*I’ve come to study. I’ve heard many great things of the libraries in Nenril. I wish to better acquaint myself with such knowledge.*” Shit, she needed to use simpler words. Her normal vocabulary didn’t come as easily to her

The guard’s expression did not change from its impassive and scrutinizing mask, “*Will you be staying with any known persons or family members while in Nenril?*”

Isabella shook her head, “*No, sir. I planned to stay in an inn or tavern*.”

His gaze narrowed slightly, “*How much money are you carrying and do you plan on working while in the city?*”

Isabella opened her cloak, revealing her slim figure and plain clothing in order to take out her coin purse, pretending not to feel the burning gaze of the Elven guard. She handed over the coin purse, the coins jingling during the exchange, “*I have about 30 gold and some silver and copper. I was hoping to get work as a maid or governess during my stay in order to support myself and my studies.*”

The guard looked through the coin purse before handing it back, seemingly satisfied, “*Where are you traveling from?*”

“*A small town named Asmid just off the boarder of Brund. Its north of here*.”

The guard quirked an eyebrow at her, breaking his firm mask for the first time while giving her a once over again, “*You traveled all that way, alone?*”

“*Not the whole way, no. Every so often I would join the small group of travelers*. *It definitely wasn’t easy if that’s what you’re implying. Though, I’m stronger than I look.*” She smiled and winked. It was an easy lie, partially because it was true. Though, in most groups she tied her hair back and kept her hood up, pretending she was a male for her own protection. Those were the nights she didn’t meditate for long.

Ah, finally, a smile. She was safe.

The guards features softened ever so subtly, “*One last question; are you bringing any weapons or magical items into the city?*”

Isabella moved her cloak again to pat the dagger hanging from her hip, “*Just my dagger. Nothing magical other than my personality.*” She grinned, making a show of her straight teeth and slight dimple that puckered in her cheeks.

The guard nodded and opened the gate for her to enter the city. Hiking her pack up higher on her shoulders, she waved cheerily behind her to the guards and made her way casually through the gate and over the large expanse of bridge, her breath coming out in a rush and her smile falling once she was a good fifteen or twenty feet away from the bridge’s gate.

Good, now she wouldn’t have to worry about hiding the fact she looked human any longer. The potion would wear off after a few hours as well, meaning she would have time to get across the bridge safely into the city under the guise of an Elf. Now, her only concern was finding the libraries in the city and then finding a place to settle for the night. As soon as she was inside the city limits she pulled her hood up once again, not wanting to be seen when the potion wore off; it would rise questions if someone saw her as an Elf one moment and then a human later on.

It took a few hours in order to find the first library. It was a large, magnificent building, as beautifully decorated as the rest of the city, ancient ruins carved into the stone walls and pillars. She made her way up one of the winding staircases, aware of the strange looks she was getting from the passing strangers, her potion having worn off now. She would have to by some normal looking clothes later instead of her traveling garb. First she would need to find a place to stay securely.

She gingerly ran a gloved finger over the spines of large books, Elvish words she didn’t recognize winding down the backs. She bit her lip in frustration and continued to look for something she may recognize or be able to read, her Elvish still inadequate other than for necessities. Sighing, she resigned to come back another time; she would have to find someone willing to teach her while she was here, otherwise this trip would be utterly pointless.

Once she found a cheap inn that she could wash up and stay in for the night, she locked her room door after dragging in a basin full of steaming water with the help of one of the tavern girls, a girl who couldn’t be older than sixteen. Without so much as flinching she stepped into the basin, the hot water scorching her skin, turning it a red hue before she started to scrub harshly at her skin, cleaning every inch of herself quickly so the water would still be steaming by the time she was finished. That way she could steam the new dress he had bought from one of the vender stalls. The fabric was fine and flowy, ever the Elvish fashion. It wasn’t extravagant by any means but it would serve its purpose of making her look presentable enough for work.

She didn’t bother putting on her dirty traveling clothes again, she’d wash them later. For now she put on her underthings and climbed into the bed, covering herself with the coarse sheets before cracking open the Elvish language book she had brought with her, practicing until she felt the pull of ‘sleep’, resting for a few hours before waking again, well before dawn and dressing for the day ahead.

