

When Snow White and Rose Red
meets Sense and Sensibility

The image features two dark silhouettes of women in long, flowing dresses. The woman on the left is holding a white rose, and the woman on the right is holding a snowflake. The background is a vibrant, abstract pattern of purple, pink, and blue with a sparkling, starry texture.

Rose Petals
&
Snowflakes

Kendra E. Ardnek

When *Snow White and Rose Red* meets
Sense and Sensibility

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The Austen Fairy Tales – 1

Kendra E. Ardnek

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DEDICATION

For Kelsey, for showing me the potential of *Sense and Sensibility*.

WHO'S WHO?

Elinrose: Elinor Dashwood / Rose Red
Snowmari: Marianne Dashwood / Snow White
Mayblossom: Margaret Dashwood / Harry Dashwood
The Bear: Colonel Brandon / the Bear
Earnest: Edward Ferrars
James: John Dashwood
The Mistress of the Forest: Mrs. Ferrars
Faia: Fanny Dashwood
Ash: Sophia Grey
Jenna: Mrs. Jennings / Lady Middleton / Guardian Angel
Sir: Sir John Middleton / Guardian Angel
Willow: John Willoughby / The Dwarf
Lilly: Lucy Steele / Anne Steele
Henry: Doctor Davis / Doctor Harris

~ 1 ~

The king of the North Country lay dying. Even his wife and younger daughter, who'd been optimistic to the end, were forced to concede to reality, and they now took turns in a constant vigil at his bedside. Meanwhile, his elder daughter, ever the pragmatist, applied herself to matters of state so their kingdom wouldn't fall into ruin.

Of course, the most pressing matter was finding their elder half-brother, on whose shoulders the kingdom ought to fall.

She had sent messengers to all corners of the land and beyond, and, one by one, each had returned in vain. Today, however, a messenger finally had information – and it was troubling news indeed. If he was right – and the uncomfortable knot in the princess's stomach said he was – then her brother wouldn't return home on his own.

At length, she put the matter aside and went to her father's bedchamber. She needed a distraction and figured that her sister, who'd been at their father's bedside the whole day, could use the same. By the time she'd reached the room, she'd settled her knot of nerves – after nearly worrying off her lower lip.

Knocking lightly at the door, she stepped into the room and sighed as she sat down at her sister's side. "How is he, Mari?"

Snowmari blinked and sat up straight. "Asleep. Keep quiet so he doesn't wake – you know that he doesn't like to hear us talking about him." She took her sister's hand. "Oh, Elin! Just look at him! Does he even *resemble* the father we know and love? And if James – Elin, have you found *any* news of James?"

Elinrose released a sigh. "I have a lead, and that's why I need to talk to you. This ... it'll be best if I personally pursue this. I'm leaving in the morning, and I don't know when I'll be back, but I'll return with James when I do. I promise."

Snowmari sucked in a breath. "Very well. Where is he?"

"Nowhere good, which is why I'll have to retrieve him myself." Elinrose put a hand on Snowmari's shoulder. "Also, it's Mayblossom's bedtime, and I think she would like it if we both tucked her in."

Snowmari frowned, her gaze flicking to their father. "Very well. We can leave a servant with him for a few minutes." She shook her head. "Oh! But to

see him like this, when he was always so strong and..." She took a deep breath and stood. "Let's go find Mayblossom, yes?"

"Yes," agreed Elinrose, hooking her arm through her sister's and guiding her out of the room.

The two sisters were as different in appearance as they were in personality. Snowmari was as pale as the snow for which she was named, lithe and delicate, with ice blonde hair that she wore loose about her shoulders and eyes as blue as the winter sky. Elinrose, was tall and sturdy, with a ruddy complexion despite North's constant winter, brown curls kept in a sensible knot, and eyes brown as the earth itself.

"Now, I just want to let you know that I've already spoken with Chancellor Markim," Elinrose explained as they walked. "While I'm away, he will handle all of the details that you find boring and tedious – much as I try to tell you those are what truly matter in running a kingdom. I hope to return quickly, but if James and I aren't back before ... well, *you know* happens, don't hesitate to hold a coronation for Mayblossom and take the position of regent."

"But..."

"Only if I don't return." Elinrose held up a hand. "I *plan* to have James home before the inevitable and to not leave you in this position. I just want you *prepared* for the worst. It probably won't be necessary, but we can't make that assumption."

"Right." Snowmari gave an exaggerated sigh. "It's just, the way you're talking ... I'm worried, that's all."

"Of course, but I've already told you that you have *nothing* to worry about." Elinrose patted Snowmari's hand.

She didn't like patronizing her sister, but Snowmari could overreact with such melodrama over the most minor issues ... and that was the last thing that Elinrose wanted right now.

Snowmari released a sigh. "If you say so. You'd better return with him – I don't know what I'll do if you don't."

"Chancellor Markim will take care of affairs – whether until my return or until Mayblossom comes of age. You will be her regent officially, but he will be your chief advisor. Use him."

"But shouldn't you..."

Elinrose pulled them up short as they had reached Mayblossom's room. "I plan to return with James. Now, no more of this – we don't want to upset

Mayblossom. She may well have the world on her shoulders before long.”

“And yet you stand there, upsetting me!” Snowmari shook her head and pulled away from Elinrose. “Now, look at me! I’m a ball of nerves – how do you expect me to *not* upset Mayblossom when I have *this* weighing on my mind?”

“Hey!” Elinrose bit down her frustration, knowing that one of them had to remain calm. “Everything will be fine. But if you don’t want to give Mayblossom her good-night kiss, then, by all means, run back to Father’s side and worry yourself away.”

Snowmari folded her arms over her chest, drawing in a breath. “Fine. Where is James?”

Elinrose took Snowmari by the arm again and pulled her into Mayblossom’s room, where their nine-year-old niece sat on her bed, playing with her dolls. Mayblossom smiled at first, but it melted into a frown as she glanced between her aunts.

“Is something wrong?” Mayblossom hugged one of the dolls to her chest.

“Oh, Aunt Mari and I are just so regretful that we have to come put an end to your game!” Elinrose slipped into a smile as she swept over to the bed and sat down at Mayblossom’s side. “Bedtime, you know.”

Mayblossom gave a slow nod as she reluctantly set her dolls to the side. “All right. It’s just, the way you were frowning, I thought Grandpa...”

“Grandpa’s still with us,” said Snowmari, rushing over to sit down on Mayblossom’s other side. “Don’t worry – he’s stubborn and will cling to life as long as he can.”

“Daddy needs to come back home soon.” Mayblossom gave a huge sigh. “I know he doesn’t like to be around me ‘cause I remind him of Momma, but with Grandpa so sick...”

“Your daddy loves you plenty well!” Elinrose countered, tapping Mayblossom’s nose. “He’s just silly and likes to adventure instead of staying here with us. Now, sweet dreams, and don’t worry yourself about it. I’ve already made up my mind that I will be going to find him myself this time and let him know that it’s more than time for him to move on and come home.”

Mayblossom wrinkled her nose but nodded as she tucked herself under the covers. “Good. I just wish...” Here she gave a colossal sigh. “I hope I don’t scare him away once he’s the king. It won’t be any good if he runs away then.”

“I think you eavesdrop more than any little girl ought.” Elinrose pulled the blankets up to the girl’s chin, pressed a kiss to her niece’s forehead, and then stood, shaking her head. “As I said, there’s no reason for you to worry.”

She nodded to Snowmari, who launched into a quiet lullaby. Mayblossom gave a slow sigh, closing her eyes.

Elinrose pinched her lips together as she listened. Mayblossom’s fears weren’t unfounded. Perhaps if Raine, her mother, had survived her birth, then things would have been different, but she hadn’t.

James loved his daughter, Elinrose had no doubt about that, but the truth was, he was sentimental, and Mayblossom was the image of her mother. James had adored Raine, and while that affection did extend to their daughter and he doted on her when he did return home, the pain of loss would still drive him away after only a few weeks spent with the child.

Indeed, the problem only worsened with each passing year. Mayblossom was the image of her mother and grew moreso with each passing year. No, the girl had a right to worry. James wouldn’t have the liberty to wander away for adventures once he was king. If he returned home at all in order to become king...

Elinrose balled her hands into fists. Her brother was sentimental *and* an idiot, and tomorrow she was going to risk her own life and freedom to get him out of the trouble he’d found himself in *this* time.

But that sentimental idiot *was* her older brother, and even though it was only by half-blood, she loved him as much as though it were full-blood. She would save his sorry backside, and she would see him on the throne. And then she would face the issue of how to keep him on that throne, rather than gallivanting across the countryside as was his princely wont.

Snowmari’s song ended, and with a few whispered words of comfort, she stood and retreated to Elinrose’s side.

“Good night May-dearest,” she said, twisting into a smile, and Elinrose pried herself out of her thoughts to repeat the words, and the two sisters left the bedroom together.

“Do you have to go find James yourself?” Snowmari protested, hooking an arm through Elinrose’s, as though she could physically anchor her sister to the castle. “Surely some messenger could do just as well. Or ... maybe I could go in your place! You know that I can’t do half the things that you do for the kingdom. Let me go! Let me be useful!”

Elinrose bit back a sigh and shook her head. “I wish, but I’ve already

considered all of our options. Alas, Mari, but you and James are too much alike, and the trouble he's in is ... tricky. Mayblossom might be able to free him, were she older, but she's not, and as his only heir, we can't risk her. No, it has to be me. I leave in the morning, and there will be no further argument."

Snowmari released a long sigh, tightening her hold of her sister's arm. "Fine. I ... I guess I'll just stay here. And worry. Do what you can."

Elinrose forced a smile. "Austere willing, I'll be back before you even realize I'm gone."



Of course, Elinrose knew even then that her words were but a cheerful exaggeration. Though she left at the first light of dawn the next morning, she had a journey of two days on horseback before she arrived at the mysterious Forest that formed their country's border. Rarely had anyone ever stepped into that wood and returned afterward. She couldn't imagine what had possessed her brother to take the risk, but here she was now.

"None of you are to follow me," she instructed the soldiers that had accompanied her this far. "You can wait for me a week, but then return to the castle if I haven't emerged again."

"Of course, your highness," said the captain. "Are you sure you want to go in there yourself?"

Elinrose shook her head. "I have to, but thank you for your concern." With that, she spurred her horse forward into the ominous wood.

Despite the temperature rising as she threaded through the trees, a chill settled over Elinrose. This forest was oddly lit. No sunbeam seemed to penetrate the foliage above, yet a green glow was everywhere, casting shadows at odd angles.

The plant life was odd here as well – though, having grown up in an ice-locked kingdom, Elinrose supposed that the large, leafy trees, vines, and bushes could be perfectly normal in a warmer clime. Still, it set her nerves on end, especially as she stared at the jagged leaves and thorny stems. The very air hung with a sense of foreboding, and the constant rustling in the undergrowth didn't help.

She tightened her grip on her horse's reigns. If she could just see what were making the noises...

No, she had to focus. She had to find James, do what she had to do to get

him out of here, and then see him back to the castle. If she didn't escape herself, if she had to remain behind to buy his freedom, then so be it.

But she really hoped that it wouldn't come to that.

And, first, she had to find him. The Forest was huge. How was she to even know *where* to begin.

Well, there was nothing to do but to press forward and pray to Austere that she was going in the right direction. People lived here – or so the legends said. She didn't know how much faith to put into those legends, but what else did she have?

And then it started raining.

It didn't rain in the North Country; it snowed. And while the canopy of leaves over her helped, it also made for solid streams of water that dumped on her head at the most inopportune moments.

Still, Elinrose pressed forward. She had to find James. She was in the Forest. She'd made her decision. There was no turning back now.

The rain subsided, and a thick mist took its place. The light was fading, so Elinrose decided that it wasn't worth it to press any further that day. She dismounted, and, not knowing where better to set up camp, she opened her saddlebags to retrieve some jerky and sat down dejectedly on a rock.

What was she doing? Her country was in a critical state, she was the best to lead it, and here she was, chasing after her idiot of a brother who clearly had no respect for the power that was due him. And she was pretty sure that it was too late for her to turn back.

An unexpected crack of thunder tore the air, and her unsecured horse bolted. Elinrose hadn't even time to leap up and grab the reins. The mare was gone.

The day was getting worse by the minute. Now she was alone in this Forest without her supplies, and she had little practical knowledge for survival. She wanted to curl up under a rock and cry ... but there were no rocks at hand to serve such a purpose. No, she had to press forward and ... well, she honestly didn't know what she was going to do. She didn't do things on whim and without a plan ... but this Forest defied plans.

It was growing dark, so she knew that she needed to find somewhere to sleep for the night. But the ground was wet, a chill had settled into the air, and her horse had taken her blanket and tarp. What was she to do now?

The trees shifted, and another chill shuddered down her spine as they formed into an arching path ahead of her. She dared not take this path, and

yet, as she glanced about herself, she found that the Forest had closed on her every other side.

“Foul magic,” she swore under her breath, and then she stood. She had no recourse but forward.

Was this why no one returned from the Forest? She hadn’t even found James yet!

Hiking up her riding skirts, she took one step forward, then another. Then she broke into a run.

She was already lost. Why not follow the path before her?

Then, just as suddenly, she was at a dead end. The trees closed into a curtain before her, and she drew up short.

“What now?” she breathed, gaze darting about, and she drew back in muffled surprise as she saw a pair of eyes glowing from the darkness before her.

“Are you lost, princess?”

Elinrose swallowed down fear at the rough, growling voice.

“Who’s there?” The question came out at a higher pitch than she liked. “How do you know that I’m a princess?”

The answer was a low chuckle that sounded even more like a growl. “I smell the nobility in your blood, and you reek of purpose and quest besides. Are you related to one of the princes we have wandering about? Perhaps you chase your wayward lover?”

Princes? The thought lodged in her throat.

“I’m looking for my brother,” she confessed. “Our father is dying. Do you know where I might find him ... sir?”

There was a sound of crunching and crackling as the mysterious figure drew near. The shadow ... did not seem human.

“I may be able to take you to the foolhardy fellow who shares your scent,” the man answered.

But then, he burst out from the tree line, and Elinrose saw that it was, indeed, no man at all, but a great, shaggy bear.

She took another step back, but held her composure in an iron fist.

“You’re a talking bear.”

“And you’re an observant princess.”

Elinrose nodded sharply. “Will you help me find my brother?”

If legend and lore were to be believed, then this bear was as likely to be friend as foe.

“I might,” he answered, with another growling chuckle. “How desperately do you wish to find him?”

He was bargaining. Elinrose knew better than to give in to such a scheme – yet what else could she do? Her brother had to be found, and she was without a horse now.

“I’m afraid that my horse ran off with everything I had of value,” she answered noncommittally.

“Did he, now?” asked the bear, tilting his head to the side. “How unfortunate.”

Elinrose lifted her chin. “Are you patronizing me?”

The bear took a step towards her, giving a growl that sounded strangely – and terrifyingly – like a chuckle. “You have courage, princess. Perhaps I shall take pity on you.”

“I don’t need your pity.”

“Ah, but you do – and your brother as well,” the bear answered. “So does every mortal soul that steps foot inside this Forest. Pity, for they are fools. Come, mount upon my back, and I will take you to your brother, though what good it shall do, I don’t know. Every soul who steps foot in this Forest entangles themselves in a web that is not easily undone.”

He took another step towards her, and every muscle in her body screamed to run, but she held her ground.

“How can I trust you?” she asked.

He gave another growling chuckle. “You already trusted yourself to this forest, and it is a thousand times more dangerous than I could ever be,” he answered. “You will trust me because you must. Without my help, you have no hope of finding your brother – no hope of finding your way out of this Forest.”

“And you’re doing this out of pity?” she asked.

“Does it surprise you that a bear can possess a heart?” he asked. “Did you not know that our hearts are the largest in the Forest? Come now, let us find your brother. If I have heard correctly, your father’s life drains away as we speak. There is no time to waste.”

He was upon her now. Even on his all-fours, he stared her in the eye. And yet, that seemed to reassure her, for though his mouth was filled with teeth sharp indeed, those eyes were strangely gentle. Human, even.

“You’re a trifle large for me to mount,” she pointed out.

“True enough, but we must manage,” he answered. He turned from her

and crouched down so his belly was against the forest floor.

She grimaced as she took hold of a large clump of his fur, hoping that she wasn't hurting him, and climbed onto the beast's back in a heartbeat. In the rain, the bear smelled strongly of wet dog, and Elinrose knew that her dress was ruined for good. Well, that was why she wore an old dress.

"Hold tight," the bear instructed, and then he took off at a bounding run.

The Forest blurred into a streak of gray-green, and she held tightly to two fistfuls of his fur, not knowing what else to cling to. He didn't protest, so she supposed it must be all right. At length, the bear slowed to a walk, pausing every few moments to sniff the air.

"So, what is your name?" she asked after a moment. When he didn't answer, she continued. "Come now, I can't just call you 'bear,' now can I?"

"Bear will do," he answered. "Now, quiet, princess. We're near your brother."

Elinrose clamped her mouth closed in a frown.

They entered a clearing that contained a tent and an extinguished campfire. An unfamiliar young man knelt before that campfire, trying desperately to coax life into the wet embers.

“Earnest, I have found the Princess Elinrose,” said Bear. “Where’s North’s prince?”

“Hunting,” said the young man, quickly mounting to his feet, his eyes fixed on Elinrose. “His sister, truly?”

“I need you to see them out of the forest,” Bear continued. “Their father may not have long left. Leaving this Forest is your privilege. If anyone can smuggle them out, it’s you.”

Earnest frowned as he walked to the bear’s side and held out a hand to Elinrose. “I will try, but you know that the Forest is subject to her whim. I shall ... petition. Even she has to respect the ascendancy laws of other countries.”

Elinrose accepted the offered hand and slid down from Bear’s back. The forest floor seemed to sway uncomfortably under her feet as she stared up at the man, though she attributed that to exhaustion. It’d been a long day, after all. Earnest wasn’t distinctly handsome – he was of a scholarly build, with brown hair that hung into his eyes, almost hiding their too-green vibrancy. Almost, but not quite. It was hard to hide eyes that green.

She felt a shift behind her, and she tore her eyes from his to see that Bear had disappeared.

“He doesn’t like to linger in this part of the forest,” Earnest explained. “Come now, princess, you look tired. Sit down by the fire. Or, rather, what remains of it.”

She nodded dumbly and allowed him to guide her to a log beside the fire. He put a pewter mug into her hand. The water it contained was stale, but was still good on her sore throat.

“So your father is truly dying,” he asked after a moment. “We’d heard the rumors but had hoped that they were only that.”

“My mother and sister are still desperately wishing that he’ll recover, but...” Elinrose trailed off with a shake of her head. “Who are you? Are you one of the wood spirits?” That would explain the greenness of his eyes.

He just shook his head. “Prince Earnest of the neighboring kingdom of

Ferra,” he answered. “We suspect some wood spirit in our ancestry, but as far as I know for sure, I’m completely human.”

And the smile he gave was disarming enough that she couldn’t help but smile back.

“Sorry,” she admitted. “We’re very cut-off in the North Country and don’t get to hear much of our neighbors.”

“Your brother said as much,” said Earnest, shaking his head. “It apparently puts quite a leash on his wandering nature.”

“A fence, at least,” said Elinrose dryly. “And now, even that…” She shook her head.

“So, tell me, did you willingly brave this Forest, or were you forced?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have done it if my brother wasn’t here, but it was my own choice to follow him.” Elinrose frowned at the way Earnest’s eyes darkened. “Indeed, my mother and sister don’t even know exactly where I am. They only know that I have gone to retrieve James.”

“And they don’t know that he’s in the Forest?” asked Earnest.

She shook her head. “They’re worried enough about Father. I didn’t want to add to their concerns.”

He nodded. “Well, that complicates things. If you were here against your will ... but you came willingly. That gives her claim to you, and she doesn’t easily relinquish her claims.”

Elinrose narrowed her eyes, tightening her grip on her mug. *Her*. “I know,” she said. “That’s why I came. James is already trapped here, but it’s said that family can bargain to take their loved one’s place. I know it’s a long shot, and I know that I’ve taken a huge risk, but it was a risk that I had to take.”

Earnest released a long breath and nodded. “That’s why I’m here, too,” he admitted. “I wish I could say that I saved my brother, but I came too late, and he had other offenses besides. I think you might have a chance. And you have my promise that I will see to it that your chance is as great as possible.”

“Thank you,” Elinrose said earnestly. “That is kind of you, and kindness is more than I’d hoped to find when I came here.”

But he just nodded and stood, pacing to the edge of the clearing and staring at the trees, not saying anything more. She stared after him for a moment before she remembered that staring was rude, and so she focused her attention on the water in her mug – it was half rainwater now.

“James, we’ve had an interesting visitor while you were gone,” Earnest

suddenly announced, jarring her out of her thoughts.

She twisted around to see her brother emerge from the woods, carrying a couple of dead rabbits. James' eyes widened as he saw her. "Elin?"

Elinrose hastily gained her feet, setting the mug to the side. "James." She wasn't sure what else to say. It'd been a long day, and she was exhausted. Furthermore, she was about to give up her freedom for his stupidity.

James handed the rabbits to Earnest and stepped towards Elinrose, shaking his head. "What are you doing here, Elin? This Forest isn't safe."

"And yet you're here," she returned, folding her arms over her chest and arching an eyebrow. He might have been nearly twelve years her elder, but she'd always felt like the oldest among her siblings. She was the most sensible, at any rate. She took a deep breath and turned her expression serious. "James, Father is dying. You're needed back home."

James opened his mouth, glancing towards Earnest, as though in desperation, and then back to Elinrose, pain streaking through his eyes. "Father's dying? Truly? He can't ... can he?"

"Mother still has hope, but everyone else has accepted the truth," Elinrose answered, lowering her voice and her arms. She shook her head. "You're needed at home. You can't gallivant across the land anymore. You have a country to rule."

James cast Earnest another pleading look, not answering Elinrose.

Earnest, for his part, heaved a heavy sigh. "I told you, friend, that you made a mistake when you entered these woods, but it was already too late. Now your sister will pay the price. She's come to bargain herself for your freedom, and I pray that the Mistress finds the exchange acceptable, for otherwise, well, you'll both be trapped here, same as *my* brother and myself."

Elinrose steeled her spine, though she dropped her gaze from her brother's face. "I knew the risk," she said quietly. "And I make it willingly. You're needed at home, James."

"But how am I to rule without my best advisor at my side?" asked James, shaking his head.

"I made a promise that I would do everything in my power to make sure the Mistress honors her agreement," said Earnest. "Your father's imminent death and your position as his heir changes things. Perhaps ... perhaps I can persuade her to show you both mercy."

~

Earnest woke James and Elinrose early the following day. Elinrose had not slept well, unused as she was to the hard ground, and unable to relax as she pondered what they could do if they could not leave this Forest. What if the “Mistress” wouldn’t accept the trade they offered? What if she demanded an unacceptable deal?

But James had to get home.

Or did he? Perhaps she should have just left him where he was, to this Forest’s mercy, and taken the reins of government herself as Mayblossom’s regent. How good of a king would James be, anyway? He had no focus, and he had never before found reason to stay safely at home. Did the North Country need a king that would gallivant across the countryside with nary a care for his duties?

“Does your sister normally wear a storm cloud, or is it just the amount of water she absorbed last night?”

She jolted to attention at Earnest’s question, glancing up at the man as he led them through the Forest.

James laughed before she could answer. “Elin has it in her head that worrying about everything and everyone is her sacred duty. Yes, that’s perfectly natural for her.”

“Well, you won’t do the worrying,” she retorted.

“Why should I when I know that you’ll do it for me?” asked James, with a shrug.

“Someone has to do it.”

“Are you sure she’s your younger sister?” asked Earnest. “She sounds like my older brother.”

“I was twelve at her birth,” James answered. “I remember the day quite well, so I’m quite certain that I’m her elder. The confusion is easy, though, as she quickly became the leader of all the games. It helped that she was absolutely adorable. And, honestly, she would have made our country a wonderful leader had she not insisted on coming in here after me.”

Elinrose gave him a frown, even as Earnest laughed again.

“Well, I still think that she would get along famously with my brother,” he declared. “He’ll be in need of a good queen, but we can’t seem to get him to think that far ahead.”

James laughed. “Are you proposing a treaty of marriage? Alas, but I think Elin might have something to say about that, and I’d be loath to lose my chief advisor, even if we didn’t have this Forest’s entrapment hanging over us. If

we can both be free, I don't think I could give her up. Mother and Snowmari are dear to me, but neither has Elin's sense. And, since my own dear Raine is no longer with us, I require a good queen myself. No, I cannot afford to barter with Elin's hand. Mari's perhaps, but not Elin's."

Earnest gave an unconvinced hum, and the conversation lagged as they continued their journey.

It was disturbing, the way the Forest opened before them, as though it were a sentient curtain or a row of soldiers that leaped to salute them. Who was this Mistress to control a whole forest like this?

Magic was little trusted in their land, and on this scale, well! It was simply unnatural.

"The Mistress seems to be in a good mood this morning," James observed, as though he heard Elinrose's thoughts.

"Oh?" she prompted.

"The Forest reflects her mood," he explained. "Today, it is bright, and the trees themselves are guiding our path, rather than hindering us, as is their wont. The Mistress prefers her tenants hopelessly lost." Earnest shook his head. "You quickly learn to distrust the trees when they seem to be on your side, for her good moods are always a trap. Yet, you can never snub your nose at it, either, for her cruelty drives her captives to desperation."

"Might her good mood possibly be a sign that she will be favorable to our request?" asked James.

Earnest glanced at him with an expression of pure exhaustion. "Or she may just be thrilled to have yet another person in her web. She'll listen to our plea, of course, and then laugh as she denies it. It will take a miracle from Austere for her to actually let even one of you go, so I can only recommend that you pray for one. And pray quickly, for we are here."

Elinrose fell back to clutch her brother's hand as they broke out of the trees into a large, perfectly circular clearing that sloped upward to a throne in the very center. In it sat a woman with an otherworldly, ancient beauty, clutching a scepter made of a tree branch. She faced them, glowering. She didn't *look* happy.

She was also green.

"Mistress," Earnest addressed her. "I have brought Prince James and Princess Elinrose from the North Country..."

"I see that," said the Mistress, in a high-pitched voice that somehow managed to be neither high-pitched nor immature.

The world suddenly shifted, and the Mistress stood directly before Elinrose. Up close, Elinrose could see that she wasn't so much green as she was entirely covered in plant matter. Her dress was made of woven leaves and grass, her skin was encrusted with moss and algae, and vines snaked through her yellow-green hair.

"You little weed!" she hissed. "You think that you can waltz right into my domain and steal what's rightfully mine?"

Elinrose took a step back as she summoned her resolve and then folded her arms over her chest. "I'm here to bargain for my brother. He was a fool to enter your Forest, I fully agree, but he's sadly prone to foolishness, especially since his wife's death nine years ago."

"Elin!" cried James, throwing up his hands as though innocent.

Elinrose just rolled her eyes, for he was anything *but*.

The Mistress narrowed her gaze. "I want you out of my forest, weed."

"I'm not leaving without my brother," Elinrose stated, firmly.

The Mistress's gaze flickered to him, and the very trees shifted uneasily.

"Our father is dying," Elinrose pressed, somehow emboldened by the Mistress's ire. "James is his heir, so he's needed at home."

"And yet he's a fool. Why couldn't you have just let him stay where he is and taken it for yourself?"

"He's my brother, and it's his duty. I won't let him run from it his whole life." Elinrose lifted her chin. "I'm not leaving him."

The Mistress twisted away, tossing a hand over her shoulder. "Take him, then, if you can't live without him. Just see to it that neither he nor yourself ever set foot in my Forest again."

"We would be more than happy to comply with *that* request," said Elinrose, truthfully.

"And yet your brother's a fool," said the Mistress, spinning back around. "How can I trust him to stay away after being shown such leniency? How can I expect you to not follow him back should he find himself here again?" She examined James closely and then glanced at Elinrose again. "You said that this idiocy was brought on by the loss of his wife?"

Elinrose gave a nodding shrug.

"Then perhaps a new wife to keep him tied to home is what he needs. And, ah! I have just the woman. Not the most romantic creature, she's already been cured of that, but she's sensible and intelligent, and she will stand by him faithfully. Treat her gently, but she oh-so deserves a second

chance after the way she was so cruelly used, before.”

“And you think that by just giving my brother a random woman, he’ll just magically decide to no longer roam the known world?” It wasn’t that Elinrose thought it a *bad* idea – theoretically, it was perfect – but if she’d thought it even possibly effective, then *she* would have found him another wife *years* ago.

“Not a random woman – the *perfect* woman,” the Mistress countered. “A perfect beauty in need of a dashing hero to ‘rescue’ her from my Forest – would you really deny her freedom?”

Maybe because marriage between strangers *wasn’t* freedom, but James was speaking before Elinrose could make that comment.

“I would be honored to, well, at least meet this lady. As Elinrose warns – and I highly value her opinions and advice – it would be foolish for me to commit to a marriage without having even met her.”

“We are more than happy to extend our freedom to her regardless, if you wish to be so generous,” said Elinrose, satisfied by her brother’s statement. “And we *won’t* return to this Forest ever, either way. I will see to it.”

The Mistress stared at her narrowly, then swung her attention to Earnest. “I want you to personally escort these interlopers out of my domain, Earnest, my pet. Faia will be waiting for you at the border, and *do* see them all the way home and settled – take all the time you want, in fact! Or can spare, for I’m sure you know your own looming deadline.”

Earnest swallowed and gave a shallow bow. “How could I possibly forget. To hear is to obey, Mistress.”

The Mistress nodded again and was suddenly in her throne once more, without seeming to move a muscle. She surveyed them imperiously and waved them away with a careless hand.

“Away with you all. Don’t waste time.”

Earnest tugged James and Elinrose back into the treeline, his face grim, and the Forest closed behind them.

“So ... that was her good mood, eh?” said James, glancing between his friend and sister with a grin that neither companion shared.

“No,” said Earnest, and he stared at Elinrose pensively. “That was ... if I thought her capable of it, I would have called that fear.” He gave a wry laugh as the corner of his mouth tugged in a humorless smile. “Makes me wonder what manner of woman *you* are, Princess Elinrose, to inspire such a reaction.”

Elinrose straightened, folding her hands together. “She’s given us our freedom, regardless,” she stated. She didn’t want to think through the implications of Earnest’s speculation.

She just wanted herself and James home, at their father’s side before he died, never to see this horrid wood or its Mistress again.

“Let’s go,” she said, turning and marching away, the trees unfolding before her.

Snowmari stared hopelessly out the window. Now, not only was James missing, but Elinrose was, too. Father wasn't going to last much longer, and she knew that both of her siblings would never forgive themselves if they returned too late to say their final good-byes, James especially.

And she *really* didn't want to be the one left to stand in as regent for Mayblossom. Elinrose might have arranged things, but it would still mean being the center of attention, people looking to her for answers and solutions – and that was not what she was good at.

Still, Austere would take care of them. He would see them both safely back home, and He might even still show mercy and heal Father by some miracle or another.

Snowmari wouldn't give up hope; she had faith in Austere. She just didn't want to be stuck with the kingdom on her shoulders – and even *she* would do a better job of ruling than their mother would.

She pressed herself closer to the glass, praying, praying. It'd be simply dreadful for her whole family to fall apart now. It was bad enough when they lost Raine.

“Worrying won't bring them back faster, Princess.”

She turned to see Chancellor Markim.

“I know,” she admitted, drawing away from the glass as she realized that it had frosted over. “And I'm not worrying. Well, except over what I'm going to do if they *don't* come back. I've found reports that James went to the Forest, and we all know that no one returns from there – and if they do, they never return the same. What was Elinrose thinking?”

“Well, we just have to pray that Austere will watch over them,” said Chancellor Markim. “For now, come along. It's dinnertime, I believe.”

Snowmari gave a heavy sigh, reluctantly backing away from the window, but just as she was about to turn away, she spied figures on the road below.

Could it be? Could it really be?

She tore away and rushed past Chancellor Markim, throwing dignity to the wind. So, yes, *maybe* she could wait until the guards made sure that the figures were friends, not foes ... but she was tired of sitting around in the castle, waiting for others to move things forward.

Servants scattered out of her way as she raced through the halls. She

reached the gates just as the figures arrived.

And, just as she'd hoped and prayed, she found *both* Elinrose and James. Also two other people, but they were hardly significant.

"You found him!" she cried, throwing her arms around her sister's neck as Elinrose dismounted her horse. "Oh, you found him. I *knew* you could do it."

"Yes, I did," Elinrose breathlessly answered, returning the hug with unexpected fervor. "I found him, and I have brought him home." She pulled back. "How ... how is Father?"

"He hasn't left us yet, but we don't expect him to last much longer," Snowmari answered. "You and James came back just in time."

Elinrose gave a tight nod. "Good." And then she glanced over her shoulder at the others, prompting Snowmari to finally notice them.

The first stranger was a man several years younger than James. He was handsome, but not in any remarkable way, and so Snowmari's attention rested on him only a moment before she focused on the young woman.

She was tall, a bit older than Elinrose, with nearly colorless blonde hair and ice-blue eyes. Her face was expressionless as she stared at James – though his was anything but. There was something off about her. Something that rubbed Snowmari the wrong way and settled coldly in the pit of her stomach.

"So who are our new friends," she prompted, elbowing Elinrose. "Did you find them in the Forest? I didn't realize that people lived there – just the boogies and tricksters."

"There's actually a fair number of us who live there," the young man spoke up. "Some are even human. But most of us are there against our will and thus would much prefer to be anywhere else. And Faia and I are both very grateful to your brother and sister for providing us with the means to escape that terrible prison."

"Prison indeed," said Elinrose nodding – and did Snowmari detect the slightest blush? "Mari, I would like to present Prince Earnest of our neighbor, Farra, and Lady Faia, who ... will be our new sister-in-law." She did not sound happy with the prospect. "Faia, Earnest, this is my sister, Snowmari."

Snowmari frowned as she spared Faia another glance. "Well, that's a development. And one that I very much look forward to hearing all about – but it's supertime now, and I'm sure you and James will be a lovely surprise for Mother and Mayblossom. Who knows, having James with us again might even be the miracle that brings Father back to us – you never know."

Faia seemed to draw back, glancing up at James with a frown. “Who is Mayblossom? I haven’t heard you mention her.”

James stiffened, leaning over to whisper in her ear, which made Snowmari frown harder. Twisting away, she took Elinrose by the arm and tugged her sister away.

“How did you not tell her about Mayblossom? If she’s marrying James, that’s going to make her Mayblossom’s *mother*.”

Elinrose’s lips pinched, and she refused to look Snowmari in the eye. “I do not know what she and James have discussed. She and I have barely exchanged three words, ourselves.”

Snowmari pinched her own lips. “I don’t trust her.”

“I don’t trust anything about our situation,” Elinrose answered. “In truth, I pity Faia more than anything else, for I suspect her to be as much a pawn in the Mistress’s schemes as much as I suspect she might be compliant. I wish James had never stepped foot in the Forest.”



That was the last that Snowmari was able to get out of her sister about the Forest. Over supper, Elinrose was only willing to discuss their father’s health and practical matters of state that Snowmari personally found distressing and boring, especially given what they *could* be talking about.

Something had happened in the Forest.

James wouldn’t say anything, either. His focus was wholly consumed by his new bride, and as for Faia ... well, she was a regular ice princess. Earnest was the only one willing to divulge anything about the Forest, but even that wasn’t much – nothing more than how he and his brother had been living in there for the last five *years*.

Supper was thus a necessarily stiff affair, and Snowmari was further dismayed by how James scarcely gave Mayblossom a second glance all through it. Sure, he’d never been the most attentive father – what with him always being gone – but, when he *was* home, she was his world. Or, at least, she was until her resemblance to Raine stabbed the thorn of loss too deep into his heart.

There was no doubt about it. Faia had cast some cruel curse upon him. There was no other way that James could have forgotten Raine. He’d loved Raine. He *loved* her.

People didn’t just fall out of love like this.

She wasn't sure how they made it through supper, but, finally, it was over, and she and Elinrose took Mayblossom to bed. They asked James to accompany them, but he was so absorbed in Faia that he didn't seem to notice their question.

"Faia's gonna be my new momma, isn't she?" Mayblossom asked as Snowmari brushed her hair.

"That's how it appears," Snowmari answered, glancing over at Elinrose, who was arranging the toys that Mayblossom had left out. Work that she usually left for the servants or made Mayblossom do for herself.

"What do you think of her?" Elinrose asked, straightening with a frown.

"I don't know," Mayblossom answered. "She's really pretty, and Papa seems to like her a lot, but she didn't say much. She said hello to me, but you really can't know very much about a person from just a hello."

"No, you cannot," Elinrose agreed. "Never judge on first impressions. Yes, Faia is going to be your new mother, and you will give her every benefit of the doubt. You owe your papa that much, you know."

"You don't like her much, do you, Elin?" Mayblossom squinted up at her.

Elinrose gave a reprimanding shake of her head. "Perhaps not, but that is my right as your papa's sister – to question his decisions. You don't need to worry yourself about the situation. If she is to be your new mother, then you will give her the respect she deserves due to that position. But, remember, you still have Aunt Mari, your Grandma, and myself, so don't hesitate for a moment to come to us if you have any complaints or suspicions. Just ... don't go looking for them. Try to stay positive and hope for the best. Now, go to sleep." She bent over, kissed Mayblossom's forehead, and then swept out of the room.

Snowmari frowned after her.

"I do like Earnest, though," Mayblossom added, drawing Snowmari's attention back to her. "If only he was marrying Aunt Elin instead of Papa marrying this Faia."

Snowmari drew back, tilting her head to the side as she considered. "That would have been far more ideal," she agreed. If anyone deserved love and happiness, it was Elinrose, what with the way she carried everyone else on her shoulders. "And I don't know if it's out of the question. He seems like a decent fellow, and I think she likes him. Of course, we both know she won't make any sort of decision quickly, and she's clearly only just met him. But I'm sure it's only a matter of time, and if she just gets a bit of help ... well,

it'll be inevitable.”

“What kind of help?” asked Mayblossom. “Can we help?”

“In the morning, perhaps, but let's not worry about it tonight,” said Snowmari, smiling. “Let's say your prayers, and then it's time for you to sleep, as Aunt Elin said.”

Once the prayers were said and Mayblossom had been given a final instruction of sleep, Snowmari slipped out of the room, hoping to catch up with her sister. Elinrose had been far too quiet during supper. Snowmari hoped that if she isolated her sister, then she might be more willing to open up and confess.

It wasn't a high hope, admittedly. Elinrose was stubbornly tight-lipped when she thought she was protecting those she loved. If only Snowmari could convince her that it just made her worry more!

Elinrose was in their bedroom, brushing her hair, when Snowmari found her. Snowmari opened her mouth to ask the burning questions plaguing her, but Elinrose spoke first.

“We must do everything in our power to make Faia feel welcome, for I don't believe her to be our enemy.” Elinrose sought Snowmari's gaze in the mirror. “She's scared, as much a victim of the situation as any of us, and I understand that her past ... has been less than ideal. I don't know details, and I don't know if James knows them either, but I hope she will trust us in time.” She gave a long, low sigh. “I know it's not an ideal situation, and it doesn't seem natural, but he fell fast for Raine, too. I'm glad he's accepted her. He did need a good queen at his side to anchor him.”

“And you're sure she'll make a good queen?”

“She's shy but sensible. James could have done much worse,” Elinrose answered. “Yes, we need to be wise for him, but I gave them my approval.”

“How well does he know her?” Snowmari demanded. “Just look at him! It's like he's completely forgotten Raine!”

“Finally! He loved her, yes, but it's been nine whole years,” Elinrose shook her head. “Mari, he can't keep living in the past. It's not healthy. Faia will give him a reason to stay here and be the king he needs to be. He won't have the freedom anymore to go running about every corner of the land when grief overwhelms him.”

Snowmari didn't have an answer for that, so she just gave a heavy sigh instead.

“Promise me that you'll give them both your support,” Elinrose

concluded.

Snowmari sighed again. “Fine. But I’d be happier about it if I just understood. What happened in the Forest? Who is *she*?”

But Elinrose just shook her head. “I would prefer to not talk about it. I’m still sorting it out myself – just how did we get free so easily?”

“Oh, come now!” Snowmari protested, throwing herself onto the bed. “At least tell me about Earnest. You like him. *That* much is obvious.”

A blush tinged Elinrose’s cheeks, and she nearly dropped her brush. “I don’t know him well enough for that,” she insisted. “I respect him. I appreciate what he did for James and myself, but *like*...”

“Oh, just listen to yourself!” Snowmari shook her head with a giggle. “Respect! Appreciation! Elin, Elin, Elin. It isn’t a crime to feel, you know. Besides, I’m almost certain he likes you back.”

“We’ve barely known each other three days,” Elinrose protested.

“And what about James and Faia? How long have *they* known each other?”

Elinrose’s lack of answer on that account was answer enough.

Snowmari paced outside their father's bedroom. James had been in there since supper the night before. He'd brought Faia in for a few minutes, but had otherwise asked to be alone. And Snowmari hated to be parted from Father by force. Sure, she'd been spending less and less time in the room these last three days, but to be told that she couldn't be there at all was pure torture!

He could die at any moment, and she would be left half an orphan, destitute upon the world's pity! To be barred from the right to know? It was absurd.

"Mari, you're going to wear a track into the floors at this rate. Does Father's illness have you this frantic? You know there's nothing we can do anymore. The physicians have done all they can."

Snowmari spun around to face Elinrose, who stood at the end of the hall, arms folded over her chest.

"I ought to be in there, at his side," she protested.

Elinrose shook her head. "No, that's where James needs to be. He's going to be king after Father passes into the Ever After. He feels unprepared. And we might argue that it's his own fault, but arguing won't help him to step up and take responsibility."

"Maybe I feel unprepared to become half an orphan," Snowmari argued.

"And James is about to become a full orphan," said Elinrose. "Mother might love him as her own son, but she is only his stepmother." She sighed. "Come now, let's not hang about like lovelorn waifs. Surely we can both find something useful to do."

Snowmari dramatically threw her hands wide. "But I can't concentrate on *anything* with this looming over us. Father could be dying. How can you even *think* of work at a time like this?"

"Because someone has to," Elinrose answered. "Mari, I hate it as much as you do, but we can't put life on pause. We have to keep moving forward, even when it's hard – especially when it's hard."

Snowmari scowled, but before she could answer, the door opened, and James stood in the doorway. His eyes were wide, but the sight of Snowmari and Elinrose seemed to ground him. "Ah, girls. You're here. Good. I..."

"What is it?" asked Elinrose, hastening to his side. "James, what's wrong?"

He didn't answer immediately, just caught her into a hug. "Oh, Elin, Father ... he ... you didn't tell me that things were so bad!"

There were unshed tears in his voice, which caused Snowmari's heart to catch in her throat. She considered running, but it was best to know now. She rushed to her siblings, only to be caught in the hug, too.

"He's gone," James finally said. "He's gone, girls."

~

Black had never been Snowmari's color, but she wore it proudly at her father's funeral. She didn't care that it washed out her color and made her look sallow and thin. It added to her air of mourning, and their father deserved all the mourning they could give him. Her tears could not be loud enough, nor her despondency too violent.

She wondered how Elinrose could be so calm and peaceful, standing on her side of the coffin. She was in black, too, but she stood so straight and stiff, her eyes dry. Apart from how she was even quieter than usual, one couldn't tell that she was in mourning at all.

James took Father's passing hard, and it was horrid that he had to swallow his grief. He had to be the strong and collected king now and prove that he was no longer the foolish young man who had lost his mind after his wife's death. No, *he* would not have the luxury of locking himself in his bedroom and consoling himself with tears. James had to keep himself together and lead his people.

Just that very morning, Snowmari had overheard Mother and Elinrose talking about rushing his marriage to Faia. As though *that* would solve anything.

He needed time to mourn, not to be distracted.

Mother herself indulged in every ounce of grief that was due her as the king's widow, and Mayblossom spent the whole funeral glued to Snowmari's side, bawling into her dress. Even Earnest had the courtesy to display a proper amount of grief, even though he was a stranger and had never even met their father. Faia, on the other hand, stood awkwardly to the side, looking like she'd shown up here by mistake and didn't know if it was polite to leave.

As far as Snowmari was concerned, however, her presence *was* a mistake. She wished Faia *would* decide it was polite to leave. Leave completely and never come back. She was not welcome here.

Somehow, they made it through the funeral, and the crowd slowly

dispersed. Mother left almost immediately to seek the sanctuary of her room, and it took the others varying amounts of time to wander off. Elinrose, perhaps, stayed overlong, just staring at the grave, but then she declared that Mayblossom needed to be taken inside, and so she whisked their niece away. Earnest and James were tucked together, talking in low tones, but they eventually left as well.