It took majority of the day, but before long she finally was able to find a job. It was in the nicer part of the city, a large home was looking for new help with cleaning and other household work. Apparently they were on such short notice they needed the help immediately and hadn’t cared a bit she had been ‘human’. The head of the cleaning staff had given her a brief tour of the home before giving her the task of picking up the day’s freshly baked goods from down the road, handing her a small amount of money and pointing her in the vague direction.

Slightly disoriented by the quick Elvish, Isabella made her way, carefully making out the shops along the way, more following her nose in the end when she reached the bakery. She stepped into the neat shop, the familiar ring of a bell clinging above her as she opened the door and closed it behind her. It wasn’t terribly busy, but enough where the easy chatter of costumers made a noisy atmosphere.

Isabella stepped up to the counter, looking around for someone to help her, “*Excuse me?*”

She was suddenly greeted by a handsome male with shoulder length brown hair hair and a cheerful expression, his face red from the heat of the ovens in the back of the shop and his silver eyes glittering, he smiled, wiping the flour off his hands with his apron, “*May I help you, miss?*”

For a moment, Isabella had to recollect the name of the family she was now working for, “*Ah, I’m here for the… Jadehelm family*…”

The man grinned, “*You must be the new maid, I take it? I’ll have your order ready in just a minute*.” He disappeared back behind where she knew the ovens were, leaving her to stand at the counter awkwardly.

A few minutes later, the brunette was back with a few wrapped parcels, setting them on the counter and taking the money Isabella offered him. He smiled at her again, “It’s not very often that we see humans around here. Usually they aren’t allowed in the city.”

His tone was friendly enough as he leaned against the counter, his expression open and completely unguarded; simply making small talk. Isabella blinked, surprised that he used the common language, “I’m not… exactly human… really. At least, not anymore.”

Her tone softened towards the end, feeling uncomfortable saying the truth out loud. However, the brunette tilted his head in confusion for only a moment, sensing her discomfort before easily switching the topic, never dropping his friendly smile, “Regardless, it’s nice to see a new face around here. I’m Rowan, by the way. Rowan Fenrir.”

Isabella found herself smiling back despite herself, “It’s nice to meet you, Rowan. I’m Isabella. Isabella Marx.”

Rowan laughed amiably, “Isabella, then. Such a lovely name~”

Isabella gave a weary laugh, before glancing around, noticing that they were getting a few stares. She cleared her throat and reached for the parcels, balancing them easily in her arms, “*Thank you, but I should be going*.”

Rowan nodded and smiled, flashing her a friendly wink as he waved her off, “I expect to see you again~”

Isabella smiled politely and waved back before leaving, glancing back through the window to see him now easily chatting with another customer, his friendly demeanor ever the same.

On the way back to the house, she wondered if she would have married someone like him had she not met Fairfox. Someone who was easy to talk to and get along with. Someone normal.

*Fairfox seemed normal. He was easy to talk with too.*

The thought was unwelcomed, like a voice that wasn’t hers, whispering her deepest and darkest desires she had locked and hidden away in her heart.

No. He hadn’t seemed normal. He seemed too good to be true. He wasn’t easy to talk with either. Every conversation they had was intellectually challenging, as if each word was a weight and each sentence was part of a game only he knew how to play.

*But that’s why each kiss seemed like a reward—*

Isabella shook her head violently, as if to clear her thoughts. She shouldn’t focus on such things right now. She needed to do her job properly so she wouldn’t get fired after just one day. She easily found her way back to the house, dropping off the baked parcels in the kitchen for the cook to deal with and moving on to the next job. At the end of the day she was permitted to go and retrieve her things from the inn she was staying at in order to move into the spare servant’s quarters she would now share with another maid.

By the time she had left the inn with her things it was dark, the night casting shadows over the buildings and the streets, playing tricks on the eyes if one wasn’t careful enough. Isabella kept close to the oil lamp lit streets, not wanting to attract unwanted attention from the shadowed alleys. It may be a nice city, but it wasn’t that nice. No place was.