And somehow, when everyone else was gone, Faia was still standing there, staring at the grave with that stupid lost expression of hers. Snowmari wanted her to leave. She couldn't grieve properly with that woman standing there.

"I ... don't think we've gotten off to the best start in our relationship," Faia suddenly stated.

Snowmari stiffened, then looked up at the woman with a glare. The audacity!

"I ... suppose this isn't the time for it," Faia continued. "But, honestly, I just want you to know that I'm not here to threaten your brother or his family. I'm beyond grateful that he gave me a way out of the Forest. That place is terrible, and I have no desire to go back."

"So I've heard," Snowmari mustered the energy to say. "Neither my brother, sister, nor even your friend Earnest will talk about it."

"Well, I've been there longer than any of them and tighter within the Mistress's web," Faia continued. "Let me assure you that I wanted nothing more than to get out of it, and I will do nothing to jeopardize my position now that I'm free."

Snowmari's jaw tightened. "You should go inside. It's cold. Most strangers aren't used to the North Country's winter."

"Cold doesn't bother me," Faia answered. "Come now, we are to be sisters – and I don't feel comfortable forcing that relationship upon you when you barely know me."

"You don't seem to have that reservation about my brother."

Faia shook her head and stepped towards her. "I'm doing everything I can about that, but I don't feel comfortable intruding on his grief right now."

"And yet you decide that it's fine to intrude on mine?" Snowmari shrieked. "I just lost my father, just as much as James did!"

"I know," said Faia. Her voice was so devoid of emotion, it was terrifying. "I will be a source of comfort to him, but I'm not ready to distract him from his grief. He needs to feel it. Feeling is good."

“You don’t seem to be someone who does a lot of that,” Snowmari flung back.

Faia flinched – the first sign of emotion that she’d displayed since Snowmari had met her.

“I had to work personally with the Mistress,” she finally stated, shrugging. “She plays with your every weakness. You learn not to feel.”

“And you want me to feel sorry for you?” Snowmari clenched her fists. “Well, right now, I’m not in the mood to feel sorry for anyone!”

“I don’t wish for pity,” said Faia. “I know where I went wrong, and I own it. I ask for understanding. Between both of us.”

“This is not the time for it!”

Faia blinked and then sat down on the ground next to Snowmari. “Your sister is pressuring me to marry your brother as soon as possible. I’m not comfortable with it unless I have your blessing as well, Mari.”

“It’s Princess Snowmari,” Snowmari snapped. She was being rude and inconsiderate, the absolute opposite as Elinrose had asked, but this woman was intruding upon her sacred moment of grief.

Faia just graciously nodded. “Very well, Princess Snowmari. I understand where we stand. Thank you.”

“And what about Mayblossom? You’re going to be her mother. Why don’t I see you reaching out to her?”

“I...” Faia ducked her head. “I’ve not had a lot of experience with children. She seems like a dear thing, but ... I don’t know how to reach out to you. It’s been far too long...”

Snowmari glared. “Mayblossom’s mother died when she was born. I was twelve. Elinrose was fifteen. James ran. So do what we did when she was thrust on us. *Learn.*”

Faia pinched her lips and nodded again. “I understand. I want to learn. I just ... it’s going to take time. I’m sorry that you had to go through that at such a young age...”

“Just go away and leave me to my grief!” Snowmari shouted. She didn’t mean to raise her voice, but this situation called for it. Faia was an intruder in more ways than one. She needed to leave. Now.

Faia’s eyes widened as she stared at Snowmari, and she quickly picked herself off of the ground and took several steps backward. “You ... you’re...”

She was pointing at Snowmari’s hands and gasped as she saw that frost had coated her hands, creeping up her arms to her elbows.

“You’re a Frost,” Faia finally managed.

Snowmari met the woman’s eyes, swallowing hard. There was no use hiding it.

“Yes.”

“Snowmari, of course. Why didn’t I see it sooner?” Faia turned away, pacing a few steps before she spun around to face Snowmari again. “Your family knows, then?”

“No, of course not!” Snowmari sprang to her own feet and rushed forward. “Frosts are feared here in the North Country. I can’t risk anyone finding out. My name is just cruel irony – I was born during the first blizzard of the year, and my mother’s sentimental. Elinrose was so-named because the first – and only – rose of the season bloomed at the very hour of her birth, and she has no plant-related powers. My family has no idea about this, and that’s how it’s going to stay.”

“Frosts are feared?” Faia gasped, taking another step back.

“It’s said that one cursed this land, many years ago, and that’s why we can never entirely escape winter’s grip,” Snowmari explained. “It’s a ludicrous theory – our winters are completely at Austere’s bidding, not anyone’s meddling – but the people are just so caught up in their superstition. They’d quicker kill me than take the time to give me a chance to prove friendly.”

Faia’s eyes widened. “They would kill you? But you’re the princess!”

“Which only makes it all the worse.” Snowmari dropped her voice to a hiss, so thankful that she’d been given privacy, though she wished that Faia had respected it. “Can you think of the blight it would place on our house? The people would never allow it.” She shook her head. “No, they can never know.”

“Then why do you take such risks and allow yourself to feel so freely?” asked Faia. “Your magic responds to your emotion!”

“And invite suspicion upon myself?” Snowmari asked. “Our people fear Frosts, and they watch for them. If I were to void myself of emotion, then they would guess immediately. Yes, it is a risk that I take, but when you’re a Frost in the North Country, your very existence is a risk.”

Faia didn’t answer for a long moment, but her eyes darkened. “Guard your heart, Snowmari. Be careful to never let a man break it. A Frost can only love once, for once their heart is broken, it will heal with ice, and they can never feel again.”

Elinrose knew that her sister had entered their room by the gust of icy wind that entered with her.

“You should not have stayed out so long,” she said quietly, not glancing up from her embroidery. “Curl up by the fire and thaw the winter out of your bones.”

Snowmari snatched a blanket from her bed and tucked it around her shoulders as she plopped down in front of the fire, as Elinrose suggested.

They didn’t talk, but Elinrose worried. It’d been a long time since Snowmari had last lost control of herself. She’d felt it at the burial, which was why Elinrose hadn’t protested Snowmari’s decision to stay out as long as she had. She’d needed time to gain control of herself.

It seemed, long as she was out, it had not been long enough.

“What are you sewing?” Snowmari finally asked, her eyes not straying from the fire.

“Faia’s wedding dress,” Elinrose answered. “There is no reason to delay the wedding, and we cannot ignore tradition.”

Snowmari twisted around to glare at Elinrose. “No reason? Elin, have you no respect for the dead? Father isn’t even cold in his grave!”

Elinrose paused in her stitching to meet her sister’s gaze. “We cannot allow death to put our lives on hold. Should we also postpone the coronation so James can wander across the realms until he finds himself again? No, let him have his comfort now and someone standing at his side as the kingdom falls on his shoulders.”

“But they barely know each other,” Snowmari protested, gaining her feet to rush to Elinrose’s side. “We barely know anything about her! Are you sure that we want to entrust the kingdom to *her*?”

Elinrose put her sewing to the side and took her sister’s hands. They were so cold.

“No, I’m not sure,” she admitted. “But they are to marry, and she has assured me that she will care for him.”

“And you believe her?”

“Mari, I know that there are a lot of things changing right now, but we have to trust Austere. I don’t like our situation now any more than you do, but we have to make the best of it. I have watched Faia closely even from the

first moment we met. She might not have been the woman that *I* would have chosen for our brother, but she's a good woman, and I think she will give him the stability that he's been lacking. And having him stable will do much to give *us* stability after Father's death."

Snowmari glanced down, emotions warring on her face, her fingers growing colder. "I just ... you won't tell me what happened in the Forest – only that it was awful. She came from the Forest, so how can you trust her?"

Elinrose leaned forward and blew against her sisters' hands, knowing that this would often stabilize her. "I trust her because I must."

"But..."

"Your hands are so cold, Mari. Why did you stay outside so long?"

Snowmari just closed her eyes, a few tears leaking out the corners and freezing on her cheeks. Elinrose said not a word about them. It was one thing to understand her sister's gifts, but she could never admit to knowing her curse. Because if she did, then it would be true, and she would have to deal with her as the people demanded all like her be dealt with.

And she could not lose her little sister. Especially not now, so soon after their father.

No, she would shield her sister from the world; temper her where she could. Anything to keep from losing her. If only they didn't have the Forest hanging over them now!

~

They held the wedding just a week later. Elinrose barely finished the wedding dress in time, even once she recruited Snowmari's reluctant help and with servants handling the bulk of the construction. Elinrose hated that she had to force a relationship between her sister and Faia, when she herself was so uncertain about the woman, but she was about to be their sister-in-law, and there was nothing they could do about it. James had made his choice.

They had to do everything they could to make sure that Faia didn't call down the Mistress's fury upon them ... if, indeed, Faia had that power. And, if not, they needed to protect Faia from the Mistress.

She felt sorry for the woman, she really did, even with as little information as they had. It was clear that whatever loyalty she had to the Mistress was forged through desperation. And if they could just shift that loyalty to themselves...

She had to believe that everything would turn out for the best. But she would prepare for otherwise.

Earnest had continued to stay with them, and Elinrose was comforted by his presence. He knew the Mistress; how to deal with her. Even though he claimed it impossible to be wholly free from her control.

The wedding was a quiet affair. Elinrose, Snowmari, and Mayblossom all attended Faia, and Earnest stood by James. It had none of the pomp and festivity of his marriage to Raine, ten years before. But that ceremony hadn't been in the wake of death.

Faia made a beautiful bride, and seeing James light up as he saw her in white almost set Elinrose's heart at ease. There was too much hanging over them for her to be completely comfortable, but at least this was a woman that he could love.

And, yet, when she spoke her vows and said nothing of her own love, Elinrose's heart quailed again. Respect, she promised. Care, honor, support, and companionship – but not a word of love.

Still, she was a reserved woman, and they were still little more than strangers. Perhaps she did not feel confident enough to promise love – Elinrose doubted that she'd be able to do the same were she in the same situation. If James seemed satisfied with the promises given, then it was no business of hers to protest.

When it was over, everyone gathered in the great hall to feast and revel – or, at least, revel as well as they could with the shadow of mourning hanging over them.

“This might be the most solemn wedding that I ever attended,” Earnest remarked to her, since he was somehow seated at her side. “Is this typical here in the North Country?”

She frowned and shook her head. “No, we don't typically hold weddings directly following a funeral. We all loved Father; he was a wonderful king. No one has the heart for festivity with him gone. And we have the whole situation with the Forest, and no one really knows Faia ... I don't even know if we can really trust her.”

“It's not your job to trust her,” Earnest answered, after a long moment, “that's James' place as her husband, but I do hope that you will keep your distrust from undermining their marriage. But given her connection to the Mistress...” He shook his head. “I don't like the way she reacted to you, and I still can't understand why she recoiled the way she did. I just know ... you

need to be on your guard, Elin. Something's afoot, and you need to be prepared." Then he paused, frowning. "I may call you Elin, yes? I don't want to presume if you'd prefer to keep things formal between us."

"I don't mind at all," Elinrose admitted, warmth creeping into her cheeks. "I know my family is honored to call you a friend. You're the one good thing that has come out of this terrible affair with the Forest."

Earnest coughed, clearly embarrassed by her praise. "Well," he said, glancing away. "I ... hope to never give you a reason to change your mind about me. I'm honored to know your family. Your brother is a good friend – the first I made in the Forest. The only thing I don't regret about the Forest. I just ... I just wish that we could have met without the Forest."

"The forest cuts the North Country off from the rest of the kingdoms," Elinrose pointed out. "We've been trapped here for decades. I'm afraid that our meeting would have been impossible if my brother hadn't been fool enough to wander into the Forest."

"Or my own."

Elinrose frowned. "You've mentioned your brother..."

Earnest just shrugged. "I don't know what possessed my brother to run into the Mistress's clutches, but like you, I chased him into the Forest, hoping to save him from himself. And, unlike you, as I said, I failed where you've succeeded."

"I'm sorry." Elinrose reached a hand and laid it on his arm. "But at least you..."

Earnest stared at her hand for a moment and then pulled away, shaking his head. "My freedom was but a respite for your benefit. I'm afraid that I must return tomorrow, and I may well never see you again."

"Austere willing, this won't be the end of our friendship." Elinrose offered him a hopeful smile. "You've ... been a good friend to James."

"Austere willing," Earnest agreed, returning her smile. "I very much want to see you and all of your family again. And, well ... I really hope that you might meet my brother one day. If only..."

"If only."

Elinrose dreamed of the Forest that night. She stood among the broad-leafed trees, the world warping and shifting in the strange light.

She was running again, dodging branches that grabbed at her even as the path before her opened, trees bowing out of her way so she could rush forward.

Where was she going? She didn't know. Was she running from something or toward? It didn't matter.

Suddenly, the clearing opened again, and the Mistress loomed before her, seemingly twice the size she'd been before.

"I told you to be gone!" The Mistress' voice boomed around Elinrose from all directions. "Who are you to come here and try to steal what is mine!"

"I don't want anything to do with your dreadful Forest!" Elinrose shouted. "I just want to be free of it, so let me go!"

"Liar!" The Mistress shrieked. "Thief!"

"Maniac!" Elinrose shouted back. Then she spun around and ran again, hands thrust forward as she shoved the Forest away.

The trees bent back, creaking as though in terror.

Was it terror? Did the trees fear their Mistress as much as Elinrose did?

Or did they cower before Elinrose herself?

Another voice called her, and she found herself staring at a beautiful young woman who stood on the trail before her. A beautiful woman clad in a knee-length dress of dark green leaves, more leaves scattered through her flowing, green-tinted hair.

"Why did you leave us?" the woman asked, reaching towards Elinrose with hungry fingers. "You could have saved us from her, and you just left!"

Elinrose drew short and glared at this being. "I came for my brother, and since I have him back, safe and sound, I'll be quite happy to never see this place again."

"We need you..."

"I'm not your hero. I have my own country to run!"

"But you belong here," the green woman stepped towards Elinrose. "Can't you feel it? The Forest runs through your veins. Can't you hear our call? We've been trapped under *her* rule for decades, and we're tired of it. Come to us, Elinrose."

“I can’t leave my family. My brother has a kingdom to run, and he needs my support. My mother, sister, and niece, all need me to care for them...”

“Your brother has Faia now. She will take care of him.” The woman’s brow knit in thought. “But the others ... the others can be arranged. Come to us. Save us...”

“No!”

“Come to us...”

~

Elinrose jerked awake with a gasp and blinked in further alarm as she realized that she was no longer in her own bed – or even her own room. Snowmari was curled against Elinrose’s back – it was hard to ignore an ice block like her sister – but Elinrose stared out, not at the curtains of their bed, but out into a rustic living space. A wooden cabin.

She sat up immediately, biting back a scream so she wouldn’t wake Snowmari. This wasn’t a dream anymore, she was sure she was awake, but where was she? Was it connected to her nightmare?

Was the Mistress at the bottom of this? Faia?

Slipping out of bed into the room that was warmer than sleeping next to her sister, Elinrose crossed to the window and opened the shutters – to be confronted by broad-leaved trees as far as she could see.

“Oh, oh! She’s awake. Look at it, Sir! She’s awake!”

Elinrose started at the high-pitched voice and spun around, searching for the speaker. Apart from the sleeping lump still in bed, Elinrose was alone in the room.

“Oh, now you’ve frightened her, Jenna,” answered a second voice that wasn’t *quite* as high-pitched. “Come now, child. Chin up! We mean you no harm!”

Her eyes widened as what looked – at first – like a butterfly flew off a chest of drawers towards her. Elinrose gasped as it came close enough for her to see that it was *not* one, for the beautiful wings weren’t attached to an insect’s body, but rather to a tiny, girlish form. A second of these creatures joined the first, this one proving to be male.

“You’re fairies...” Elinrose breathed.

“Of course!” cried the girl. “Who else do you expect to keep house in the middle of the Forest? Been lonely here, too, what with no one to live in it. So glad that you and your sisters chose to move in. Awfully nice of you. I’m

Jenna, by the way, and this is my husband, Sir. His parents were a bit touched in the head; wanted him to be a knight.” She shook her head. “But aren’t we all a bit silly, one way or another?”

“We didn’t choose to come here,” said Elinrose, deciding to leave Jenna’s declaration of silliness alone. Perhaps it *was* true for fairies. “And I only have one sister.”

She nodded back to the bed where Snowmari still slept, and her eyes widened as she realized that their mother and Mayblossom were both in the bed as well.

“Do you? asked Sir, blithely passing over her surprise. “But they all three smell like your sisters. Though, now that you mention it, the old one might be your mother.”

“She is.” Elinrose took a breath. “And Mayblossom, the young one, is our niece. Her father is our elder half-brother.”

“Ah! Ah!” Sir cried, flying in an excited zig-zag. “That makes perfect sense!”

Elinrose was pretty sure that she would very quickly tire of these fairies’ energy.

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad *something* makes sense.”

A shriek rose from the bed, and Elinrose spun around. Snowmari sat bolt upright, eyes darting about the room, mouth open for another scream.

Mother and Mayblossom were awake now, too – there was no sleeping through that display of vocal prowess.

“Great icicles, child!” Mother was saying, and then her own eyes widened. “Where are we?”

“You’re in the most charming cottage in the north part of the forest!” answered Jenna, flying to the bed, her tone just as bright and as cheerful as it had been with Elinrose. The fairy clearly had no concept of the distress that they were in. “Sir and I keep it, but it’s so lonely with no one to live in it. That’s why we were so excited when we flew in this morning and found the four of you tucked together in bed, sleeping just as snug as could be. Oh, but we’re just so glad that someone will be living here again!”

Snowmari screamed again.

Elinrose hastened forward to reassure her sister, then turned to the fairies. “I’m so sorry, but I think there must have been a misunderstanding ... or something. We didn’t *decide* to live here, as I already said. We just ... waking up here was as much a surprise to us as it is to you.”

“Ah,” said Sir, sagely nodding as though he understood – which Elinrose hesitated to believe. “That explains the screaming.”

Jenna, for her part, flew in loop-de-loops. “Oh, and I do so love surprises!”

“This isn’t a very pleasant one for us, I’m afraid,” said Mother, as she glanced between the fairies and comprehended the situation. “We were all expecting to wake in our own beds, same as we do every morning, and now...”

“Where is this cottage, anyway?” Elinrose asked. Jenna had misunderstood Mother’s question earlier, but it was vital that they figure out *what* had happened, and knowing *where* they were was the first step in figuring that out.

“The forest, of course!” cried Jenna, now flying in a zig-zag. “That’s where we live – the forest. And we come here every day to take care of this cottage. It’s been my family’s task for generations.”

Elinrose frowned. That really could mean anything. Yes, this could be *the* Forest, placing them soundly back in the Mistress’s territory, but it could just as possibly be some other forest that encompassed these fairies’ whole world. And generations? Fairies only lived ten years at the most and could go through five generations in that time.

“Who gave you this task?” she further prompted.

Jenna just shook her head. “We always *have*. If anyone ever asked us to do it, they’ve been long forgotten. Does it really matter who it was? I say not. It *is* our sole purpose, and we shall carry it out so long as there are fairies in our trees.”

“Good to know,” said Elinrose, and she let the matter drop. There wasn’t anything more to learn – not from this quarter. But, oh! She hoped that she was as far from the Mistress as possible.

Her nightmare made that hope flimsy.

She stepped away from the bed to peer out of the cabin’s one window. All she could see were trees – but they didn’t *seem* to have the same magical half-light quality as the Forest had...

“Aunt Elin, why are we in a forest and not in the castle?” Mayblossom’s hand slipped into Elinrose’s. “Where’s Papa?”

Elinrose twisted around and put on a brave smile for her niece. “Magic, clearly. Didn’t you notice the fairies? They’re going to take care of us for now.”

“What about Papa?”

“Oh, but you see, this cabin is only for princesses, and he’s a king,” Elinrose explained, knowing full-well that this was unlikely the truth, but Mayblossom needed *some* explanation.

“Grandma isn’t a princess, either. She’s a queen.”

“We needed an escort.” Elinrose hoped that telling this story wouldn’t prove a mistake when they found out the real truth. “Mothers and grandmothers make the best escorts.”

Mayblossom nodded, but her scrunched nose said that she still wasn’t convinced even if she would accept the explanation.

Elinrose twisted back around, surveying her mother and sister, both now standing, and made her smile even broader. “Well, we’ll just have to make the best of the situation, won’t we?”

“But just what *is* the situation, Elin?” Snowmari demanded, jumping up from the bed to take Elinrose’s arm. Snowmari’s fingers were prickly with frost – she was truly upset to have lost control to this degree. Elinrose didn’t blame her.

“We’re in the middle of some woods, in a cabin kept by a pair of fairies,” Elinrose explained, as calmly as she could. “I don’t know exactly where we are, though...” No, Snowmari didn’t need to worry about the Mistress. “We need to figure out how we came here and why, but in the meantime, I’m pretty sure that the fairies themselves are harmless.”

“Do you think that this might be Faia’s doing?” Snowmari tightened. “Perhaps she wants to be rid of us all so she can have James to herself. Oh, but wouldn’t that be just like her!”

“It’s a possibility, but a conclusion that I hesitate to jump to,” Elinrose answered. “I do think that she could have something to do with it, but I doubt that she’s at the root of the matter.”

“Then who is?” Snowmari demanded. “You know something, I can tell. And you wouldn’t tell us what happened to you and James in the Forest, either. Oh, Elin! You don’t think...”

Elinrose’s smile faded into a grim line. “I don’t think, I...” She shook her head. “Mari, please, can you just help me keep Mother and Mayblossom from worrying? I want to be wrong. Let me worry about what the consequences might be if I’m not.”

“Consequences?” Snowmari’s voice hitched.

Elinrose shook her head. “Mari, you *know* how you get when you’re

worried. Please, just leave it to me.”

Snowmari’s lip trembled as she stared Elinrose in the eye, and then she finally took a deep breath and withdrew her hand.

“Very well. This *is* a nice cottage, now that you mention it. And is that breakfast I smell?” In undertone, she concluded, “Just *please* be careful, Elin!”

Snowmari hated it when Elinrose knew something important that she thought too dangerous to share. She went everywhere all worried but still expected Snowmari to act like the world was all sunshine and flowers.

Still, what could Snowmari do about it? Elinrose was a locked box of secrets, though she let slip more than she thought, and so Snowmari put on her brightest smile and inspected every inch of the cabin, though there weren't many inches to inspect.

On one side of the single room was the bed where they'd been sleeping, just large enough for the four of them, piled with practical but well-made quilts. On the opposite side stood a crackling fireplace where the two fairies fussed over breakfast. A long chest of wooden drawers stood against a third wall. Snowmari opened them to find homespun dresses in sizes to fit the four of them – which she quickly passed out so they could change out of their nightclothes – and dishes and utensils for eating. A table and four chairs were positioned before the fire, so she asked Mayblossom to set it. The fourth wall held a window and a door.

Snowmari stepped outside. The glory of nature that assaulted her was almost enough to make up for the underwhelming cabin. Trees of all kinds spread before her, sunlight shining through their leaves with magical beauty. A dirt path led into the woods, beckoning Snowmari to explore, but she decided that could wait for later and turned back to the cabin.

Every inch of the building was covered in crawling vines of blooming roses. Having grown up in the North Country, which rarely saw non-coniferous plant life, Snowmari had never seen living roses before, but she knew them by sight, for they adorned all of her sister's things. Here they were, some nearly as big as her head. Half were red as blood, and the rest were as white as the freshly-fallen snow.

A shiver ran down Snowmari's spine, but not from any amount of cold. In fact, it was quite the opposite. She'd never been anywhere so warm.

How would she hide her ice now? What would her mother and sister think if they found out? What would they *do*?

They couldn't find out. Snowmari clutched her arms about her and drew the ice into her veins. Then she turned and returned inside.

"Ah, there you are, child," her mother cried, throwing an arm around

Snowmari as she entered. “The fairies, bless their hearts, have finished breakfast for us, and it smells simply delicious!” And she guided her to the wooden table where Elinrose and Mayblossom already sat.

“So, how is it outside?” Elinrose calmly asked. “Any idea where we might be?”

“Not in the North Country – any part of it,” Snowmari answered, sitting down between her sister and niece. “It’s too warm. Certainly beautiful, though. You should see the roses!”

Elinrose’s eyebrow flickered, but she also bit down a frown. Snowmari frowned back. Why *were* they here, and what might Faia have to do with it? What if...

Snowmari’s heart gave a squeeze. Faia knew her secret. She’d promised not to tell, but was this how she circumvented that promise?

“Oh, roses!” Mother cried, clutching her hands to her heart. I used to have the most beautiful roses, but they never fared well in the North Country. They only bloomed once, at Elin’s birth. Ah, Mari, how I miss them!

Snowmari bit her lip as she stabbed the eggs on her plate. Those roses had *died* in the snowstorm that had accompanied her own birth. Had it been a portent of things to come? Was she destined to have destruction follow her through life?

No, Austere forbid! Snowmari clenched her fists. Surely she wasn’t meant to always be a curse to all she knew!

~

The day crept on, and they only seemed more and more trapped in their enigmatic situation. The situation also seemed less and less dangerous. The fairies led them down the paths and trails, showing them where to find the best berries and nuts, and then back to the cabin where they were left for the night.

Snowmari thought that this would be the perfect chance for her and Elinrose to return to the very important matter of *how* and *why* they were in these woods ... but Elinrose seemed disinterested in the topic as she turned instead to tuck Mayblossom into bed.

“Where do you think we’ll be when we wake up tomorrow?” Mayblossom asked. “Do you think Daddy will be there this time?”

“Who knows?” said Elinrose, smiling as though this were nothing but a fun game. This was anything but! Still, what else could they do but smile and

pretend that everything was fine?

“I hope he is.” Mayblossom rolled over and buried her face in her pillow. “I’ve missed him lots, you know.”

Elinrose sighed. “I know.”

She pressed a kiss to the back of Mayblossom’s head and then straightened as they heard a scratching at the door. She and Snowmari shared a glance, and then she crept forward.

“Hello?” she called. “Is someone there?”

“I thought I smelled your scent on this house, Princess,” a voice rumbled from the other side of the door.

Elinrose straightened as a strange emotion crossed her face. Or, rather, *set* of emotions – relief, disappointment, fear, and joy, all at once.

“Bear!” she breathed. “Is that really you?”

She threw open the door, and Snowmari released a gasp of surprise as she saw, not a man who might have possibly been *named* Bear, but the actual animal.

“I had hoped to never see you again in this Forest, Princess,” said the bear. “Your brother...”

“I took my brother home. I ... I don’t know how or why I’m back.”

Snowmari wrapped her arms around Elinrose’s. “Elin ... that’s a talking bear.”

“Your sister?” asked the bear, staring at Snowmari.

Elinrose released a long sigh as she glanced from Snowmari to the bear and back. “Yes. This is my sister, Snowmari. Mari, this is Bear. He helped me find James when ... I had to find James.”

There she went again, refusing to admit the whole truth because she thought Snowmari was too weak and emotional to handle it.

“Your sister is a beautiful young woman,” said Bear.

“And you’re a talking bear,” Snowmari repeated.

Elinrose gave Snowmari an unamused glance and then smiled at Bear. “Would you like to come inside and sit by the fire? I mean, I’m sure as a bear, you’re far more used to sleeping among nature, but, well, we have a fire.”

“And I’m sure you and your sister would feel far safer in this Forest if I was near enough to guard you, yes.” Bear nodded, his great head swinging terrifyingly.

Elinrose pulled Snowmari out of the doorway so Bear could squeeze

inside, every massive, shaggy inch of him.

“He’s a friend, Mother,” Elinrose announced before their mother could protest. “Bear, it wasn’t just Snowmari and myself who woke up in this cabin this morning, but our mother and niece as well.” She gestured to the bed, where Mayblossom stared at him with wide eyes, her head obediently glued to the pillow.

“Well!” said Mother, throwing up her hands. “Just when I thought that this day couldn’t get any stranger.”

“The day was strange enough, and it’s night now,” said Elinrose. “But we can trust Bear. Or, rather, I have trusted him before and didn’t regret it.”

Mother shook her head as she twisted away. “Well, you’ve always known what you’re about, Elin, so I suppose that we can’t but trust you now. But, really, a bear?”

“Well, we can’t all be as favored as you, my queen,” said Bear as he turned himself about a few times before settling before the fire. “And I personally think I got off quite well as a bear. I could have been a frog, after all. All slimy and green. No means of self-protection and at the mercy of this forest. Ah, but I quite like being a bear.”

“We don’t have frogs in the North Country,” said Mayblossom. “It’s too cold for them and the bugs they eat.”

“Then you’re quite lucky, little princess,” said Bear. “Bugs are quite annoying, especially when they bite. It’s not so bad for me, since I have such thick fur, but I shudder to think how they might devour one so small and exposed as yourself.”

Mayblossom sucked in a gasp. “Really?”

“But you hear all that chirping outside the cabin?” asked Bear. “There are lots of frogs out there, eating all the bugs, and you won’t have anything to worry about.”

“Good.” Mayblossom wrinkled her nose.

“Are you worried about sleeping with a bear so close to you?”

“Aunt Elin trusts you,” Mayblossom answered. “But...”

“I won’t hurt you,” said Bear. “I only eat naughty little girls. You’re not naughty, are you?”

Mayblossom gave another gasp. “I don’t think so.” Her eye strayed to Elinrose, and she bit her lip.

“She’s the best little girl that her two aunts could ask for,” Snowmari declared, stalking over and sitting down beside Mayblossom on the bed. “So,

don't you dare even threaten her with being eaten!"

Bear shifted his gaze to stare at Snowmari apologetically. "I meant only to amuse, not frighten. Forgive me, for I have far too little experience with children."

Snowmari continued to frown at him. "What? Have you never found a lady bear willing to have cubs with you? Are your manners that terrible?"

"I suppose they must be." Bear glumly tucked his head between his paws.

"Manners aren't everything; you have a good heart, Bear." Elinrose sent Snowmari a glare as she settled onto the floor next to Bear and ran a hand through his thick fur. "After all, your heart is the largest in the forest."

Bear gave a growling chuckle as his eyes slid closed.

Elinrose's gaze turned thoughtful as she continued to scratch his head.

Snowmari kissed Mayblossom good night again and then stalked over to sit beside Elinrose. She didn't like being so close to this massive bear, but she had just so many questions for her sister.

"You weren't happy to see him, Elin," she said. "Stop protecting us. Where are we?"

Bear heaved a massive sigh, though his eyes remained closed. "You ought to tell your sister the truth, Princess," he said. "After all, you're stuck here now."

Snowmari clenched her fists, holding back her ice. "We're stuck here?"

"No one returns from the Forest, Mari," said Elinrose, shaking her head. "But ... I meant to bargain my freedom for James', and I thought..." She leaned against Bear's side as though seeking his strength. "The Mistress banished me the moment she saw me. She was more than willing to send James with me, and Faia, too, to anchor him at home. And then we woke up this morning here. I don't know what to make of any of this, anymore."

"But until I appeared, you were able to hope that you weren't in the Forest?" Bear surmised.

"I hoped," said Elinrose. "But disappointment aside, I was very happy to see you, Bear."

Bear released a long breath. "I'm glad someone is."

"I just wish that I knew why I returned against my will like this," Elinrose continued. "Is it the Mistress's doing? If not, what will she do when she finds us here?"

"And how do we get back home now?" asked Snowmari.

Elinrose just gave her a very tired smile.

Despite the looming threat of the Mistress and the fear of never leaving this Forest again, their days slipped into something of a routine.

Every morning, the fairies came by to clean the house and prepare meals. Elinrose frequently offered to help, but the fairies always insisted that the chores were their duty and honor.

Bear came by nearly every evening to sleep by the fire, and the girls soon overcame any fear they had of him. He was especially gentle with Mayblossom, letting her brush his fur each night. He would take her for rides through the forest each morning, before he would disappear for the day.

“I’m so glad that Bear has friends now,” Jenna announced one morning as she washed the dishes. Which she was surprisingly adept at despite being smaller than any of the plates. Snowmari wasn’t sure if she’d ever cease to marvel at the fairies’ abilities to do such tasks. “He’s always been so mopey whenever he was around, before, and now he’s *not* so mopey.”

“Well, Mayblossom has that effect on people.” Snowmari shrugged. “Bears, too, it seems.”

“Ah, but he’s sweet on you,” said Jenna.

Snowmari drew back with a frown. “I’m sorry? But he’s a bear!”

The fairy flew in a loop. “Perhaps, but here in the Forest, things aren’t always as they seem. He’s sweet on you; I know that much. He’s always staring and sighing after you and calling you pretty, the way men do when they think they’re being subtle.”

“He’s still a bear,” said Snowmari.

Was she being unfair? Perhaps. But Faia’s warning echoed through her. Frosts never loved again after a broken heart. Snowmari might not trust the woman, but those words had rung true. Snowmari had always known that her magic made love a risk, but now it was a looming fact.

Elinrose might trust Bear. He might be gentle with Mayblossom, but Snowmari owed him nothing, least of all her incredibly fragile heart.

She stood, tucking her hands behind her back.

“I think I shall go explore the woods for the rest of the day,” she announced.

Jenna clapped her hands together and did a backflip. “Oh! Then I shall hurry myself through these dishes so I can accompany you. Can’t have you

getting lost, after all!”

Snowmari shook her head. “Oh, please don’t bother yourself!” She insisted with a forced smile. “I won’t go far, and you’ve shown me most of the surrounding area. I doubt I’ll have any trouble without you!”

And she dashed out the door before Jenna could react.

Was this childish and foolhardy of her? Sure, but she didn’t want to spend another moment discussing Bear and romance with that flighty little fairy.

Jenna knew nothing of what stood between Snowmari and love.

~

Exploring these woods without a guide had been ill-advised. Especially when Snowmari started out in such a temper that she paid no attention to her direction.

Hours had passed, and she’d long-since decided that it was time for her to turn toward home again for lunch. But she could find no trail that would lead her home – or even any friendly face who could point her in the right direction.

She’d been all through these trails in the previous weeks – after all, how was she to hide her ice magic in such cramped quarters? – she ought to have known her way about by now, even without the fairies’ help. But this was clearly a treacherous forest, for she found herself wandering in circles. With each step, the trees seemed more menacing than they had been before.

Snowmari hadn’t wanted to believe in the villainy that Bear and Elinrose had ascribed to the Forest’s mysterious Mistress. Now she saw the Mistress in every twisting shadow the trees cast.

Such a horrid, *horrid* woman to have held their brother hostage. Such a monster for kidnapping Snowmari, and Elinrose, and Mayblossom, and their mother, all together! And for what cruel, twisted purpose? Some knowledge lurked in the darkness of Elinrose’s eyes, but it never crossed her lips.

Why had Snowmari rushed out into these woods alone? Why had her sensibilities been so fragile that she’d run without thinking at the mention of romance with that stupid Bear? He was just a bear! Nothing to her – no one.

She paused and clasped her hands to heart, trying to stave off the frost that was creeping down to her elbows.

Why wasn’t anyone finding her and taking her safely home? Surely the fairies, with their extensive knowledge of these woods, could have tracked her down and brought her safely back home. Sir fancied himself some sort of

knight. Surely he would have braved this forest to rescue her.

At this point, she would even have taken Bear as her savior. If he appeared on the path ahead of her, she might well throw her arms around his neck and marry him then and there, fur and all.

“Austere!” she prayed in a desperate whisper, and not for the first time that morning – afternoon? She didn’t know anymore. “Austere! Please, help me get home!”

No fairies appeared on the trail before her. No Bear, either. No friendly faces. Just spindly, grabby trees as far as she could see.

What had happened to the bright, green forest that had welcomed her into its bosom just a few weeks before? Had it succumbed to her ice magic, the way that the roses had at her birth? Was she naught but destined to destroy anything and everything she came in contact with?

Something poked her from behind, and she released a scream and started running again, blindly.

She didn’t trust this terrible, horrid forest. Every time she stopped, it was just an opportunity for it to grab her and gobble her alive. She had to ... she had to keep moving. She couldn’t stop running. Where she was going, if she could ever find anything besides trees, trees, and more trees, it didn’t matter, she...

The ground gave way under her feet, and she slid, tumbling and pitching, rolling and screaming, through dirt, twigs, debris, and rock, pure terror gripping her in its fist.

Was this the end, then? Was this how this Forest would consume her? How long before Elinrose or their mother, or even Mayblossom would follow her into the woods and meet this same fate?

Snowmari squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for the worst, and then ... nothing.

She’d stopped. She was still in one piece.

She couldn’t move.

Snowmari bit back another scream as she tried to push herself off the ground. She was face-first in the dirt. She could feel all her extremities – still wiggle her toes, but ... her skirts were trapped and tangled under a pile of dirt.

She collapsed, head on her arms, tears leaking out of her eyes and freezing on her cheeks. How had she just survived all of that, only to land here, trapped forever...

“Miss, are you all right?”

She lifted her head from her arms to find herself staring into a pair of vibrant green eyes.

“Earnest?” she breathed, hastily brushing at her eyes, hoping that the dirt would disguise the ice.

The green eyes pulled back, blinking. “I was expecting a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ in answer to that question. But perhaps you’re the poetic sort. Indeed, I am here in earnest to lend you my aid however I can. You seem to require assistance.”

It wasn’t Earnest who stood before her. Earnest had green eyes, yes, but he didn’t also have green hair and a green beard that hung to his waist. Nor was he so tall and spindly, clad in a shirt and pants woven from leaves.

“Who are you?” she breathed.

“Willow!” the man answered cheerily. “Because I’m the spirit of a willow tree. That’s how it works, you see. And what’s your name, my beautiful damsel in distress?”

Snowmari was sure her cheeks were frosting over. Oh! Why couldn’t she just blush like normal girls?

“Snowmari,” she answered, rubbing at her cheeks again. “You can call me Mari, though. Everyone else does.”

“And cut such a beautiful name short?” Willow clucked his tongue and shook his head. “It’d be like cutting down my own tree! No, my dear Snowmari, I would never do you such a dishonor.”

“Oh.” Snowmari knew he was flirting – there were lords aplenty at home who sought her hand, perceiving her to be the foolhardy second daughter with her heart on her sleeve. They all wished to court royal favor through her.

So she’d heard idle flattery before. Often. Her beauty had been lauded until she hardly believed it anymore. They were after her position and family, and saw nothing of herself.

But lying here on the ground, with this strange man holding out a hand to her ... she felt her heart crack the slightest bit.

“I would appreciate some help. I’m buried under this pile of ... I don’t know what all. I just know I’ll die of starvation, right here on the ground, never seeing my family again. So, well, if there’s anything you can do to help me, I would be forever grateful.”

Willow hummed and nodded, disappearing out of her line of sight to inspect her predicament. When he came back around, he was shaking his head. “Those are some heavy bits of rock that fell on you, and we’re a mite

too far away from my tree to use its roots to free you. That said, the worst of it is on your skirts, and I think if we cut you loose from those, you can wiggle free just fine on your own.”

Snowmari jerked to attention, blinking as she stared up at the wood spirit. “I’m sorry? Cut my skirts off? But that wouldn’t be decent!”

Willow tilted his head to the side as he examined her situation some more. “Is decency more important than your freedom?”

She pressed her lips together and craned her head around to stare at the mess she was in. “Fine. Help me out,” she acquiesced.

He disappeared around her again, and Snowmari squeezed her eyes shut against the sound of cutting fabric. Then his arms hooked under hers, and he was hauling her out of her prison.

“There you go, Snowmari,” he concluded, setting her on her feet. “Ah, but I’m glad that I was in the area.”

“Yeah,” she breathed, staring up at him – he was still so tall, even now that she was standing. She tried to take a step back and then gave a cry as her ankle nearly gave out under her.

His arms closed around her again, catching her as his brow knit in concern. “Were you injured?”

“Clearly.” After the tumble she’d taken, what else should she have expected? She’d barely escaped with her life, after all. “I ... I don’t think I can make it home. Not that I knew where home was – I was lost already when that landside tried to kill me.”

He stared at her quizzically again and then nodded. “You really are the damsel in distress, aren’t you, Snowmari? Very well, tell me where you live, and I am but your humble servant to convey you home.”

Snowmari’s heart gave an extra beat. “Well, actually, my home is in the North Country, but my family and I have been staying in a cabin, I think it’s nearby, but I’m really not sure. It’s covered in red and white roses and is kept by a pair of fairies – Jenna and Sir.”

“There’s a creature as beautiful as yourself now living in the Rose Cabin?” asked Willow, the corner of his mouth lifting in a grin. “How have I not learned of this sooner? I’ll bear you safely there at once.”

He lifted her up and cradled her against his chest. Snowmari gasped in delight at his strength that belied his spindly form. She could truly believe he was the spirit of a tree.

Elinrose paced the length of the room, worry gnawing at her. Snowmari hadn't been seen since that morning, and Jenna's account indicated that she'd rushed off in a fit of emotion. Not that the fairy had said anything so clear, but Elinrose knew her sister.

Oh, just *why* had that thoughtless fairy broached *romance* of all subjects? Snowmari was young. She was a Frost. She had enough problems without having to worry about Bear's feelings.

It'd taken hours, but Elinrose had finally pressed the danger of the situation upon the fairies, and Sir had gone out to find Snowmari. Now Elinrose could only hope that he hadn't been distracted by some flower not five minutes upon entering those woods. She raised prayer after prayer that her sister would return safely.

She glanced at her mother, trying to keep Mayblossom calm with a story. Mayblossom wasn't stupid, though. She knew Aunt Mari was missing. She felt the tension in the room.

A scratch came at the door, and Elinrose threw it open to find Bear.

He drew back at her glare. "Is something the matter, Princess?"

Elinrose stepped out into the dusk with him and shut the door behind her. "Mari is missing."

Bear jerked to attention, sitting down on his haunches. "She knew to stay near the cabin unless she had a guide ... didn't she?"

"Yes, well, she got mad at the fairies," said Elinrose, folding her arms over her chest. "By the time any of us realized what had happened, she was gone."

"I'm so sorry, I..."

He started up, but Elinrose held up a hand. "Sir is looking for her. You and I need to talk."

Bear's ears bent back. "This seems serious. Do you think I had something to do with your sister's situation? Let me assure you, Princess..."

"Yes, please assure me," said Elinrose. "Bear, what *are* your intentions regarding my sister?"

He drew back and considered a long moment before answering, which was reassuring.

"I know better than to break her heart," he finally said. "I assure you, I've

made that mistake before, and I vow never to make it again.”

“She’s the only sister I have,” said Elinrose. “She’s very dear and precious to me, and I walk a tightrope to keep her as it is. She ran into the woods because Jenna told her you liked her, and that frightened her. If and when she comes back safely, see to it that no other harm comes to her on your account.”

Bear hung his head. “I should follow her and try to bring her back. The Forest is treacherous, as you well know, and Sir, well ... he’s a fairy.”

“I know.” Elinrose pressed her lips together. “Bear, do you love her?”

“I...” Bear hesitated – and this time, it wasn’t a good sign. “I find her beautiful, and every day I spend with her, she becomes more dear to me.”

“She deserves only the truest and most earnest affection, Bear.” Elinrose shook her head.

“I know.” He glanced towards the Forest.

“Someone needs to find her, I know,” she said. “But I don’t know if I want you playing her *hero* like that.”

“I can take you with me,” Bear suggested. “The Forest seems to like you, even if its Mistress does not.”

Elinrose frowned, considering, thinking of the nightmares that continued to plague her each night. Dreams of this forest. Reaching for her. Demanding her. The Mistress’s ire at her presence. The other woman’s hopeful, desperate pleas.

Did the Mistress have anything to do with Snowmari’s disappearance now? What would she do with Elinrose’s sister if she found her?

“Elin!”

Elinrose spun around, her dilemma solved as she saw her sister emerge from the Forest. And a new quandary presented itself as she saw that a stranger was carrying Snowmari. She had her arms tucked around his neck.

A low growl rumbled in the back of Bear’s throat, and she sent him another glare.

“Snowmari!” she cried, rushing forward. “Where have you been?”

The stranger lowered Snowmari to the ground, and she threw her arms around Elinrose’s neck.

“Oh, Elin! I’ve had such an adventure! I nearly died!”

Elinrose’s eyes widened, and she tightened her arms around her sister. “You knew better than to go into the Forest alone!”

“I know! And it won’t happen again! Oh, Elin, I’m so glad that Willow

was there to save me.”