She hadn’t caught anyone’s attention until suddenly she heard a voice calling out to her, breaking the peaceful call that had surrounded her. Isabella looked around to see what looked like a small group of elven guards making their rounds. She immediately recognized the one waving at her as the guard who had given her entrance into the city. Isabella paled; she had looked like an elf the last time the guard had seen her. If he got too close now he would know she had lied in order to gain entrance to the city and escort her out personally. Or worse.

She shuddered and tightened her hold on her pack, forcing a polite smile on her features as she waved back, “*Good evening. I hadn’t thought I’d see you again. Unfortunately, I am running late and need to get back to my master’s home.*”

She tried inching away but to her misfortune the small group crossed the street towards her, the Elven guards smiling at her until the one in the front frowned slightly, “*Wait a minute…*”

Isabella paled and immediately bolted, lifting her skirts and slinging her pack over her shoulder to gain as much speed as she could. She heard yelling from behind her and the heavy clinking of their armour as they chased her. She grit her teeth and pumped her legs harder, her muscles burning from the effort as a swear caught in her throat. She zig zagged down different roads, traveling back a ways in the opposite direction of the house she was staying in. She panted, her vision spotting as sweat dripped down her face, unsure of how much more she could run, until something snatched her arm and pulled her into the cover of a dark alley.

She gasped, ready to loose a scream, only to have a hand shush her, familiar silver eyes staring at her as she was pressed against the alley wall, the rough brick cutting into her skin. Isabella’s eyes were wide in surprise as Rowan leaned in close, his face inches away from hers as his body caged her against the wall, blocking her from line of sight to the mouth of the alley. Despite being so close, his eyes were trained on the open street.

Her exhausted and adrenaline dazed mind slowly made the connection: he was helping her escape from the guards. He was pretending to be her lover in an alley. Public displays of affection made others uncomfortable, the guards wouldn’t think twice to glance their way. It was brilliant really.

Rowan leaned his face closer, cupping her cheek gently when they heard the clinking and shouting of the guards, as expected, they ran straight past them without a second glance. Isabella held her breath as they ran past, her heart hammering in her chest. From Rowan’s close proximity or from the unexpected exercise, she didn’t know. She decided it was the exertion of running and left it at that, not wanting to dwell on the thought.

They were both still for a long while, wanting to make sure the guards had indeed left the area, before Rowan finally release Isabella, giving a rather dramatic sigh, “*Whew!* That was close! It seems we met again far sooner than I had expected. Though, not in the way I would have thought.”

He gave her a carefree smile, his eyes sparkling with the thrill of the situation, no judgement in his expression what-so-ever. Isabella couldn’t help but feel thankful for that. She decided to voice as much, “Thank you. If it weren’t for you I would have been caught and thrown out of the city on my second day...”

He waved his hand, as if brushing aside her thanks like it was no big deal, “Not a problem! As long as I didn’t just aide you in a robbery or something of that sort…”

Isabella shook her head, leaning against the brick wall as she tried to calm her breathing, “No. One of the guards recognized me from the entry gate. Except at that point in time I looked like an elf…”

She tried her best not to look sheepish of her crime, studying the elf in front of her wearily as he looked at her. Instead, he simply offered her his arm and smiled, “Shall I walk you home? It’s pretty dangerous for a woman to walk at night. Especially you I recon.” His tone was light and friendly, offering her a wry grin as she hesitantly took his arm. He took her pack easily and swung it over his shoulder, as if it were the obvious thing to do, and he made small quiet chatter all the way to the manor she now resided.

Once at the front gate of the manor house, he handed back her pack and gave her a happy smile, “And with this, I bid you *goodnight*. I hope to see you at the bakery again, Miss Isabella~ Hopefully without guards chasing you.”

Isabella smiled and nodded, hugging her pack tightly to her chest as she waved him off, “Thank you again, goodnight Rowan.” She watched his retreating form for a while, her mind still reeling on the fact that he had helped her so willingly and hadn’t asked for a single thing in return. He was strange that elf.