“And I suppose this is Willow?” Elinrose surmised, pulling back to size up the stranger. The very tall stranger ... with green hair?

“Yes! He’s a wood spirit!” Snowmari clutched Elinrose’s arm. “I was nearly buried alive, but he dug me out and carried me home.” She dropped her voice. “And isn’t he just so handsome?”

“I suppose.”

Hadn’t Snowmari run this morning because she was frightened by the prospect of love? Had Elinrose been right to insist that Bear not go after her?

Would she need to have another *discussion* with this stranger?

“I’m glad to see her home safely,” said Willow, giving a charming bow, prompting a stronger frown from Elinrose. “I hope you won’t mind if I call again to see how she’s recovering from her injuries? To think you were here all this time, and I hadn’t the slightest idea!”

He gave Snowmari a wink and disappeared into the trees.

“Injuries?” Elinrose glanced her sister up and down. It was difficult to see in the dying light, but she counted dozens of scrapes and bruises.

“I was nearly buried alive, as I said! Oh, and I think I twisted my ankle, or something. That’s why Willow was carrying me; because I couldn’t walk.”

And he hadn’t seen her all the way to the safety of a bed? Well, Elinrose did suppose that she was glaring at him pretty hard.

“And your skirt!”

“He had to cut me free – I’d been buried, remember?”

Elinrose sighed. “Let’s get you inside,” she said, tucking Snowmari’s arm over her shoulder. “We need to clean your cuts before they get infected.”

She heard a few gasps of pain from her sister as she limped back into the house. Elinrose gave Bear another glare as she passed him. “I’ll let you in after she’s bathed,” she instructed. “Until then, you can see to it that Willow isn’t hanging about.”

“Elin!” cried Snowmari.

Elinrose just shook her head as she ushered her sister into the house. “I’m not happy with either of them right now,” she stated. “I’m your elder sister. It’s my job to keep you safe. And today...”

“And today Willow saved me!”

“Because you were a fool who didn’t follow instructions!” Elinrose took a deep breath as she set Snowmari in a chair. “Mari, we’re in a Forest controlled by a Mistress who doesn’t like me. I don’t want you to get hurt

because she's trying to get to me."

"You'd just prefer me with that Bear, wouldn't you!"

"No!" Elinrose put her hands on her hips as she drew a bucket of water from the sink's pump. "I just want you to be safe. I..."

"Aunt Mari? Are you all right?"

Elinrose clamped her mouth shut as their niece slid out of bed and approached them. Snowmari burst into a grin and held out her arms.

"Never better, May-dearest," she declared. "But don't you dare go exploring those woods without Bear or those fairies, like I did. That was truly foolish of me."

Elinrose grabbed the bar of soap. "At least you can admit one piece of truth."

Snowmari ignored her, tapping Mayblossom's nose. "Would you like to hear all about it? I was rescued by the *most* handsome stranger – better than a dashing knight; he was a Wood Spirit!"

Mayblossom gasped, her eyes widening.

Elinrose rolled her eyes. She considered further protest, but she couldn't continue this argument right here and now. Not with Mayblossom listening. Tomorrow, when Bear took her for her daily exploration of the woods.

Snowmari *would* be getting an earful, that was for certain.

"Take off that dress," she instructed. "It's torn to shreds and past saving. We'll have to cut it to rags. A pity because it was one of the nicer ones."

She wasn't sure yet if there was an unlimited supply of clothing in this cabin, and she really didn't want to make more work for those fairies if they didn't have to.

As Snowmari rambled on about the day's harrowing adventure, Elinrose knelt before her and scrubbed her every injury, washing away the dirt and ice crystals.

Did Snowmari even realize that her injuries healed with ice? It was less noticeable in the chill of the North Country, but Elinrose had never let anyone but herself tend her sister's cuts.

It was a risk she could never take.

~

True to his word, Willow appeared the next morning, before they'd even finished breakfast. Trying to be polite, Elinrose did invite him in and offer to let him join them, but he claimed that Wood Spirits never ate, so he and Bear

sat glaring at each other on the other side of the room while the womenfolk finished their food.

Elinrose provided a few glares of her own. After all, she'd planned to talk to Snowmari about him. How was she to do that now that he was here and Snowmari sat there making doe eyes at him?

"We really can't thank you enough for saving our dear Mari," said Mother, trying to be friendly. "We thought we'd lost her for good, you know, and it's frightening how close we did come to it."

"I'm just glad that I was in the area, ma'am," said Willow, grinning as he inclined his head. "I must say, she's looking much better this morning, though she's clearly been better for wear. Ah, but that was quite the tumble she took."

"So she tells us," said Elinrose.

Willow shrugged, as though trying to disarm Elinrose's suspicion. "How is your ankle doing, Snowmari?" he asked.

"She still can't put her weight on it," Bear inserted. "She will be confined to this cabin for the foreseeable future, though I was planning to offer her a ride through these woods."

"A noble offer, my good bear," said Willow.

"Bear gives the best rides!" Mayblossom announced, brightening.

Snowmari wrinkled her nose as she stared between Bear and Willow. "I wouldn't want to inconvenience him."

"It'd be no inconvenience, I promise," said Bear.

"I think she had her fill of exploration yesterday," said Elinrose, giving *him* a glare. "Perhaps you can make the offer again tomorrow, and she'll be more receptive."

Bear opened his mouth to answer and then tucked his head between his paws.

"You can take Mayblossom, like you always do," Elinrose added and swung her gaze to Snowmari. "You and I need to talk."

Snowmari's shoulders sagged, and then she looked up at Elinrose with a disgruntled glare. "No, we don't *need* to talk. You *want* to talk because you have this need to control every aspect of your life, especially me. Elin, I have my own life, and I can live it just fine, thank you very much!"

Elinrose sucked in a breath. "Mari, I just want you to be safe..."

"I can keep myself safe!" Snowmari hastily stood and then gave a hiss of pain.

“Elin, stop exciting her,” Mother chided. “You know how she gets. And what’s the harm of a little romance? She was never of the mind for it back home.” Here she gave a sigh. “Look at my baby – they do grow up so fast.”

Snowmari tensed and then sat down quickly, the fight fading from her face. “Yes. What harm in a bit of romance?”

She glanced over at Willow, her smile returned, and Elinrose’s heart softened a little. She only wanted her sister to be happy, after all. Maybe she didn’t trust the situation, but did she want to become a villain to her sister?

Elinrose pushed her eggs about on her plate, her appetite gone, and then she stood, sighing.

“Just be safe,” she told her sister. Then she turned and went outside.

Bear followed her, and she released a long sigh.

“Right now, I don’t really want to talk to you, either,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“I do apologize for every part I’ve played in her current circumstance,” said Bear, heaving a massive sigh of his own. “I’d hoped to court her subtly and slowly, with respect for her feelings. I ... know the impossibility that I could earn her heart, and yet...”

“You’re a bear. What business do you even have, courting a human girl like her?”

“I’m a talking bear,” Bear countered. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed that or not. And I have as yet to meet a lady of my kind with whom I can have scintillating conversations.”

“I suppose that is an impediment,” said Elinrose, tilting her head to the side as she stared at him.

“I know my chances are small. I know I don’t deserve her.” Bear hung his head. “And then I think about that Willow. He’s a Wood Spirit. His kind aren’t known for their faithfulness. And with what she is ... he’s going to break her heart, and I don’t know if I can watch that happen to her. And yet, I can’t help but feel that I owe it to your family to be there for you in the case of the worst.”

Elinrose sucked in a breath, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “Perhaps a broken heart would do her good? Teach her a bit of sense?”

Bear raised his head and stared at her. “Perhaps it would.” His answer lacked sincerity. He was just trying to make her feel better.

“But she always avoided romance before. I just ... what changed? Why now, in this forest? What if this has the Mistress written all over it?”

“You’re trying to blame yourself for whatever mistakes your sister may make,” said Bear. “Well, yourself and James. He was the one who first entered the Forest, and you were only following him.”

Elinrose squeezed herself tighter. “I ... I suppose so.”

“I made a grievous mistake, some years ago,” Bear confessed. “And my younger brother has wound up paying for it. Well, I’ve paid my own share, too, but it’s harder to watch a younger sibling suffer for your own mistakes.”

Elinrose took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

“I want to tell you what he assures me, each time I try to talk to him about it.” Bear raised himself to meet her eyes. “The mistake might have been mine, but he made his own choices, too. He’s a grown adult, and so’s your sister. And, sometimes, that means letting them get hurt so that they can learn what choices are safe to make.”

Elinrose nodded. “I know. You’re right. It’s just...”

“It’s just hard.”

“Yeah.”

He took another step closer to her, and she threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his shaggy fur.

“I pray to Austere that my suspicions are wrong,” he rumbled. “I pray that this Willow might have the faithfulness that others of his kind do not. I pray that she does not care for him as deeply as it appears and that her heart won’t break when he leaves. I pray that her heart might be strong enough to resist such a trauma.”

Elinrose gave a half-hearted smile. “I pray that we might learn what the Mistress wants with us here in this Forest and that we might find freedom from her.”

“That’s a good prayer too.”

No matter how Elinrose disliked it, Willow was now a fixture in their lives. He appeared each morning, not long before Bear would leave, and stayed most of the day. He was attentive enough to Snowmari, so Elinrose supposed that she couldn't complain. But she didn't like him there.

Snowmari's injuries healed quickly enough – as they always did – and soon, she was up and about and exploring the woods just as fearlessly as ever.

“You know, I've been thinking,” Willow announced just as he was leaving one evening.

Elinrose raised an eyebrow. “Really? What a feat.”

She earned a glare from her sister, but just because Snowmari liked the Wood Spirit didn't mean that Elinrose had to play nice.

Willow, for his part, seemed unphased by her jab. “I was thinking about the fact that you folk eat. It seems like such a strange cycle of existence, but Snowmari assures me that you find it pleasurable.”

“More or less,” Elinrose admitted. “I also admit that *not* eating for extended periods can be quite unpleasant and painful.”

“She said as much,” said Willow excitedly.

Elinrose cast a glance towards her sister. Was this *really* the sort of man that Snowmari had fallen for?

“It seems you've been thinking about eating a lot,” she concluded. “Too bad you're a Wood Spirit and shall never know the pleasure.”

“Alas.” And Willow drooped with a truly remorseful posture.

“Oh, Willow, tell Elin about your idea!” Snowmari shoved him playfully.

Willow's eyes lit. “My idea, yes! See, my dear Elinrose, your sister was telling me all about how eating can be such an enjoyable recreation for you, about all the different festivities you have built around food. And I was particularly intrigued by the *picnic*.”

Elinrose nodded. “Yes, I've heard that they can be quite a treat. They aren't popular in the North Country, thanks to all the snow and ice, but there's a certain ... romantic quality to them, I've heard.”

“Yes!” cried Snowmari, rushing forward to grab Elinrose's arm. “And Willow wants to take us on a picnic by his tree!”

“His tree ... us?” Elinrose narrowed her gaze on the Wood Spirit.

“Of course – I hardly expect you to let me run off with her alone for the whole day.” Willow tilted his head towards Elinrose. “Nor would I wish to let her experience the joys of nature and leave her family cooped up in this cabin? Especially when that would mean that she’ll be eating alone.”

“And you *know* how horrid it is to sit there, eating, with your partner just staring at you.” Snowmari shuddered. “Why, it isn’t romantic at all!”

“So, how does tomorrow sound?” asked Willow. “I’m sure the fairies would love to throw together some special treats for the occasion.”

“I’m sure they would,” Elinrose remarked dryly.

The fairies had been all sorts of ecstatic over Snowmari’s romance, despite, and even because of their involvement in the idiocy.

No, Elinrose had *not* forgotten that it was Jenna’s idle words that had pushed Snowmari into this mess.

“It’s settled then! Tomorrow it is!” Willow gave a mock bow and tipped an invisible hat before disappearing out the door.

Elinrose rolled her eyes towards her sister and released a long sigh. “Truly, Mari? Him?”

Snowmari bristled. “It’s my life. I can make my own choices. I know you don’t trust me, Elin, but...”

“I’m your older sister – it’s my job to question your decisions and make sure you’ve thought everything through.”

“And what if I have? Elin, I assure you I had time enough to think while I was lost in the forest and buried under a landslide. I almost died under there, you know!”

Elinrose pressed her lips together. “I suppose, and I know we’re infinitely grateful that Willow saved you, but this is all just too fast – you barely know him!”

“And I’m working on getting to know him better.” Snowmari bit her lip. “I know you want me to be safe – I don’t want to get hurt, either. But, Elin, he saved me, and he was so charming, and I fell in love before I even knew what was happening. So what else can I do?”

“Just ... you need to be careful, Mari.”

“I’ve been careful. I’ve lived my life careful. I’ve been so careful I’ve never *let* myself live.”

“Granted.” After all, Snowmari’s secret was deadly if anyone found out. “But just because we’re in this Forest doesn’t mean that you can throw every care to the wind.”

“I haven’t!” Snowmari drew herself up to glare at Elinrose. “I know you’d probably prefer me with that bear than Willow, but I didn’t fall in love with Bear! I fell in love with Willow, and there’s nothing I can do about that now.”

“I want you to be happy and cared for, Mari.” Elinrose laid a hand on her sister’s arm. “Frankly, I don’t care for Bear as your suitor any more than I do that Wood Spirit, but at least I’m convinced that he would be faithful and would accept you for who you are. But I wouldn’t push you to him if he isn’t who you want. He *is* a bear, after all.”

Snowmari wrinkled her nose, and she stiffened as she stared at Elinrose. “You...”

“I just want you to be happy and safe,” Elinrose offered her sister a smile. “You’re so special, the only sister I have. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you because of me. This forest is dangerous, and Willow is part of it ... I can’t help but worry.”

“Bear’s part of it, too,” Snowmari protested.

“No, he’s a prisoner trapped here same as we are.” Elinrose shook her head. “Look, we don’t know his whole story; I don’t know if he can *tell* us his whole story. But I don’t want you running to Willow because you’re scared of Bear. Nor would I want it the other way around. I just...”

What did the Mistress want with them in this Forest? Why were they here? Why wouldn’t Snowmari believe her about the danger that this place held? Especially after nearly dying in that landslide!

“I’ve heard that Wood Spirits can be fickle. They don’t love the way humans do. I don’t want to see him break your heart.”

Snowmari drew in a sharp breath and dropped her gaze. “Then my heart is as good as broken already, for it’s already his.”

Elinrose pulled Snowmari into a hug and held her tight. “I’m sorry. I hope ... I hope I’m wrong about him.”

“I hope so, too,” Snowmari sighed against Elinrose’s shoulder. “Please ... let’s just enjoy the picnic tomorrow and not worry about what will happen to my heart. And stop glaring at Willow so much. He can’t help what he is.”

“I will absolutely *not* stop glaring.” Elinrose rubbed Snowmari’s back. “I think I scare him, and I won’t pass by the chance that I could frighten him into faithfulness.”

Snowmari gave a pained laugh. “He is a good man. Wood Spirit. I think he really does care for me.”

“I hope he does.” Elinrose sighed. “I hope that’s enough.”

~

Willow was right about one thing – the fairies were *more* than happy to prepare a scrumptious feast for the proposed picnic. They flitted about the place excitedly as the Wood Spirit arrived.

“Ah, I see that my idea met with favor!” Willow practically beamed as he inspected the fairies’ work. “Why, I do declare that this might well be the best picnic ever!”

Elinrose restrained from rolling her eyes. “Well, given that most of us have never been on a picnic before, we all look forward to finding out what one is like.” She glanced at her mother. They really didn’t know much about her past, and Elinrose had recently found herself wondering about the roses that she’d brought with her on her marriage.

“Aunt Mari told me all about it and how grand it’s going to be, and I told Bear!” cried Mayblossom, bouncing up to Willow, hands clasped together. “Do you mind if he comes with us, too? I asked him if he would, and he said he will if you say it’s all right with you. He doesn’t want to impose, after all.”

Elinrose glanced at Bear, who lay with his head on his paws, watching Snowmari. She sighed.

Willow just burst into a grin. “Of *course* he can come! The more, the merrier, I believe the saying goes.”

Bear lifted his head from his paws to stare at Willow. “Yes, that is the saying.”

“So he can go?” Mayblossom burst into a broader grin and rushed back to Bear to throw her arms around his neck. “Do you hear that? Willow says you can go, too!”

A massive sigh escaped Snowmari.

“Is something the matter, my dearest Snowmari?” Willow rushed to her side. “Does that creature upset you?”

“As long as he makes Mayblossom happy, no,” Snowmari quickly answered. “He’s a good friend to her, and she’s my beloved niece, and I can’t say no to whatever friends she wishes.”

Willow pulled back, nodding. “Ah, well then, I have no qualms with your company, my good bear, so long as you don’t use your claws on my tree, but you do seem to have manners.”

A low growl began in the back of Bear’s throat, but Elinrose silenced him

with another glare.

“I believe that the fairies are nearly done with our food,” she announced, peering into the picnic basket. “Willow, would you mind carrying it for us? Bear, I’m sure Mayblossom would love to have a ride.”

“I am her humble steed, as always,” said Bear, shifting his attention to the girl who was already climbing onto his back. “Now, hang on tight, little princess. Wouldn’t want you to fall, you know. Your aunts might never forgive me.”

And so they wound their way through the forest, Willow leading the way, whistling a merry tune. Snowmari skipped at his side, eager to soak in as much of his presence as she could, same as she always did. Elinrose followed behind, watching them closely. Mother was at her side, grinning like nothing was wrong, and Bear brought up the rear, Mayblossom on his back, babbling cheerfully about everything and nothing. Sir flew about, apparently their honorary guard for protection, though Jenna had stayed behind to clean up the cabin for the day.

Truly, that fairy was obsessed with cleaning.

“And here we are!” Willow finally announced as the trees bent back before him, showing an idyllic view of a willow tree hanging over a babbling brook. He gave a charming bow, gesturing for his guests to go ahead of him.

Snowmari led the way eagerly, clapping her hands in clear delight.

It was, truly, a delightful picnic. Mayblossom fell into the brook and was nearly swept away by the current, but Willow deftly plucked her out and deposited her by Bear to dry. Mother gushed on and on about how enchanting the scene was, while Snowmari explored with the broadest grin upon her face.

Elinrose, for her part, sat and listened. The Forest was louder here than it had ever been before, and it played horridly on her nerves.

Willow, for all his charm, couldn’t be free of the Mistress’s control. If Bear was hers to command just by his presence here, how much more power did she have over the spirit of one of the Forest’s very trees?

Soon enough, Sir announced that it was time to eat, and Elinrose quickly helped him lay out the spread of sandwiches and cakes, but not even the taste of chocolate could melt the knot of worry that sat in the pit of her stomach.

And yet, everyone else, except her, were chatting cheerily like nothing in the world was wrong. Well, everyone except Bear, who had disappeared into the forest claiming to seek his own lunch.

“Ah, I truly don’t envy him,” said Willow, shaking his head as he stared into the forest. “Having to chase after rabbits and squirrels for one’s dinner...”

“Well, there’s plenty of hunting for humans, too,” said Snowmari, picking up one of the sandwiches. “That’s how we get meat, after all. Though I don’t know where the fairies get what they feed us. I don’t know the source of any of the food in that house.”

Sir, unhelpfully, chose to not add any comments, busy refilling Mayblossom’s cup with some sort of nectar. The fairies seemed quite disinterested in explaining the cottage’s secrets.

“Fascinating, you humans,” said Willow, with a wondering shake of his head.

Elinrose licked a few crumbs off her fingers and stood, swaying uncertainly.

“Are you all right, Elinrose?” asked Willow, frowning up at her. He started to stand, but she shook her head.

“I just ... need to stretch my legs a bit. I just realized that I’ve been sitting for a long while, that’s all.”

Willow still appeared confused and concerned but nodded anyway, seeming to accept this as yet another strange human habit. He was soon once more chatting as carelessly as ever.

Elinrose bit her lip. What was *with* this forest, and why did it scrape across her nerves so painfully?

She laid her hand against Willow’s tree for balance, and the world inverted.

Suddenly, it was just her and him, and he stood before her, arms crossed with an intensity blazing in his eyes that she had never seen there before.

“The Mistress doesn’t take challenges to her power lightly,” he warned. “You ought to go home, as she told you to do.”

Elinrose swallowed, her fingers curling. “As though I *chose* to come here? I was more than happy to leave and never come back, and then we all woke up in that cabin.”

His gaze darkened, and he tilted his head to the side as though listening. Focusing, Elinrose heard whispered all about them but couldn’t make them out.

“You meddle with things you don’t understand,” he finally stated. “Elinrose, I have nothing against you, and I am fond of your sister. For her

sake, I want you safe. Don't think that the Mistress will stand idly by much longer."

"As though this is a battle I *wanted* to fight? I don't even know where in this Forest I am, let alone how to leave – which I would do in a moment if I had any confidence I wouldn't reappear right here again if we got free again. I've tried that before. What does she want with us?"

"I don't think you can be as ignorant as you claim," said Willow, shaking his head. "The whole Forest is choosing sides. I must stand by the Mistress, but I hope, for everyone's sake, that you win. I think you will have mercy on those who oppose you. She won't."

Elinrose's eyes narrowed as a new figure appeared behind Willow – the green, leaf-clad woman from her dreams.

"We need her, Willow. We must convince her that this is where she belongs."

Willow twisted around to stare at the newcomer, his face softening. "Ash. I should have known that you would be involved."

The woman tilted her head to the side and laid a hand on Willow's arm. "I had to. The Mistress has ruled as a tyrant over us long enough. Every reign must end."

"You know I'll have to report this to her..."

Ash gave a quiet laugh. "I assure you she knows already. Nothing happens in the Forest without her finding out. Don't worry, I've been careful, but the risk is worth it."

"What are you even talking about?"

Elinrose pulled her hand from the tree to step nearer them, but then she was standing on the bank of the brook again, and when she turned, Willow was *still* laughing with Snowmari, as though oblivious to the conversation they'd just held. This Ash was nowhere in sight.

Ash. Of *course* she'd been another Wood Spirit.

"Are you alright, Aunt Elin?" asked Mayblossom, her hand slipping into Elinrose's. "Because you really, *really* don't look alright."

Elinrose pasted on a smile for her niece's sake, squeezing her hand. "I'm just confused by the whole mystery of this Forest, you know. Don't you think it's just so strange that this tree *is* our good friend Willow?"

Mayblossom tilted her head to the side as she examined the tree and then turned to Willow, nodding as sagely as an nine-year-old girl could. "Yeah, that is pretty funny."