That night she lay awake for hours, listening to the gentle snores and breathing of her roommate until she was able to meditate for a few hours, getting up bright and early and waking her roommate when it was time to start their day of chores…

For weeks, her routine was the same: she would wake up, take out the morning laundry, go to the bakery, talk with for a bit Rowan, entertain the children until lunch was prepared, eat, do the afternoon cleaning, help with dinner preparations, clean up after dinner, go to the library, come back feeling tired and frustrated, pretend to sleep, meditate and start all over again.

Every so often Rowan would come by and pester her, making jokes or helping her entertain the kids (who loved him to bits) playing small pranks on her or kissing her hand to tease her and make the children complain. Sometimes he would bring her small packages of baked gifts, each time she insisted she shouldn’t, and each time he refused to take no for an answer. Usually she would share them with the children in secret, but sometimes she would keep them for herself if she were feeling especially frustrated from her struggles at the library. She had most weekends off, lest it be a special occasion. She often found herself either at the library or spending her afternoons with Rowan.

Rowan proved to be a good companion and distraction on those days. He was always cheerful and mindful of her mood, never asking her what was wrong and respecting her privacy. After her first month of finding nothing and her Elvish skills only improving slightly, she finally asked Rowan if he would help teach her.

They were sitting in the bakery after closing hours, occupying one of the few small tables along the wall adjacent to the counter, Rowan playfully trying to catch her hand as always, “*Teach you? Elvish? But you seem to be doing fine as you are*.”

Isabella shook her head and sighed, dragging her hand through her hair and leaning her elbow against the table, cradling her temples, “*Only the basics and essentials. I need to become fluent so I can search the libraries more thoroughly*.”

Rowan was unusually silent for a moment before he spoke up again, ever the cheerful attitude, “*I’ll help*. It’s a date~”

Isabella winced, “Rowan…”

He simply smiled and snatched her hand in his successfully, giving her a wink, “One day I’ll win you over with my charm. Until then I can only hope~”

She frowned slightly and pulled her hand away, folding them neatly in her lap as she leaned back against her seat, “Rowan… there’s…” She sighed and looked out the window of the shop, her eyes following the few strangers that would pass by every so often. She took a steadying breath and tried again, “A long time ago, I gave my heart to someone… and I ended up being hurt in the end… I’m not completely over them yet… as much as I hate it, a part of me still loves him… I’m sorry… I don’t want you to waste much time on a hopeless cause such as me…”

Rowan was silent for a long while, but Isabella couldn’t bring herself to look at him. She didn’t want to be the reason to put an unpleasant emotion on that happy face of his. It was cowardice of her, but she didn’t want to see it.

When he finally spoke, his tone was softer, making her head turn to look at him, his expression warm and understanding, “I figured as much. There’s a haunted and tired look to your eyes, even when you smile. Each time you go to the library it seems to only worsen. I’m worried about you, but I can’t tell you to stop going, it seems so important to you after all. I don’t believe you’re a hopeless cause and I’ll continue to have these fond feelings of you as long as it takes for you to get over whoever hurt you in the past.”

Isabella’s eyes widened slightly as she stared at Rowan, completely speechless as he smiled at her. She had nearly forgotten what it was like to have someone care for her genuinely. She blinked and shook herself out of her reverie, clearing her throat and looking away. She couldn’t help thinking it would have been nice if she had met someone like Rowan before Fairfox…

Isabella and Rowan had agreed to meet at the library at least twice a week and on the weekends at the library to study Elvish. Even though he teased and flirted with her each time, Isabella having to lecture him every so often just to have him laugh at her, he was a good teacher. As her Elvish got better, she began to cherish those days they met together.

He began to visit the house more often to play with the children when she was watching them, teaching them pranks and earning more lectures from Isabella, picking her up from behind and swinging her around, throwing her into piles of colourful leaves with the children once the fall seasons came. It was during those times that Isabella was able to laugh and smile genuinely, as if a weight was being lifted from her shoulders thanks to the silly male Elf. She had to admit though, even she enjoyed when he sang to the children. He had a beautiful voice, and it reminded her of the bards she had listened to on her journey to Nenril. Perhaps he had missed his calling; he was certainly flamboyant enough to be a bard instead of just a baker’s son.

Rowan caught her staring and winked at her, making her face turn an involuntary crimson hue as she continued her task of cleaning up after the kids and taking down the hanging laundry. It was when the cook, Lethil, called for the children that they whined and reluctantly left Rowan who laughed and promised to come again to play with them. Isabella was still attending to the laundry when she felt a sudden weight leaning against her, Rowans arms wrapping around her shoulders as he rested his chin on top of her head, letting out a dramatic sigh, “*Ah~ those kids take it out of me! I need to recharge*.”

Isabella simply smiled and did her best to continue her work despite his added weight, “*The kids love it when you come to play with them though*.”

She could feel the vibration of his chuckle on the back of her head as he spoke in a sing song voice, “*Yes, but I’d rather you climb all over me than them*~”

Isabella prickled as she felt Rowan press a soft kiss on the back of her neck, a bright blush immediately staining her features, swatting at his arms as he released her, hands held up defensively as he laughed, the sound playful and happy. Isabella couldn’t help but huff, trying not to smile as she finished up the laundry. Moments like this were bittersweet. She wanted them to last and be real, only to remember what she was really here for and soil that pretty image that Rowan painted for the two of them.

There were times where she had considered a life with Rowan, during the hours she pretended to sleep she would list out the pros and cons. Rowan was handsome, not a must but a definite nice attribute, he was kind and caring, he was an Elf, meaning he was virtually immortal and wouldn’t die before she would, another perk. He was easy going and she had grown to care for him, but part of her believed it wouldn’t be fair to him. A part of her couldn’t forget Fairfox. She wasn’t being completely honest with Rowan about herself and she didn’t want to end up hurting either him or herself.

It had almost been a year since she had come to Nenril now and she was nearly fluent in her Elvish thanks to Rowan. She still batted his flirtation and advances away and he took it like the cheerful gentleman he was, true to his word. She was almost naïve enough to think it didn’t really bother him until one weekend afternoon in one of the city’s libraries. Isabella groaned quietly and lay her head on the book she had propped open. A year of scouring the libraries in Nenril and nothing. All that work, and nothing to show for it.

She felt Rowan’s hand lightly on her shoulder and she turned her head to peak up at him, his expression gentle and concerned, his voice coming out soft, “*Isabella… why is this so important? What are you looking for?*”

Isabella bit her lip and closed her eyes, heaving a sigh and waiting a moment before sitting up, staring blankly at her covered wrist. She had taken to tying ribbons around her scar since she couldn’t wear her gloves all the time as a maid. She played with that ribbon absently now, her voice coming out as a hoarse whisper, “*I’m looking for him*.”

Rowan was completely silent as Isabella spoke, telling him from beginning to end what happened between her and Fairfox—omitting the more personal details, but giving him the over-all story in general, in all its horrifically bitter glory.

Rowan was silent for a while, the air thick between them, when Isabella glanced up at him for the first time, she saw a somewhat confused glint in his serious expression, “*Not that I doubt you, but, if no one in your hometown remembers him, how do you know he exists?*”

Isabella looked down and tugged the ribbon free from her wrist, holding it out to show the scar to him, listening to his breath hiss quietly as he gently stroked the marred skin. His next question threw her off, however:

“But why? Why are you looking for him?”

Isabella opened her mouth only to close it again. The answer she usually told herself refusing to surface. Before it was because in her heart she still loved him, despite everything he did to her. She was confused and wanted answers. But now… looking at the concerned elf before her…

Her voice came out meek, “I… I don’t’ know anymore…”

There was another long moment of silence between them before Rowan suddenly gripped her wrist and pulled her out of her seat, dragging her along through the bookshelves as Isabella tried to ask him what he was doing quietly so not to disturb any others in the library. However hard she tried, he refused to look back at her as he dragged her along deeper into the seclusion of the book shelves, finally stopping and cornering her against a secluded alcove, Isabella’s eyes wide in surprised as she looked up at him, his expression unusually serious, “*What*—?!”