“And yet it’s how things are, here in this Forest,” said Willow, looking up at them finally, his gaze losing the careless charm it had for Snowmari. “Not every tree is as spirited as I am – I’ve lived a long time to gain my freedom, and the Mistress granted me an extra measure of magic besides. But this is a Forest of magic and mischief, and so you would do well to guard yourselves so long as you’re here.”

Elinrose spared Snowmari a glance. “Yes, we would.”

Elinrose grew sourer by the day.

Snowmari, admittedly, *did* feel a bit of guilt for provoking her sister the way she did. She knew that Elinrose *did* care and that she showed her love through a drive to protect. But her sister could be just so *controlling*. Snowmari was already trapped in the vice-grip of her Frost curse, but to have Elinrose restrict her further! As though Elinrose had any idea what Snowmari struggled with on a daily basis.

Perhaps Snowmari was a fool to encourage a Wood Spirit's attention. Maybe she was doomed to a broken heart, shattered beyond saving. Possibly she only delayed the inevitable ... but as long as it was in her power, she would defer it as long as she could in hopes that she could avert it altogether.

Willow cared for her – as much as a tree *could* care for a person. She saw it in his eyes whenever they spoke. Didn't he spend as much time with her as possible? Surely he wouldn't leave his tree for such long hours if she was nothing to him!

And yet, Elinrose *still* glared at him the whole day long, whenever they were in a room together. As though he had *already* left Snowmari in the dirt with a broken heart.

She didn't even know how dangerous a broken heart *was* for Snowmari.

If she would never love again, then she would love with every beat of her heart while she could.

Why couldn't Elinrose just let her be happy?

It was *so* easy to be happy with Willow, too. He always knew just what to say to make her smile or laugh, always ready with some gift or other surprise that showed *so* much thought and care. And his constant curiosity about humans was utterly charming.

"I've never quite understood the human fear of magic," he mused one day as they roamed the forest. "I mean, when the magic is used for ill, then fear is natural, but when it's benign or even beneficial? Why fear something that could make one's life so much easier?"

Snowmari fidgeted, feeling a bit of ice between her fingers. "Because they won't trust it to *not* be evil, won't believe that it *could* be used for good." She glanced about herself. "I mean, you hear how Elinrose speaks of the Mistress of this wood."

Willow's face darkened. "Ah, yes. The Mistress."

"I suppose she is a threat," said Snowmari. "What with the way she brought us here against our will. And that's just why people can't trust magic. Because someone is always going to come by and use it wrong, and who's going to stand up and stop them?"

"Do you think that those with magic are as much Austere's creation as anyone else?"

"How can they not be?" Snowmari sighed. "Magic isn't something that a person can choose. One either has it, or they don't. As such, how could it not be part of His plan and creation?" She glanced up at Willow. "I mean, you're the very spirit of a tree. That's been happening for as long as people can remember. Are you evil for being a tree that can walk and talk and save a girl from a landslide?"

"I am ever so glad that I was there to save you," said Willow, giving her a winning smile.

Snowmari's stomach gave a little flip. "I'm glad too."

"That aside," he continued. "I am of an honest belief that, when magic is used for ill, Austere will, eventually, bring them down. Somehow. Someway. He always sends someone." He pressed his lips together and sighed darkly. "But then it always comes down to whether or not that someone has the courage to rise up and fight."

"And that's when the fear starts – when they don't stop fighting, even when it's not a danger," said Snowmari.

"All too true."

"But it does need to be fought, sometimes," she acknowledged. "Oh, I do hope that someone rises to fight the Mistress, soon. Much as I love it here, I miss home, and I would very much like to return there someday."

Even if her people would *never* accept her magic. But maybe, just maybe, she could confess to Willow. Might *he* accept her for what she was? He was a being of magic himself – surely he of all people would understand!

"I think Austere has sent someone," said Willow, thoughtfully. "But it remains to be seen if she will see beyond herself and stand and fight. However ... she won't be the first. I keep hoping that the Mistress is weakening, and yet it has as yet to happen."

"But when she does, you and the rest of this forest will be free?"

"I hope. It may well be that she'll become a worse tyrant than the Mistress ever was, but from what I know of her, I don't think that shall happen,

despite all of her faults.”

“I hope so, too. Perhaps if it isn’t this Mistress ruling the Forest, then Elinrose would better approve of, well, you and me.”

Willow glanced down at her and offered a slow but encouraging smile. “Perhaps.”

Elinrose’s glare when Willow brought Snowmari back home was much less encouraging.



It was with this conversation still chasing itself about her head that Snowmari found her mother behind the house, sitting under a bower where the red and white roses met. She gazed wistfully into space, stroking a rose’s petals, but she brightened as Snowmari approached.

“Ah, Mari, my dearest, isn’t this just a beautiful day?”

Snowmari sighed. “Not if you ask Elinrose.”

Mother’s gaze darkened, and she stared again at nothing. “Ah, my dear Elin. She’s just so determined to put everyone’s struggles on her own shoulders. Born to be a queen, she was. Pity that she already had a brother, but now I wonder...”

“Wonder what, Mother?” Snowmari prompted, sitting down beside her on the bench. “Are you as concerned about the Forest as she is?”

“I don’t remember my past, you know,” Mother explained. “Nothing before I stumbled upon the castle doorstep, with only the clothes on my back and two rose pots to call my own. Since coming here, though, wisps of memories have been coming back. They feel like memories, though I don’t know. Perhaps ... perhaps my mind is just making things up out of my experiences now in this new place. But I feel like I’ve lived here before.”

“Oh.”

“Mari, promise me that you’ll stay close to your sister. The two of you are both so special. I don’t think she ever believed it of herself, but she’s learning now.”

“I wouldn’t want to abandon her for anything,” Snowmari insisted. “She’s my own sister.” Despite their differences, they had always been inseparable. “But lately...”

Mother let go of the flower. “Your sister cares about you, and she’s scared right now.”

“I know. But ... why can’t I just live my life?”

Mother gave a long, slow sigh as she stared at Snowmari. “You’re such a special girl ... she only wants you to be happy, and she isn’t convinced that Willow will do that. I know you feel restricted, and I think he’s a good man, personally, but wouldn’t you prefer happiness in the long run?”

Snowmari lifted her shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. She couldn’t voice her true concerns – couldn’t speak of the threat to her heart if Willow broke it.

“Happiness isn’t permanent,” she said, dropping her gaze to her hands, clasped in her lap. “You and Father were happy, but then he died. So why always be putting off happiness to tomorrow when it can be so easily destroyed. Why not take joy in the moment, when it’s offered?”

Sorrow passed over Mother’s face – her whole life as she remembered revolved around her marriage. She had appeared on the palace doorstep, and Father had fallen immediately in love. Everyone had questioned it as a love spell, but nothing ill *had* come of it. Well, nothing ill beyond Snowmari’s ice magic, but could they really blame Mother for that?

“Mari, stay close to your sister,” Mother repeated. “Some wonder why I left so much of your care to her, and it is something I often wished against, but you’re better when you’re near her.”

Because Elinrose was determined to curtail Snowmari’s “violent emotions,” of course. But Snowmari just nodded and offered her mother a smile.

“And watch out for Mayblossom, too. It worries me that she was brought here with us.”

But it was just so *hard* to be civil to Elinrose when all she offered Snowmari were glares and “advice.”

“Why are the fairies preparing another picnic basket?” She asked, crossing her arms over her chest as Snowmari emerged from the dressing curtain, smoothing down the folds of the adorable blue dress she’d found yesterday.

Snowmari drew herself up straight and met Elinrose’s gaze. “Willow invited me to visit his tree again, and we’ll be gone all day, so I’m bringing some lunch.”

Elinrose frowned harder. “Alone?”

“Of course. We’ve been alone before – he’s always been a gentleman.” Snowmari tried to disarm her sister with a smile. “Look, what else is there to do about this house? Both of us can’t lurk about and pester the fairies trying to get them to let us help with the chores. At least I’m doing something with myself while we’re here.”

Elinrose released a very disappointed sigh but said nothing.

“Look, I know it’s not completely proper, but we’re living out here in the middle of this Forest! *Nothing* is ‘proper’ anymore.”

Elinrose shook her head. “Mari ... he’s a Wood Spirit. You’re a...” She paused and folded her arms over her chest. “You’re a princess.”

“I’m a princess in a Forest, and he’s a magical being,” Snowmari countered. “Have a bit of romance, Elin!”

“Princesses can’t afford romance; you know that as well as I do.” Elinrose shook her head. “After all these years, and you’ve always been so careful. Why throw it all to the wind now?”

“I’m not throwing anything to the wind. I’m enjoying life. Making the most of the situation. Maybe *you* should stop worrying so much and learn to live life.” Truly, it was as though Elinrose were the unfeeling Frost, not Snowmari. “I know you don’t want me to get hurt, but a life without pain isn’t *living*. You can’t keep anyone in a box, away from pain. Let me live, Elin. And maybe learn to live yourself in the process. Maybe you’ve lost your chance with Earnest, but we have this lovely Bear who’s been stopping by every evening or so, and the two of you seem just so close.”

“Mari!”

“Look, I’m just trying to help you live *life* for once.” Snowmari twisted

away and peered into the picnic basket that the fairies were preparing. “Oh! This all just looks so delicious.”

“Mari ... please, just be safe.”

“Maybe if you got your own life, you’d stop trying to live mine for me!”

Willow said that someone was coming to take the Mistress down. If they just waited a little while, maybe she would free the Forest. Then Willow could accept Snowmari for who she was, and they could live happily ever after together. That’s how it worked, wasn’t it?

“I’m twenty-one, Elin. Let me make my own mistakes.”

“And so you agree that Willow is a mistake?”

Snowmari straightened and glared at her sister. “He might break my heart in the end, but I believe him to be a good man, and while he makes me happy, I will *let* him make me happy.”

“Mari...”

Snowmari shut the picnic basket just as Willow’s knock came at the door. “We can talk about this tonight, Elin. Not because I want to, but because I know you’re not going to let this rest as long as Willow’s in my life. Because you *refuse* to approve of him.” She rolled her eyes. “Seriously, *you’re* the one who keeps upsetting me. I don’t like arguing with you, Elin. You’re my sister. You’ve been there for me every day of my life – don’t imagine I don’t appreciate that. I don’t want things to end with me resenting you.”

“End?” Elinrose’s face softened, and she took a step towards Snowmari. “What are you talking about?”

Snowmari opened and shut her mouth, then twisted away to get the door without answering her sister. Elinrose didn’t know, *couldn’t* know, the danger to Snowmari’s heart.

“Mari ... Mari, you know you can tell me anything, right?” Elinrose continued. “We’re ... we’re not in the North Country anymore. I don’t know when we’ll return – so if there’s something you need to tell me, please just tell me. Let me know how I can help you, because here in this Forest, I don’t ... I just don’t know anymore.”

Snowmari glanced over her shoulder at Elinrose and sighed. “I have nothing to tell you, and you can’t help. I’m sorry.”

~

Elinrose couldn’t help her.

Elinrose couldn’t help her.

Elinrose couldn't help her.

That fact chased itself about Snowmari's head as she followed Willow through the Forest. That fact and Elinrose's long, pleading gaze as she begged Snowmari to open up and confess all her deepest fears and struggles.

We're not in the North Country anymore. As though that changed anything. Which perhaps it did. Perhaps Snowmari's ice magic wasn't a crime here, but she wanted to go home one day. If she confessed to Elinrose, she would still face exile. The law was clear. Her sister would never be able to take her back to the North Country.

And there was no way for Elinrose to save Snowmari's heart from breaking.

"You've got an awfully long face today," Willow remarked, glancing back at her with a frown of his own. "And that just isn't right for my smiling Snowmari. Care to tell me what's the matter?"

Snowmari forced herself into a smile, snow flurries swirling in her stomach at his concern. "Oh, Elinrose and I were arguing this morning, before you arrived. It's nothing, really."

"You and Elinrose argue a lot, I've noticed. Now, granted, I don't know that much about girls and their sisters, but it doesn't seem quite right to me."

"It's not right." Snowmari sighed. "Elinrose and I are close. Or, at least, we used to be. I mean, she has always been so much of a worrier, but I *am* prone to trouble. It's only when the stress of Father's illness started falling on our shoulders that we began pulling apart. I hate it, but we just *can't* seem to see eye to eye anymore." She released a long, slow sigh. "She doesn't approve of you and me spending time together."

"I've suspected that." Willow fell back to walk at Snowmari's side. "She glares at me often. I ... I don't want to come between you and your sister. She loves you a lot."

"But I don't want her to come between you and *me*," she balled her hands into fists and then swallowed in alarm. Despite all the time they'd spent together, they had never spoken of what their relationship *was*.

He was charming and flirtatious enough, but he was a Wood Spirit. And her heart was too fragile to suffer disappointment, so she had never asked.

"Your sister needs you far more than I do." Willow stared ahead, refusing to meet Snowmari's eye. "Her love for you is deep. Don't abandon her for me – she needs you, and she would do anything for you."

"She needs something to control. She needs to learn that only Austere can

fix everything, and even He doesn't always do that." After all, He'd still let Father die. He hadn't taken away Snowmari's ice magic, no matter how hard she'd begged.

"And He gave her a devoted sister who challenges her every ideal." He shook his head.

Then again, Snowmari supposed that it *was* charming how Willow insisted that she not abandon her family for him. She did love her sister, and if Elinrose heard his declarations, then perhaps she wouldn't dislike him so much.

"I know she's scared of the Mistress, and I really don't blame her for it, but you said that someone's here who can take care of the Mistress, and when that happens, don't you think..."

Willow stopped short and spun around to face her, shaking his head sorrowfully. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Her breath caught as she stared up at him. "Like what?"

"I wasn't supposed to fall in love with you."

Her heart leapt and floundered. "You love me?"

He sighed. "And that's why I'm sorry."

Snowmari was far too quiet when Willow returned her that evening.

Elinrose frowned in concern as she watched her sister fold herself dejectedly into a chair and stare blankly into space.

Snowmari wouldn't answer questions. She barely ate the food that they offered her. And she was just so *cold!* The very air about her snapped with frost, and fear settled painfully in Elinrose's stomach.

What had become of her bright, cheerful sister?

Mother kept Mayblossom distracted and away from Snowmari, though it was impossible to hide that *something* was wrong.

They were all so out of sorts that Elinrose practically forgot about Bear until she heard the scratching at the door, and she rushed to let him in. Not that he could fix anything, but he could be one more person who could stand by them in this mess. Well, as much a person that a bear could be.

He took one look at Snowmari and deflated.

"Her heart's been broken. What did that—"

"Don't!" cried Snowmari, suddenly leaping into herself, eyes flashing as she gazed at Bear. "He didn't mean it. I promise. It ... it was my own foolish fault."

Elinrose's gaze narrowed, and her lips parted as she reached for her sister.

Snowmari collapsed against the back of the chair again. "And it doesn't matter, anyway."

"Oh, dearest," Elinrose breathed. "What—"

Snowmari glanced over at Elinrose, pulling her hand away. "I don't want to talk about it. I want ... I want to sleep."

"Well, in your own good time, then," said Elinrose, shaking her head. She'd hoped so hard that this wouldn't happen – but here they were.

"Dearest Mari, perhaps a story to help you through this trying time?" Bear suggested. "You can have the use of my warmth – it takes a lot to get through the thick fur of a bear."

Elinrose narrowed her gaze on him. "Bear..."

"I know my place," he said. "But right now, your sister is fragile and in pain. She needs extra care to help her stay put together."

Elinrose sighed again. She knew that all too well.

Slowly, reluctantly, Snowmari peeled herself out of the chair and slid onto

the floor to curl up at Bear's side. Elinrose would have fetched a blanket to lay over her, but she knew that it wouldn't do any good for her sister. Especially not right now.

"And now, the story." Bear gave a low rumbling growl that was strangely comforting, and Snowmari relaxed visibly, her fingers threading through his fur.

"There was once a beautiful young maiden who was so special, and yet she would never believe that of herself. She held men at arms' length, thinking that none could love her for herself. One day, a charming prince came along, discovered her beauty, and, with a bit of work and far too much charm, managed to get past her defenses."

Here he released a long, regretful sigh.

"Then he learned why she was so special, and he did not respond well. He rejected her, and by the time he realized his error, it was too late. He had broken her heart, and he had lost her.

"The maiden was strong, however, and she found healing. She was never the same, but she was able to find a new path for herself. I think she's even found love again."

Snowmari tensed, balling a fist in Bear's fur. "I don't think I can ever love again."

"Perhaps not, but you can definitely *be* loved, and I've heard that that can be just as exciting."

Elinrose frowned and sat down beside her sister, curling around her. "You're going to be just fine. You just have to heal."

"And I assure you, that idiotic fool of a prince was well-punished for his misdeeds. I can only assume that your good-for-nothing Wood Spirit will suffer himself."

"No ... I don't want him ... it wasn't his fault..." Snowmari's shoulders shook.

"Time will heal," Elinrose repeated. "And soon, you'll be back to the normal, bright Snowmari who braves life with her whole heart, my dearest little sister."

"Or, even if you don't, she'll still love you all the same," Bear added. "Because you're still you, Snowmari. Even with a broken heart."

~

"Would you like some cake, Mari?"

Three days had passed, and Snowmari had remained quiet. Remained cold.

Oh, but Elinrose wanted to march into those woods and cut down that willow tree with her bare hands. If she could trust the Forest to take her there and then return her to the cabin, then she would have done it already.

Her sister needed her, after all. Even if she acted like she needed no one.

Snowmari narrowed her gaze at the cake and curled tighter in on herself. She didn't even extend the energy to shake her head.

"You didn't eat breakfast. You need to eat something."

"How can I eat when food tastes of nothing?" Snowmari's voice was so flat. The only time she even gave a hint of emotion was when Bear came each night, and he had already left for the day.

Elinrose had her suspicions of *him* as well, but he'd very sternly explained that he only cared that she had support while she healed. That he'd set aside his every romantic aspiration the moment it was clear that her heart belonged to Willow.

Oh! But if *he* hadn't treated her so cruelly! And the way Snowmari kept defending him – it only made Elinrose angrier and angrier.

"Eat something. We don't want you to waste away into nothing, after all."

"What is even the point of me?"

Elinrose faltered. "Mari ... why would you need a *point*?" She shook her head. "You're here. You're our beloved sister, daughter, and aunt, and that's all we need from you. You make our lives better just by being here with us."

"But do I, though?" Snowmari fidgeted, and Elinrose could see that she stared at her hands. Her frost-encrusted hands. "Or do I..."

Elinrose reached forward and took her sister's hands, willing as much of her own warmth into Snowmari as possible. "You make our lives better," she repeated, firmly.

Snowmari tensed, but she didn't pull away. She opened her mouth, but she said nothing.

She was just so broken.

A knock sounded at the door, and Snowmari leapt out of the chair with sudden vigor. She threw open the door, her face fell a moment, and then a smile curled her lips. "Earnest!" she breathed, and she glanced towards Elinrose. "Elin, Earnest came for you!"

Elinrose stood and hastened to her sister's side to find that it was, indeed, Earnest on the other side, shuffling his feet awkwardly. "Well, actually, I

came for your whole family, really. Are your mother and niece with you?”

“They are,” said Elinrose. “Mother took Mayblossom for a walk, but they shouldn’t have gone far. Sir went with them, too, so they won’t get lost.”

“Sir?”

“One of the two fairies who keep this cottage,” Elinrose explained, as Snowmari retreated and tucked herself back into her chair, watching Earnest and Elinrose with gleaming eyes.

“Ah,” said Earnest.

“Would you like to come in? We have some cake, and I can only imagine that you’ve been traveling awhile. And you really must tell us everything – how is James doing as king? Are he and Faia getting along? Oh! But it’s been so hard, sitting here, cut off from all of them, with hardly a clue as to how things might be going at home!”

“Breakfast would be nice.” Earnest nodded to Snowmari as Elinrose stepped aside for him to enter. “I wish I could answer your questions better, but the truth is, I left early the next morning after your brother’s wedding and didn’t know that you had disappeared from the castle until Faia found me three days ago.”

Elinrose swallowed. “They must be so worried about us.”

“They are.” Earnest sighed as he took the slice of cake that Elinrose offered him. The cake that had been meant for Snowmari, but...

Elinrose *really* needed to find a way to keep her sister from wasting away, but news from home *surely* would go a long way, wouldn’t it?

“Faia knows more about the Mistress than I do,” Earnest continued. “She said she could feel the tension of this place as soon as she stepped foot in it again. To be honest, so did I, but I wasn’t sure what to make of it. How was I to guess that the women of your family had been spirited out of the castle in the middle of the night, right out from under my own nose?” He shook his head. “Have you been all right out here? You’ve not been hurt in any way?”

Elinrose slid her gaze towards Snowmari again and sighed. “We’ve suffered no attacks from the Mistress, so far as we know. But ... Mari did get caught in a landslide when she ventured into the Forest alone. She was rescued by a Wood Spirit, but ... that ended badly. Other than her broken heart, though, we’re all in one piece.”

Earnest grimaced as he glanced towards Snowmari, who had collapsed in on herself again at the mention of her heartbreak. “Wood Spirits are notoriously unfaithful.”

“Clearly. I warned her against him, but she wouldn’t listen, and now what can we do?”

“Perhaps a change of scenery is what she needs most,” said Earnest, staring at Snowmari thoughtfully. “There’s a village not terribly far from here, and it’s actually where I told Faia I would bring you if I found you.”

“Will it be safe?” Elinrose frowned as she thought of all the mysterious comments that Willow had made. Of the Mistress’s anger when she’d seen her.

“I imagine it’s just as safe as you being here.” Earnest stared at Elinrose thoughtfully. “Nothing happens in the Forest without the Mistress’s knowledge. She already knows you’re here. My only question is – why *are* you here?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. Are we here at her bidding, or, if it’s against her will, what force brought us here, and...” She paused and frowned as she thought of Ash. What did that mysterious woman have to do with everything? What did any of her riddles mean? “I really don’t think I’m here because the Mistress wanted me back, but I am pretty sure that *I* am the target. Snowmari, Mother, and Mayblossom were all just ... I don’t know. Here to keep *me* here.”

“What do they want with you?” Earnest frowned.

“Beyond the fact that I apparently scare the Mistress ... I really don’t know.” She rubbed her head. “This place is so strange, and all I want is to go *home*.”