She was cut off suddenly as he leaned forward and captured her lips, completely stunning her silent, her pulse spiking and her thoughts whirling at a dizzying rate. To her own surprise, she found herself leaning in to his embrace, craving the warmth and tenderness he offered her. His lips were soft and his kisses had been gentle until she responded positively, as if he hadn’t really expected to get this far, before becoming more passionate, cradling her face in his hands as he pulled her closer, the open vulnerability to his feelings leaving her breathless.

Rowan finally broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against hers, his expression still serious as he gazed into her own dazed eyes, “*Isabella… I want you to be happy. I want to be the one that makes you happy… Will you let me?*”

Her chest felt as if it were burning, her pulse roaring in her ears as she stared at him, his sincerity almost too much to handle as she chewed her lower lip. Did she really *have* to look for Fairfox? Could she use her new seemingly extended life to be *happy*? Why couldn’t she have an opportunity for a long, happy life? Fairfox might have done this to her, but maybe she could choose to make it a good thing…

“Okay…” Her voice came out in a meek whisper so she nodded and repeated herself, wanting herself to be heard properly, “Okay.”

Rowan’s face was surprised at first, but his face quickly lit up with one of his beaming smiles before pulling her into a tight hug, engulfing her in his warmth. Isabella blinked, startled slightly before a soft smile reached her own lips and she hugged him back, laughing when he started peppering her with enthusiastic kisses. This was her chance to be happy, and she was going to take it.

Rowan and Isabella’s new relationship didn’t go unnoticed for long. In fact, people began to treat her differently, kinder perhaps and she noticed Lethil, the ever-so-stern cook, began to tease her more and give her larger portions, “You’ll need your strength to keep up with that one.”

Rowan still visited on the days she was working, but they stopped going to the library on the weekends and twice a week. Instead they went on walks, picnics, plays, anything that suited their fancy at the time. Gradually, she began to think of Fairfox less and less, her thoughts utterly occupied by work and Rowan, whom she came to love dearly. Every day he would bring her either a baked parcel or flowers, acting more lovey in front of the children than usual, eliciting a chorus of groans and giggles as Isabella halfheartedly swatted him away, laughing along with Rowan and the children.

Rowan, ever the flirt and troublemaker, always stole kisses whenever the opportunity arose: between the hanging sheets of laundry, at the bakery behind a parcel he was giving her, passing a tree in the park. She made sure to keep them in balance, scolding him every so often in what she knew was vain. He wasn’t going to change and she was glad for that.

By her third year in Nenril, Isabella had completely learned to love Rowan, her only thoughts of Fairfox being her scar. Perhaps she could see a wizard or someone to have it removed magically? She shook her head and tied her ribbons over the scar once again, looking around the small cottage she and Rowan now called home together.

She had quit her job as a maid and began working at the closest of the city’s libraries, having scoured the library quite completely over her first year, she had become a sort of expert of the place, giving her a sizeable advantage when applying for the job. She had the day off due to the holiday. Later on in the day she and Rowan would go to the town’s festivities after he was finished at the bakery.

The weather was warm, a slight gentle breeze coming through the windows, the air peaceful as she embroidered in one of the large chairs. Perhaps that was why she ended up dozing off, the fragrant aroma of summer flowers easing her into a blissful sleep…

Isabella woke to the soft chuckle of Rowan as he gently kissed her back into consciousness. She felt at ease and warm, completely relaxed as she opened her eyes and smiled at Rowan. The brunette elf smiled at her happily, “It’s not often I catch you napping~”

Isabella stretched as she sat up and yawned, “The weather is so nice I suppose I couldn’t help but doze off. Are you finished at the bakery?”

Rowan nodded, his cheerful attitude ever in place, never changing, his silver eyes sparkling with promise as he clasped his hand easily in his, pulling her up flush against him, cradling her frame gingerly and giving her another kiss, “I’ve got you something for the holiday.”

Isabella smiled against his lips, her hands squeezing his upper arms, “You didn’t have to do that.”

Rowan laughed, “I wanted to!” He pulled her along to the adjoining kitchen and gestured to the table.

Isabella immediately froze as her gaze landed on the large bouquet of blue roses, a large gold ribbon tied around the vase they sat in. Her chest constricted as she slowly stepped towards the table, her voice strangled, “Where did you get these?”

Rowan grinned at her, oblivious to her change of mood, “A vender was selling them and they reminded me of you.”

Isabella gave a weak smile and counted the roses as she approached the table: one for every year she was away from Fairfox… Her lips pressed into a tight line as she reached up, gently stroking one of the soft petals before snatching her hand back, all of the flowers blackening and dying, turning to dust.

Isabella gasped, pressing her hand to her mouth as she looked to Rowan, her blood turning to ice. Rowan’s eyes were wide, tears of blood streaming down his face as he grinned at her, laughing wildly as random wounds began to materialize over his body, blood oozing and staining through his clothes. Isabella screamed, tears blurring her vision as she squeezed her eyes closed and shook her head violently, pressing her hands over her ears to muffle his awful laughing.

Isabella jolted awake, beads of sweat gathering on her forehead as she panted, clutching her chest and the arm of the chair tightly, her knuckles turning white with the effort. She pressed her hand to her mouth as she tried to calm her breathing and the trembles that raked her body. It was just a dream. Just a dream. It wasn’t real. Rowan was safe and at the bakery.

Isabella took a deep breath and went to the kitchen, pouring herself a large glass of water to calm herself, gaining control of herself after a few minutes, her heartbeat back to a normal speed as she glared at her wrist, as if it were the cause of her troublesome dream.

That was when Rowan opened the front door, his usual cheery greeting chasing away the silence that had filled their home, “Bella~! I’m back~!”

Isabell smiled, just his being safe already setting her at ease. She called back to him, wanting nothing more than one of his big hugs and a kiss as she made her way to meet him, “Was the bakery busy today?”

He was just closing the door as she walked in, his expression brightening as soon as he spotted her, making her heart warm until she saw what was in his hand, her heart skipping a beat painfully as she froze. Her face paled and hands started to tremble as her eyes latched onto the single blue rose in his hand, a thin golden ribbon tied around it.

Her voice was quiet, “Where did you find that.”

Rowan frowned in confusion for a moment before he looked at the rose in his hand, “This? It was on the front step when I came home. Do you have a secret admirer, Bella~?”

His tone turned teasingly playful at the end but Isabella made no move towards him, her back pressing against the door frame as her hand knotted the fabric of her skirt in her fist, her knuckles white, “Rowan, throw that thing away. Burn it, I don’t care. Just get it out of this house. Get it away from us.”

Rowan frowned in confusion, his eyes concerned now as he studied the rose carefully, “Why? Isabella, what’s wrong?”

Tears burned in her eyes as a lump in her throat strangled her voice, “Just get rid of it, please.”

Rowan nodded and stepped back outside, disappearing for a few moments, Isabella holding her breath until he came back, the rose and ribbon gone. Isabella let out a shaky breath and ran into his outstretched arms, burying her face into his chest as she gripped him tightly, afraid he would disappear if she didn’t.

Rowan cradled her carefully and pulled her over to one of the chairs, pulling her into his lap as he held her close, rubbing soothing circles over her back, “Bella… what’s wrong…?”

Isabella sniffed and wiped her eyes, taking a deep breath to steady herself before she told him the significance of the blue rose and gold ribbon, telling him how Fairfox use to give them to her as a gift so long ago and her dream that she had only moments before he arrived.

Rowan was quiet as he listened, holding her protectively and pressing kisses into her hair as she spoke. When she finished he gently tipped her chin up and gave her a reassuring smile, his silver eyes warm and loving, “I’m not going anywhere, Isabella. I promise. There’s nothing to worry about.”

He cupped her face and she kissed him, a sheepish smile on her lips as she held his hand gently, leaning her forehead against his and closing her eyes. She breathed in his familiar scent before turning her head to press a kiss into his palm, her breath mixing with his as she whispered, “I’m glad I met you, Rowan. You’re the best thing that could have happened to me.”