Earnest reached over and laid a hand over hers. “Well, we’ll get you to that village and see how we can go from there. No promises if it’s the Forest itself scheming against you.” He shook his head. “But I promised to see you safely home if it was at all in my power, and that promise still holds true.”

“Thank you.”

“Well, it’s the least I can do for your brother and our neighbor, and well, I’m always ready to make the Mistress unhappy. She’s made my life quite miserable, I don’t mind admitting.”

“I think she’s made quite a few lives miserable.” Elinrose’s frown deepened. Ash seemed to think that *she* could do something about it. But what? And why would she even want to?

“If there was a way to stop her completely, well, I don’t know if there is one, but legends go that she was once a kind and benevolent ruler. Or ... something. This Forest wasn’t always a prison to everyone who stepped foot

into it.”

“I know,” said Elinrose. “The North Country wasn’t always cut off from the rest of the land.” She pulled her hand away from him.

Earnest stared at her for a long moment, then shoved the last bite of cake into his mouth and stood. “Well, I’ll leave you to make whatever preparations you need for the journey. Pack some food. There’s no way to know how long it will take us to convince the Forest to take us to the village. I’ll go find your mother and niece and let them know where you’re going.”

Elinrose nodded woodenly as he retreated.

“He came for you,” said Snowmari, staring after him. “He really likes you, Elin. He found out that you were in trouble and immediately ran to save you.”

“He came to save *all* of us.” Elinrose stood, sighing, and retreated to her sister’s side. “But, it was very sweet of him, and I’m glad he did it, even if there’s absolutely *nothing* for you to read into the situation.”

Snowmari stared up at Elinrose with a lost expression. “One of us needs to be happy. Take it from your sister with a broken heart – it’s worth it. All the pain and heartache, it just means that you lived life. And I know you’re afraid to live sometimes, because you’re so determined to keep everyone around you safe, but that’s not your job. It’s Austere’s.”

“Oh, Mari...” Elinrose took a deep breath.

“You wanted me to be safe, but I want you to be happy. Because one of us deserves it.” Snowmari stood and threw her arms around Elinrose’s neck. “Don’t let my pain hold you back. I need you to be happy for me. Please.”

Elinrose squeezed her sister tight, willing as much warmth into her as she could give. “For you, I’ll try. But it’s really, *really* too early to be talking of *anything* between Earnest and I, beyond the prince of one country helping the princess of another to deal with a mutual enemy. It’s nothing more, and nothing less.”

“I see the way he looks at you. The way you look at him.”

Elinrose swallowed. “Mutual hardship creates familiarity.”

“You sound so *heartless*, Elin.”

Heartless.

Elinrose stiffened, holding her sister tighter. The word struck an unspeakable chord within her, and she didn’t know how to answer.

Snowmari accused her of going to any length to keep those she loved safe, and her mind plunged into her dreams and strange visions, where Ash – and

Willow, even – begged and begged for her to save them from the Mistress.

As though that were in her power...

But was it really power that held her back? Or was it fear of this woman, *being* that she knew so little about but seemed to have such control over her life.

Why had James ever stepped foot in this Forest?

She owed it nothing. Whatever Ash claimed, they had the wrong woman. Elinrose wanted nothing but to return home. Let someone else rise and face the Mistress.

What could *she* do?

Earnest warned that it could take days to convince the Forest to lead them to the village. They were there by nightfall.

“I don’t know how or why, but the trees certainly seem to like you, Elin,” Earnest remarked to her as they surveyed the row of houses. “I may have to travel with you more often in the future.”

Elinrose stiffened and then forced herself to shrug. “I can’t abandon my family.”

“No, I don’t suppose you can.” Earnest released a long sigh.

Elinrose pushed the thought aside, telling herself that it was just the Snowmari’s imaginings rubbing off on her. But was the gaze that Earnest gave her just the *tiniest* bit wistful?

She focused on the village instead, if, indeed, “village” was a proper term for the cluster of maybe fifteen cabins and huts that huddled in the clearing before her. A few people wandered about, weaving between the houses, stopping to chat with one another, a few doing necessary tasks such as gardening and building.

“It’s not much, but this is one of the largest settlements within the Forest,” said Earnest. “It’s said that there were once entire cities, built out of living trees, but the Mistress destroyed them so that her subjects would be scattered and helpless against her.”

“It sounds like she’s scared of any power that might rise against her,” said Mother.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Elinrose folded her hands at her waist.

“Ah, but I wish some days that I could have seen this Forest like it was then. That perhaps it could be like that again. Come along,” said Earnest, walking again. “I have someone I’d like to introduce you to. Faia used to stay with her, and I’m sure she’ll let you four do the same while I find Faia.”

Elinrose nodded as they followed. “Sounds agreeable.”

“I hope it is.” Snowmari hugged herself as she pressed herself close to Elinrose. The chill about her was as bad as ever. Had it really been wise to bring her among people?

Elinrose’s eyes narrowed as she focused on a young woman with dark curls and skin who nursed a fire. Who *controlled* the fire. A Cinder. Such were even more of a legend than Frosts in the North Country, but would have

been very welcomed.

Perhaps Snowmari *could* find a home here. Elinrose wrapped an arm around her sister's shoulders.

Perhaps...

Perhaps...

Perhaps, but there was the Mistress to think of.

Could Elinrose doom her sister to live in a place controlled by that woman?

If she was even a woman.

"And here we are," said Earnest, knocking at a door, which flew open moments later. A pretty young woman stood on the other side, red hair bound into two braids, eyes wide and innocent, freckles scattered across her nose.

"Your Highness!" she breathed.

"Hello, Lilly, I have some friends who've come to stay with you. Faia's new family – her stepdaughter, sisters-in-law, and their mother."

The girl's eyes widened even further as she surveyed the group. "The Mistress said that Faia was going off to marry a prince who was about to be a king."

"Yes," said Elinrose. "And the night after the wedding, the four of us found ourselves spirited back here without a clue as to why."

"Faia came looking for them," Earnest added. "Asked me to help, and here they are."

Lilly nodded again and continued to nod as she continued to glance from one woman to another, then she suddenly drew herself to her full height. "Well, it's been lonely in this house since Faia left, and I've been wanting some new friends. Come inside – I know how awful it can be, traveling through the Forest, so you must be tired. The stew's just ready – it was supposed to last me a few days, so there's more than enough to share."

"Thank you, you're too kind." Mother patted Lilly's hand as they stepped into the house.

Lilly smiled awkwardly and glanced to Earnest. "Will you be staying for supper as well?"

He squinted up at the darkening sky that was visible in this clearing. "It is too late to travel anymore today, so I may as well stay for dinner. I won't impose on you for sleeping, not when this house will be full already with the guests I've brought, but I would appreciate food."

Lilly bit her lip and nodded, retreating quietly to a cupboard to retrieve

bowls and spoons, into which she ladled servings of the stew that hung over the fire.

“Mousy little thing, isn’t she?” Mother observed.

“Indeed,” said Earnest, frowning as his eyes fixed on Lilly. Like she was a riddle that he couldn’t quite solve. Like she was one he desperately *needed* to solve.

Elinrose smiled her thanks as Lilly set a bowl of stew in front of her.

“So, what is it like in this village?” Elinrose asked, feeling the awkwardness of the gathering. “Do you like it here?”

Lilly drew in a sharp breath as she laid a bowl in front of Earnest and then sat down in the empty seat across from him. “Well, I’ve never known anywhere else,” she said. “The Mistress took me from my parents when I was a baby to pay a debt. She raised me herself for a few years until she grew bored and then left me here with an old woman who died a few years later.” She shrugged and spooned a bite of the soup into her mouth. “I’ve had many housemates over the years, but most give me a wide berth due to my connection to the Mistress.”

“Poor thing,” said Mother, reaching over to pat Lilly’s hand. “The Mistress is a cruel one, to be certain. Jealous, too. If I thought we could safely extract you, then I would suggest you come with us when we make our escape.”

Lilly stirred her stew pensively. “I don’t think it’ll be easy for you to leave. The Mistress...”

“The Mistress all-but banished Elinrose, the last time she was here,” said Earnest. “That’s why Faia was sent with them.”

“And then no sooner was Faia married to our brother that we all woke up here,” said Elinrose. “It doesn’t make sense from beginning to end.”

“The Mistress ... I don’t think there’s anyone who can understand the full depths of her schemes.” Lilly sipped at the broth in her spoon. “But there’s been a more hopeful wind blowing through the trees. A troubled wind, too. Perhaps...” Her gaze drifted to Elinrose, and she gave a nervous shrug. “Well, it’s probably been a long day for the five of you. You probably want to eat and get to sleep as soon as possible.”

~

Once Earnest bid them good night, they didn’t see him again, for he left early the following day to seek Faia.

Lilly invited Elinrose to tend to her garden that morning. It was a sprawling affair that took up the entirety of her backyard and was filled with flowers, vegetables, and herbs in almost equal measures.

They made small talk for a while, as Lilly showed off her plants with a mother's pride. But there was only so much she could say about the yield of her strawberries, and at length, she drew herself to her full height and turned to Elinrose.

"I wanted to talk with you alone."

Elinrose raised an eyebrow. "Well, you have me to yourself. What's your concern? I suppose you would be right to fear sheltering us, given how the Mistress..."

Lilly's eyes flashed. "I have no love for the Mistress, I promise. I..." She drew in a shaky breath, her eyes fixed on the treeline before them. "I said that the winds have shifted, and they have. I'm telling you now that I swear to do anything in my power to help end her tyranny."

Her expression was so meaningful, Elinrose wondered if she was supposed to understand some hidden context.

"Well, I suppose, if you're trapped here, that would be your only option..."

Lilly sighed, her arms falling to her side. "I suppose you might not recognize the signs, growing up in a snow-locked country as you did. But I can feel the way the trees bend towards you. The effect you have on your sister. You're the strongest Sensitive that I've ever met, and I know that the Mistress hates you because you're too old for her to drain your power."

"Drain my..." Elinrose took a step back, shaking her head in confusion. "I don't have any..."

Lilly grabbed her arm. "How else do you think that your sister is still standing? The loss of a father, home, and lover, all so close together, would shatter the heart of any Frost, but she's still standing."

"My sister isn't..." The custom protest died on her lips, and Elinrose swallowed. "Frosts are put to death in the North Country. I've compensated for her since her birth."

Ever since, at three years old, her mother laid an ice-cold bundle in her cradle and told her that this was her sister to love and protect however she could.

"Because a Sensitive, with our connection to life and spring, is the true balance to a Frost. Not a Cinder, with their blazing heat. No, they would

overwhelm a Frost. But us...”

“Us?”

Lilly drew back and inclined her head to the garden. “Why do you think the Mistress took me from my parents? Why do you think that Faia lived with me while her own heart healed? I don’t think I was ever strong, and the Mistress stole almost everything I did have, but here I am.”

Elinrose swallowed again. “Yes, here you are.”

“You really can’t feel the Forest?” Lilly’s brow knit. “You have to feel *something*.”

The air around them tightened. Elinrose pushed away thoughts of Ash and how she continued to invade her dreams. It wasn’t as frequent since the confrontation at Willow’s tree, but it was no less disturbing and unwanted.

“This Forest is so strange. How would I know what is unusual here?” she finally answered.

“That is true enough,” Lilly admitted. “I think I could help you learn, though. Learn how to listen. How to speak. If you want to learn. Because you *are* a strong Sensitive, and the Forest is reaching for you.”

“I’m needed in the North Country. James...”

How had James handled things alone? Elinrose had worried about him enough while she thought he still had his new wife to help him focus. Now that she’d learned that Faia had come looking for them...

Lilly’s shoulders sagged. “I’ve heard that the North Country is suffering for its separation from the rest of the land. Wouldn’t it be in its best interest to free it so it can once again thrive?”

Well, that was a fair point. Elinrose refused to accede to it, however.

“The Mistress is cruel,” Lilly continued. “She steals power and abuses it. And yes, we could wait until someone else comes along who can stop her, or maybe she might someday die of old age – though I somehow doubt that’s even possible – but why would you condemn us to that? It’s in your power to rise up, but you just sit back, wash your hands and say it’s not your problem.”

“And just because my brother wandered into this Forest and I came looking for him, that gave the place the right to haul me and the rest of my family back here and demand I fix its problems?”

“I know.” Lilly glanced down and hugged her arms around herself. “I don’t like asking it of you, but I’m desperate. Time is running out for Earnest and myself, and as long as the Mistress rules the Forest, I don’t think there will be any escape. I don’t love him, nor can I condemn him to go back ...

he's still under her curse.”

Elinrose stiffened. “Curse? I’m sorry, but you’re not making any sense. Do you mind going back and starting over from the beginning?”

“The beginning, of course.” Lilly sat down hard on the ground and rested her head in her hands. “To tell the truth, I’ve never told anyone this before – Earnest told me to keep it secret to keep me safe. Not even Faia knew, though she *had* to suspect something. But Earnest’s brother did something to anger the Mistress, so she not only trapped them here but also transformed him and Earnest into animals. I don’t know much about his brother – they avoid crossing paths, Earnest has told me – but one day I was out fetching water, and I found a frog who asked if I would take him home and let him stay the night. The frog was Earnest, and I wound up breaking the curse, but when he transformed into himself again, he said that we would have to marry within a year or he’ll turn back and this time be stuck as a frog forever.”

“You and Earnest are engaged?” Elinrose wasn’t sure why her heart forgot to beat for a second.

Lilly nodded. “I’m not sure how much time he has left, but it can’t be much longer. And I don’t love him – I love Henry, the village doctor. I haven’t told Henry yet, I’m sure he thinks I hate him, and I don’t know...”

“All this time...”

“So, you see, perhaps you think that you can wait for someone else to come along and fight the Mistress, but I don’t have that luxury.”

Elinrose shook her head. “He’s ... he’s a good man, though...” she muttered, unsure whether for herself or Lilly.

“He is – but he’s a prince,” Lilly protested. “We belong to different worlds, he and I, and I just can’t get past that. He knows how I feel, and I’ve tried ... perhaps if Henry wasn’t in the picture, but here I am, at the focus of this mess, with two men I don’t want to hurt. And if I sound selfish when I ask you to help us, then it’s because our situation is hopeless, and we’re desperate for someone to save us.”

“I’m sorry,” said Elinrose, and she turned and went back to the house, her thoughts whirling.

All this time, Earnest had been promised to another. And, much as she had protested Snowmari’s teasing and speculation, she *had* allowed herself to hope. She *did* like him. He was kind, determined, and handsome besides. Perhaps she still wouldn’t call it *love*, but the fact that he would never be hers was a devastating blow.

Was it in her power to fight the Mistress and free him for herself? Perhaps, but the thought didn't sit well with her. She had no right to presume upon him. Who was she to alter the trajectory of his life?

Maybe he didn't deserve to have the Mistress controlling his life, but what would it take to free him? Elinrose was pretty sure that it would take more than just walking into the Mistress's clearing and asking her politely to be nicer to the people in the Forest.

She didn't fear Elinrose that much.

This wasn't a decision to make on whim. Elinrose had heard Lilly's appeal, and she wasn't going to turn her back on it, but until she was sure what was the *right* course of action, she wouldn't rush in.

Earnest would return with Faia soon enough. She'd make the decision then. Not before. She had to talk with him first.

And in the meantime, it might not hurt to ask Lilly to teach her everything she could. If only so she could better protect Snowmari.

Every beat of Snowmari's heart was proof she still lived. But for what?

She pulled her blanket tighter around herself as Elinrose stalked back into the house, frowning like the world was ending.

But what else was new?

Elinrose paced up and down the length of the room and then suddenly spun around to face Snowmari.

"How are you this morning?"

Snowmari gave a half-hearted smile, sensing that her sister desperately needed her spirits lifted. "Well enough. I'm still breathing. I haven't died. What more can I ask for?"

"The man you love to return your affection." Elinrose pressed her lips together and leaned against the wall.

Snowmari shrugged, her smile fading. "I could wish that our love lacked barriers, but it was doomed from the start. Perhaps I was a fool, but I enjoyed it while it lasted, and that's all I wanted. I mean, I do wish my beloved older sister had been more supportive, but she was as determined to question my decisions as ever." She held up a hand as Elinrose opened her mouth. "I don't need 'I told you so's.' You've said enough of them already."

"I'm sorry."

Snowmari tugged the blanket tighter, even though it didn't do her any good. She had no body heat.

Elinrose crossed the room and wrapped her arms around Snowmari, lending her warmth. As though she knew exactly what Snowmari needed. How hadn't she said a word about the cold that overwhelmed her more each day?

"But you're strong, Mari. You'll get through this." Elinrose gave a long, heartfelt sigh. "And I'm not going to abandon you for anything."

Snowmari shrugged limply, not having the energy to respond more than that. A broken heart was *exhausting*.

The door opened again, and Lilly entered, a basket of vegetables over her arm. "I think I'm going to make you some clove tea," she announced. "It's what always helped Faia while she was recovering."

Snowmari blinked, even as Elinrose pulled away. Her frown had returned. Snowmari wished she knew how to comfort her sister, but when she only

grew colder with each beat of her broken heart...

“We could even send for the doctor,” Lilly mused as she set a kettle over the fire. “I mean, I have confidence in my own abilities, and I know that yours is an emotional malady, but he’s a healer, and I do know he can help you.”

“A doctor would be appreciated,” said Elinrose, pinching her lips together. “Are you sure...”

“He’s a good healer.”

Snowmari threw the useless blanket off of herself and stood, shaking her head. “I don’t think a doctor is necessary for a broken heart. I will survive.”

“Of course you will,” said Lilly. “But that’s no excuse for us to not give you all the help we can give. Falling for a Wood Spirit...” She shook her head with a click of her tongue. “It’s a well-known warning to never let one have your heart.”

“Well, by the time I heard the warning, it was too late.” Snowmari drew a deep breath and shrugged again. “I don’t want to talk about him anymore. He’s gone, and he’s promised to never see me again.”

“Mari...”

Snowmari pushed her sister away. She needed to stand on her own. She couldn’t keep stealing Elinrose’s warmth, no matter how willing her sister was to give it.

It was only a matter of time before Elinrose realized that Snowmari had no heat of her own.

She might have survived their father’s death. Losing Willow had broken her, but she *would* recover. But if her sister learned what she was, if Elinrose looked at her like she was a monster...

That would destroy her utterly.

She pasted on a smile and shook her head. “You really don’t need to keep treating me like I’m a fragile piece of glass. I’m going to be just *fine*.”

Elinrose’s shoulders sagged, and she glanced at Lilly as though for help. Lilly’s lips pressed into a line as she shook her head.

“There’s no shame in accepting help while you heal,” said Lilly. “Your sister loves you. Accept her help.” She chewed her lower lip as she checked the kettle. “Don’t be stupid.”

Snowmari bristled at this near-stranger – and commoner no less – calling her stupid.

“I’ll get you this tea, and then I’ll go talk to Henry,” Lilly continued. She

gave a limp smile. “Please, don’t be rash. I can tell that it would devastate your sister if you don’t take the healing you need.”

It wasn’t much longer before Lilly put a mug of tea into Snowmari’s hand and then disappeared out the door.

Elinrose took a deep breath as she stared after their host. “Do you ever wonder when too much is too much?”

Snowmari blew lightly on her tea, careful to not freeze the liquid. “What do you think is too much?”

Elinrose hugged her arms around herself. “This Forest. What it wants of us. Of me.”

Snowmari froze with the cup against her lips. “I ... you think it wants something from you? I mean, there has to be some reason that the Mistress brought us here, but she brought all of us, and...” She trailed off, Willow’s parting words echoing through her head. “Elinrose, what are you caught up in?”

Elinrose’s chin lifted. “I don’t know. I don’t ... I don’t want to know. Oh, Mari!” She sunk down on the bed with a heavy sigh. “Mari, first and foremost, I’m your sister and a princess of the North Country.”

Snowmari took a long draught of her tea. It was already cold, but it felt good anyway.

Your sister will do anything for you, Willow had told her. You weren’t meant to fall in love with me – most Frosts guard their hearts better than you have, especially against my kind. But, perhaps, this is for the best. Elinrose will do what she must to cure your frozen heart.

~

They didn’t say anything else to each other, and the unspoken secrets hung heavy in the air between the sisters.

Snowmari understood so little of the situation, and though she knew that Elinrose likely needed to know what Willow had told her, she didn’t want that on her sister’s shoulders. Elinrose clearly knew far more than she shared.

Part of Snowmari felt hurt all over again as she knew how little Elinrose confided in her. Part of her desperately wanted to keep herself from being used against her sister.

Oh! How she had been the fool! Her every action and decision since they woke in the Forest had been nothing but impulse and rebellion, and now here she was, unsure what her broken heart might mean for her sister.

But ... this barrier was Elinrose's fault as much as her own. Elinrose didn't have to keep everything to herself. She could have told Snowmari her fears.

But she *never* trusted Snowmari.

The door opened, and Mother and Mayblossom entered, and Elinrose leapt up to entertain their niece while Mother chattered away about nothing in particular.

How did Elinrose do it? Smile and laugh like nothing was the matter when everything was clearly just so *wrong*.

Elinrose fixed Snowmari another mug of tea, cautioning her to drink it more quickly this time, though she made no comment about the slush of ice that remained on the bottom of her emptied cup.

How did Elinrose never notice what was so glaringly obvious to Snowmari? Surely she wasn't so blind. Surely she knew that ice wasn't normal now that they were away from the North Country.

The door opened again and in walked Lilly and the promised doctor. Henry proved to be a tall, wiry fellow with an easy-going smile that reminded Snowmari achingly of Willow.

"Well, I hear we have a broken heart on our hands," he announced, far too cheerily and far too loudly. The whole world didn't need to know Snowmari's woe.

But, then again, maybe it did.

Maybe she ought to find the highest mountain and shout her every complaint to the wind. If only she had the energy to do it. The passion...

It grew harder to feel by the day. Her stupid broken heart.

She sucked in a breath as she realized that the doctor had taken her hand and was closely examining the lines of frost that no one else had yet noticed. No matter how hard she tried to will that crust of ice away, it consumed her.

"You are colder than Faia was when she came to us, but you seem stronger," the man mused, pushing his spectacles up his nose. "But, of course, hearts don't all break the same."

He asked a list of questions that Snowmari answered mindlessly, not having the wherewithal to care about what she said, so long as she didn't incriminate herself. A few times, she held silent, and Elinrose answered for her with terrifying accuracy.