He chuckled, happy attitude back as he began to attack her with kisses, holding her close as she laughed and tried to get away, her ominous mood clearing almost immediately. That was Rowan’s gift. He made her happy effortlessly and she appreciated it more than he knew.

They attended the festivities of the town as planned, holding hands as they made their way through the happily chattering crowds and music, the smell of the food venders drifting temptingly through the air. Talking vaguely of the future and their hopes, unaware of the golden eyes that watched them from afar.

Weeks later, Rowan stepped out of the bakery, ready to go home where he knew Isabella was waiting as he shouted out his cheery farewells to the other bakery workers and remaining customers.

However, he ran into a handsome stranger on his way out, immediately apologizing with his trademark smile and laugh. The stranger merely smiled and handed him a folded slip of parchment. Confused, Rowan took the note, the stranger walking away without another word.

He watched the stranger go, briefly thinking how strange it was to see a human so young have white hair. He began to cross the street as he opened the note and froze, unaware of the commotion around him. That was the last thing he saw as a carriage ran him over...

Isabella’s chest hurt, her lungs and legs burning as she ran as fast as she could, her eyes wide and frantic as tears threatened to spill. They were wrong. It wasn’t right. It couldn’t be her Rowan. It had to be someone else. They were mistaken.

Isabella almost skidded into a building, pushing through a gathered crowd of people as she reached the street of the bakery. People eager to get out of her way as she fought her way to the center, denial still clinging to her throat, her heart refusing to believe it was true. The pitying looks people were giving her were mistaken. It wasn’t her Rowan. It couldn’t be. She would see this was all a big mistake and her happy, smiling Rowan would come out of the bakery to greet her, as he always did.

She finally broke through the crowd, her chest constricting painfully as she nearly choked on the lump in her throat, tears brimming and streaming down her face as she shook her head, clinging to her last shred of hope, her last shred of denial. The bloody body lying beside the carriage wasn’t her Rowan. It couldn’t be.

Her hands began to tremble as she pushed herself past the sympathetic men trying to shelter her away from the sight, landing harshly on her knees as she knelt beside the body, shakily turning him over and suppressing her strangled sob as she gazed upon his bloody face, his expression frozen in surprise.

This wasn’t her Rowan. This couldn’t be her cheerful smiling Rowan.

She couldn’t stop the tears, her vision blurring as she refused to look away, her hands going to smooth his hair away from his face unsteadily, to close his glassy eyes. Ignoring the blood that stained her hands as she touched him, her hand going to hold his until she found a paper crumpled in his fist.

She frowned, confused as she glanced at his face once more before pulling out the paper gingerly from his cold fingers and smoothing it open…

She couldn’t breathe.

It felt as though the breath had been knocked out of her, forcibly sucked from her lungs. Her world burning and turned upside down.

From the paper, Fairfox’s seal stared back at her in blaringly black ink, a perfect replica of her scar. Her hands trembled as she crumpled the paper and clung to Rowan’s body, sobbing pitifully, refusing to be moved as she gripped his shirt and cried into his still chest, willing for him to come back to her.

This was her fault. If it weren’t for her, Rowan would still be smiling and alive.

Her Rowan…

“*Wake up, Rowan… Come back to me… Don’t leave me, please… Please… Rowan… I’m so sorry… I’m so sorry, please don’t leave me… Don’t leave me…I love you…Please…*”

But he didn’t answer. He remained lifeless, unable to hear and answer her quiet and desperate pleas…

She was numb. She felt nothing. It had been weeks since Rowan died. They had buried him the week after his death. It was as if they buried her heart with him. She was at his grave again now, White lilies in hand as she laid them gently against his gravestone. She had visited his grave every day.

Her world was bleak. Cold. Lifeless.

As if the colour had drained from her life.

She grit her teeth and hissed in a sharp breath, her tears flowing freely as she clenched her fists tightly, her nails digging into her palm and breaking the skin, blood slowly trickling down her fingers and onto the ground: there was a single wilted and dying blue rose next to his grave, the same gold ribbon tied around it’s stem. Taunting her.

This wasn’t the end. No.

She was going to find Fairfox and end him.

Even if it took the rest of her miserable life.

Even if she died trying.