At last, the interview was over, and Snowmari was released to sink down wearily on the bed. Henry nodded to Lilly. "Well, she seems to be holding

together as well as we can ask for – a stubborn young woman to be certain. You know what I prescribed for Faia. I can only instruct you to do the same for her.”

Lilly nodded. “Of course. I expected as much. I just thought, well, it couldn’t hurt to get...”

“To get a second opinion? Of course not.” Henry finished her statement with an easy smile. “Ah, and I never turn down the opportunity to come and see you.” His smile faded as he glanced to Snowmari. “But, then, as you well know, jealousy is something we should never risk. Take care of the patient, and I’ll be by again as I have a chance to see how she is doing. Keep her warm. Keep her loved.”

With another nod to Lilly, he disappeared out the door again, and Snowmari’s heart gave another painful jolt.

Jealousy.

It was a heavy word, made more painful for the fact that Snowmari wasn’t quite sure that it *fit*. She didn’t want a single other person to share in her misery. She just desperately wished that she wasn’t filled with it herself.

“Is Aunt Mari going to be all right?”

Mayblossom’s voice cut through her haze, setting her spinning thoughts on one trajectory.

She couldn’t stay here and let her family watch the ice consume her. Couldn’t let them see her become an unfeeling monster.

Snowmari waited for everyone else to fall asleep before she crawled out from between Elinrose and Lilly.

It was almost painful, leaving their warmth, but she knew that if she stayed now, she'd never have the strength.

She went to the pantry to fetch a few supplies. Not so much as to leave her family and Lilly bereft – but enough that she could put distance between herself and them before the inevitable. A bundle of vegetables and some more of those cloves. She might not be able to bring hot water with her, but the spice seemed to help even without physical warmth.

That done, she headed out into the night.

As Snowmari crossed into the line of trees, she wished she had some form of light, but she'd known that her ice would have quickly overtaken any candle she carried, if she'd been able to light it in the first place. Light or no light, she would get lost quickly, and this time she wouldn't let any charming Wood Spirits rescue her. The moon was full tonight, even if she couldn't see it anymore. The light that filtered through the tree leaves would have to be sufficient.

“Please, Austere,” she prayed, throwing one last glance over her shoulder at the huddled cluster of houses. “Watch over them. Don't let them mourn me too much. Keep Elinrose safe. Don't let her do anything rash.”

There was nothing more that she could do. She rushed forward, not daring to look back again.

The Forest was even more terrifying in the darkness. If she'd thought herself hasty and unprepared before, now she felt thrice so.

But it was too late to turn back, even if she wanted to. The Forest had already closed behind her. So she kept pressing forward, one step after another, blocking out the terrifying noises of the night.

She had no illusions that her family would take her disappearance easily. They would be devastated when they woke to find her gone. But it would already be too late. They would surely know better than to plunge into the Forest after her.

They would mourn her, but it was better they do it as she was – foolish faults and all. Better they think her a lovesick idiot than the monster she was.

She sent up another prayer, this one that her family would never even

guess at the truth. That their memory of her would never be marred by the Frost she truly was.

One step after another, Snowmari kept pushing through the night. There was no need to worry about direction when she had no destination. She just needed to get as far away as possible.

A few tears leaked from her eyes, and she cherished them. Tears meant sorrow, and sorrow meant she still felt *something*. Her heart hadn't frozen completely, just yet.

Lights flashed in her peripheral, and Snowmari twisted around to follow after it. Was this perhaps yet another foolish idea? Most certainly, but she wasn't picky about which direction she went.

Footstep after footstep, she kept pushing through the night, until exhaustion weighed down her limbs and she could no longer move. Then she sank down onto the ground right where she stood and fell asleep, the lights still circling around her.

~

She woke in a cradle of ice.

Snowmari blearily felt around herself, but she'd frozen the ground for several feet around her, no doubt killing every plant in the area.

Just one more thing to add to the things she couldn't do right.

A shudder went down her spine – if she had stayed in her own bed, would this have happened to Lilly and Elinrose? Would even Mother and Mayblossom have been safe?

“Ah, there you are, Snowmari! Awake at last – and here Sir and I had been just thinking that you might sleep forever. Bear told us that it would be a terrible thing indeed if that happened, but we weren't to wake you, regardless. You were walking for such a long time last night, after all.”

Snowmari jolted to attention at the chirping voice, eyes widening as the two fairies circled about her head.

“I thought the two of you had to stay with the cabin,” she whispered.

“We've never stayed at the cabin before,” said Jenna, pausing to frown at Snowmari. “That was you and your family. We just came by every day to take care of you and the house.”

“Bear was worried about you,” said Sir. “Said that we needed to keep an eye out regardless. It was good that we did, too. When we found you last night, you were about to walk straight off a cliff, and I don't know what good

all of that ice would have done you, then. It's not like you have wings."

"Humans are so terribly designed." Jenna shook her head. "It's a pity, really."

"We told you to tell Bear that Earnest was with us and that we would be safe." Snowmari pressed a hand against her head.

"Yes, but Bear worried about *you*." Jenna clapped her hands together. "We went and told him we found you while you were asleep. He was here, for a while, but just left to hunt. Sir, go find him and let him know that Snowmari is awake."

Sir flew away before Snowmari could answer.

"I don't ... I don't want him to see me like this," she muttered.

"Like what?" Jenna tilted her head to the side as she stared down at her.

Snowmari gestured to the ice around her. "This."

Jenna still seemed to not comprehend – witless fairy that she was.

"It's very pretty – you're a powerful Frost, to be certain."

"I don't want to be powerful. I want to be normal! I want to be able to love my family without fearing the consequences! I want to live without death hanging over my head if I make even the slightest wrong move." She sunk against the ground, her outburst draining her of what energy she'd gained in sleep. "I want to be honest with them."

"And what keeps you from that, Mari?"

She winced as Bear came out of the treeline, settling on all fours before her.

Snowmari opened her mouth, but then shook her head, her shoulders sagging in defeat.

"I can't bear the thought that they would look at me like I were a monster."

She could barely believe that Bear could stand to sit there, starting at her.

"You really think your family is so ignorant that they don't already love you for exactly who you are?"

Snowmari tensed, her eyes widening more as she looked up to stare at Bear. "They don't know ... they can't..."

"Your sister knows for certain, and I can't imagine your mother ignorant of the daughter she birthed. I can't speak for your niece – Mayblossom has confessed no suspicions to me – but I know you've had at least two allies carefully keeping your secret for you your whole life."

Snowmari shook her head. "If that's true, then how have they never *said*

anything? Why did they make me think I bore this secret alone?”

“Those aren’t questions for me to answer – but have they really said nothing?”

Snowmari swallowed, closing her eyes as she cast back through the years. Every conversation with her tight-lipped sister, always cautioning her to take care and keep warm.

“I am such a fool.”

“As are we all when we’re young.” Bear crawled closer to her so she could burrow into the warmth of his fur. Much as she hated the thought of her ice freezing *him*.

“The Mistress gave me fur thick enough that even the strongest Frost can’t hurt me,” said Bear. “Don’t be afraid.”

Something akin to a sob caught in Snowmari’s throat. Every time she’d accused Elinrose of not understanding her problems and her sister’s crestfallen expression haunted her. Why had she never listened to her sister?

“And here’s some nice, hot soup for you! Do eat up – you need both the warmth and the nourishment.”

Snowmari blinked as the fairies flew a steaming bowl of soup into her hands, thick with meat and vegetables and smelling strongly of cloves. She recognized the vegetables as the ones she’d brought with her, though she had to guess where they acquired meat. Or the bowl and spoon and fire to cook it with.

But it wasn’t worth the energy to wonder. She spooned the soup into her mouth with restless desperation.

“When you’re ready, I want you to climb onto my back so I can carry you back to your family. I’m afraid that this little excursion of yours might have repercussions, and I’d like to prevent as many of those as possible.”

Snowmari nodded, knots of worry tying themselves up in the pit of her stomach. Last night, she’d been so focused on her family never finding out, but if they already knew – oh, there was no point in their pain at all!

How had she been such a selfish, ignorant fool? How much had her family suffered because of her? How much would they still suffer? She had no illusions that this revelation would make her wise and careful in all decisions henceforth – if she even managed to survive this broken heart.

“Thank you...” she whispered. “I don’t deserve...”

“No one deserves a broken heart, especially not a princess as special as yourself. Besides...” And here Bear rumbled with a growling chuckle. “I

have a debt to pay – not necessarily to yourself, but certainly to your kind.”

Snowmari stiffened and nearly choked on a mouthful of soup. “That story you told me, the night that Willow ... that was a true story, wasn’t it? You were the prince, and you broke the heart of another Frost.”

Bear took a long minute to answer.

“I did.”

Snowmari took another bite of soup, not sure what to do with that confession.

“I loved her,” he added. “Truly, I did. But my love wasn’t enough to accept what she was, and I broke her.”

Snowmari swallowed another spoonful of soup.

“She wasn’t like you – she wasn’t surrounded by a family that loved and protected her. She’d already been cast from her home for her difference.” Bear shifted, laying his head on his paws. “Not a day goes by that I don’t think about how things might be different if I had just behaved better. If I had accepted her at once rather than leaving without a word so I could selfishly ‘process’ my shock.”

“What was her name?” Snowmari still wasn’t sure what to do with this information, but she figured that being an interested listening ear was the least she could do for Bear, given that he had just saved her life.

“Faia.”

Snowmari sucked in a breath and she sat up straight. “So, you mean...”

“Yes, I mean your new sister-in-law – and I am infinitely grateful that she’s found a family who will love and care for her as she is.”

Snowmari’s grip tightened on her bowl as she thought over conversations with and about Faia. No wonder she’d warned Snowmari about breaking her heart. No wonder Lilly and Elinrose constantly compared them.

“Does Elin know? James?”

“I can’t imagine that your sister is ignorant – once you know what to watch for, a Frost’s tells are obvious. And, knowing Faia as I do, she wouldn’t enter a marriage with an ignorant groom.”

Snowmari nodded, hoping that this was so, but unsure how it could be.

“And what about you?” she prompted. “You were a prince, and now you’re a bear.”

“The Mistress thought it a fitting punishment. I’m trapped in this form until I can win the heart of another Frost. *That* is why I wished to pursue you. I admit that it sounds selfish when I say it aloud, but I wanted to fall in love

with you for who you were, not just so you could save me.”

“But then I fell for Willow, and he broke my heart.”

“You owed me nothing, and you still don’t. And I will stand by you as you need me. *I* owe that to Faia. And, besides...”

He didn’t finish that thought and just let it hang in the air. Snowmari was too overwhelmed to ask him what he meant. Perhaps it didn’t matter. Perhaps she didn’t want to hear it.

Perhaps it was too late.

Elinrose frowned at the treeline, worry tying her stomach into painful knots.

Where was Snowmari?

She'd felt her sister slip out of bed, but had thought nothing of it, expecting her to return after she took care of her nightly needs. It wasn't until morning came that Elinrose realized that Snowmari never did come back.

"No one in the village has seen her or knows where she is," said Lilly, stepping up behind Elinrose. "She's not here. That means she went back to the Forest."

Elinrose swallowed.

"I know, after a loss as she's suffered, people don't always think straight, and you're all new to the Forest – but you did say that she knows the danger of the place." Lilly tugged on one of her braids. "Is your sister usually given to rash impulses like this?"

"Unfortunately." Elinrose wrapped her arms around herself. "I think she didn't want us to see what was happening to her. She ... we ... Frosts are put to death in the North Country. Even though I've always covered for her, cared for her, protected her ... but I could never *know*."

"But you *did* know?"

Elinrose nodded. "And I always thought she realized I did. I wasn't *that* subtle. And now..." She took a step towards the trees. "And now how am I to find her?"

Lilly put a hand on her arm. "You did the best you could, I'm sure."

"I always thought I did – but what if I could have done better?" Elinrose shook her head. "For so many years, I had my life neat and ordered. Everything was in balance. Yes, my sister had ice magic that would get her killed if anyone else found out, but I always knew what to say or do to protect her. Yes, my father's health was failing, but he was still a good king, and I was there to compensate for his shortcomings. Yes, my brother was an adventurous fool, but he kept up the morale of our people, and his daughter still received love and guidance from the rest of us. Then James went missing, Father's health gave out completely, and now we're here. I can no longer protect anyone I love."

"We can ask the trees if they can tell us where she is," Lilly suggested. "Their communication has been weakening, lately, but they like you. They

might be able to find her and guide her back to us, or guide us to her.”

Elinrose eyed the trees warily. “How would I do that?”

Lilly stepped up to the treeline and laid her hand warily against one of the tree trunks, frowned, and moved to another one.

“It must be one that’s awake, and those tend to be the older trees,” Lilly explained, shaking her head. “But you have to reach out to the trees and hope that one of the Spirits answers you.”

“May I point out that I don’t have a good history with the Wood Spirits?”

“Not every Wood Spirit is Willow,” said Lilly. “And not all of them are loyal to the Mistress.”

“I know that,” said Elinrose. Some were like Ash, who would invade Elinrose’s dreams and beg her to fix their problems for them.

“Look for older trees, lay your hand against them, and reach out,” Lilly instructed. “You’re a far stronger Sensitive than I am, and so should get the attention of even quieter trees. If a tree can’t answer you, they’ll channel one that can.”

Elinrose still wasn’t keen on talking to any of the trees, but she was desperate to find her sister.

The first tree she tried produced nothing, and Elinrose felt quite silly, trying to ask a *tree* to talk to her. When she tried a second tree, Ash appeared immediately.

Elinrose sighed, her shoulders sagging in defeat.

“I’ve been wondering how long it would take for you to reach out to us,” the Wood Spirit said, smiling brightly.

Elinrose narrowed her gaze, shaking her head. “I need to find my sister.”

Ash glanced about herself, her brow knitting in concentration. “The cold one ... she is safe.”

Elinrose released a breath of relief, then folded her arms over her chest. “And *where* is she? I’ll have you know, after your friend Willow broke her heart, she—”

“Your sister is resilient, and she will survive. We guided a companion to her, and he will see her safely home to you.” Ash took a step towards Elinrose. “Consider it our gift.”

Her smile was playful, but Elinrose wasn’t amused. “And just who is she with?”

“Someone you trust, I promise.” Ash sighed and shook her head. “The poor girl – hurting so much because her beloved sister refuses to be truthful.”

“I’ve never lied to her.”

But she had withheld truths.

“You’ve let her believe herself alone, her whole life,” said Ash. “And the moment she thought she found love with someone who could accept her for who she was, you did nothing but condemn her for her choice. And, no, she and Willow would have never worked – a Frost’s ice is deadly to a Wood Spirit – but if she knew she had an ally her whole life, would she have run straight to the arms of the first man with magic she met?”

“You’re trying to make me feel guilt over my relationship with my sister.” Elinrose frowned. “And I know you want something from me.”

She pulled her hand from the tree, but Ash didn’t disappear. Beside Elinrose, Lilly gave a gasp.

Ash glanced about herself, as though surprised by a change in scenery, and then focused again on Elinrose. “And your denial doesn’t just extend to her. You refuse to become everything you’re capable of.”

“I have no obligation to you or this Forest.”

“No, but you have plenty of obligation to your sister and to your family. Will you embrace your own self so your sister knows that she can do the same?”

With that, Ash turned and walked back into the Forest, vanishing after only a few steps.

“That was one of the Elder Spirits!” breathed Lilly, laying a hand on Elinrose’s arm again. “Most of the Wood Spirits can only appear near their actual tree, but the Elders can walk anywhere.”

“Including into dreams?”

“You dream about her!” Awe filled Lilly’s voice. “I could feel that you’re powerful, but to be able to reach the Elder Spirits in dreams...”

“She’s the one who brought my family and myself here,” Elinrose explained. “She came to me in a dream, said that I should never have left the Forest, that they need me, and then I woke up in that cabin.” She shook her head. “She kidnapped me.”

“Or did she just unlock a part of yourself that scares you?” said Lilly. “I’ve never heard tell of even an Elder Spirit having power outside the Forest, but *you* might.”

“And if I’m that powerful, then why can’t I just transport my family and myself back home?”

“Because your power is tied to this Forest, not the North Country. Indeed,

I would question how you came to be strong, if it weren't the echoes of strength that I sense in your mother."

"What?" Elinrose pressed her fingertips against her forehead. It seemed that every time someone told her something new, her mind felt closer to exploding.

What happened to her neat, orderly, balanced life?

"Your mother ... I suppose I probably should have mentioned it sooner, but she's like me – she has power, but it's been stolen from her. Except even worse."

A chill ran down Elinrose's spine. "She ... we don't know anything about her from before she appeared in the North Country. She has no memory of her life before that."

"Then I have no doubt that she lived here before – and that the Mistress drained her of so much power that it ripped out her very sense of self." Lilly wrapped her arms around herself. "The thought that she could have done that to me ... it's terrifying."

Elinrose released a long breath. "Well, Ash said that Snowmari is all right and will come back home. We'll just have to wait for her." She released a long breath. "More sitting around and waiting, and—"

"Lilly! Is that Elinrose with you?"

"Faia?"

~

Elinrose fidgeted with her spoon as she sat across the table from her sister-in-law.

"They only arrived the other day," Lilly explained. "They were in a rose cabin until Earnest found them and brought them here. He's now looking for you ... and you've found your way here." She shook her head. "Let's just hope the Forest decides to play nice and brings him back this way since it's already brought you."

"This Forest never likes to play nice. It takes after its Mistress. And it seems even more troubled of late." Faia shook her head.

"It's descending into a civil war," said Lilly. She glanced towards Elinrose. "I think it's found someone to replace the Mistress."

Faia straightened. "Someone ... that would be excellent."

"It would be, if the one they found is willing to step up." Lilly didn't glance at Elinrose a second time, but her point was still just as sharp. "But,

from what I've heard, she's quite reluctant. She's not from the Forest, and she carries more loyalty to the land of her origin."

Faia nodded. "That's understandable. Still..."

"Still."

The door opened, and in walked Mother.

"Have you found Snowmari yet – oh!" Mother's eyes widened as she saw Faia.

"No, but we have a new guest, as you can see," said Elinrose, standing. "I talked to the Forest. Apparently, Mari's safe and will be returned to us. No, I don't like the sound of that, either, but what else can we do?"

Faia tensed. "What happened to Snowmari?"

"She fell for a Wood Spirit, and he broke her heart," Lilly explained. "We were caring for her, but last night, she decided that she didn't want anyone to see what was happening to her and ran off."

Faia fell forward and rested her head in her hands. "After I warned her..."

"You warned her against Wood Spirits?" asked Elinrose.

"No, about her heart, and what would happen if she let a man break it. She —" Faia glanced to Lilly, as though for help.

"When a Frost's heart breaks, it heals with ice, as any physical injury does," Lilly explained. "But, because it's an emotional injury, the ice is permanent, and a Frost is never able to love again."

"Oh." Elinrose swallowed and shook her head. "But ... if she knew that, then why did she still insist on pursuing that relationship. I told her..." She winced as she recalled every one of Snowmari's arguments. "She knew that it wasn't going to end well for her, and she insisted on enjoying what she thought was her only chance to feel love." She sank forward and rested her head in her hands. "Oh, Mari..."

"I am so sorry if my warning only scared her into making the very mistake that I warned her against." Faia shook her head and then stiffened. "Wait ... you know that she's ... but she said..."

"You may have influenced her, but there were many people with a part to play." Elinrose sighed. "And largely myself. Because I was too scared to let her know that I knew what she was."

Faia swallowed.

"I hoped you and she would be friends. That you would help her feel less alone." Elinrose glared down at her hands. "Because, yes, I also know what you are. And, yes, I knew that letting you into the North Country was a risk,

but you seemed to have control of yourself.”

“I promised James that I *would* control myself.” Faia gave a joyless laugh. “With my heart frozen the way it is, it’s been far easier to do so. Though, your sister’s report that people without emotion are automatically suspected...”

“I would have found a way to deflect suspicion,” Elinrose promised. “James and I both. We’ve done it for Snowmari her whole life.”

“And then ... what happened? How are you back here?”

“We’re all still trying to figure that out,” said Mother, laying a hand on Faia’s shoulder. “And here we thought we had left you back at James’ side. How is the dear boy doing?”

“He couldn’t rest, knowing that the rest of his living family had gone missing. When I offered to go look for you, he insisted on it.” Faia shook his head. “The poor man. He’s been through so much...” Her gaze narrowed as she glanced about the room. “Where’s Mayblossom? Is she...”

“She stayed outside to pick flowers,” said Mother. “She’s fine. I just wanted to ask questions without her listening.”

“We try to keep her from worrying as much as possible,” said Elinrose, standing and circling around the table to fetch her niece. “We don’t always succeed, but we try.”

Mayblossom had a nice handful of daisies gathered, and she grinned up at Elinrose hopefully. “Have you found Aunt Mari?”

“Not yet, but I’ve been told that she’ll be back soon,” Elinrose answered. “Until then, we have another visitor who I think will like those flowers just as much.”

Mayblossom glanced down at her flowers and then gave a begrudging nod. “All right. Who is it?”

“Come along and find out. She came all this way to find us and let us know how much your daddy misses you.”

“You keep saying he misses me a lot. I think he probably misses you more. After all, he told me how much he was going to need your help to rule, and now you’re not there to help him.”

“He misses all of us. Let’s just leave it at that.” Elinrose opened the bedroom door and ushered her niece inside.

Snowmari still hadn't returned by noon the next day. Elinrose pulled irritably at a weed, glancing out the corner of her eye at Mayblossom and Faia.

She could, at least, be grateful that her niece finally had a chance to bond with her stepmother. Before, the shadow of grief and Faia's uncertainty had hung over them, but now Mayblossom had had time, and Faia was in a place where she felt comfortable.

But Elinrose was also surprised at her own reluctance as she watched Mayblossom stare up at Faia, enraptured by the story she told. Elinrose couldn't hear the story, but she was certain that Mayblossom had never heard it before. It made sense. Faia had grown up in a different country and would thus know different stories.

Elinrose didn't know why she was judging them so hard, but all she could think of was every night that Mayblossom had complained that she'd heard all of Elinrose and Snowmari's stories already.

Elinrose had encouraged this relationship. She wanted Mayblossom to bond with her father's new wife.

But it was more piece of her life that was slipping out of her hands. Mayblossom would now have a mother. Would she need Elinrose the same way she always had before?

She threw one last weed to the side, stood up, and walked into the house. There was no point in sitting there, making herself feel worse. She wasn't even doing the task Lilly gave her correctly.

But what was the point of nicely asking weeds to leave the garden on their own when it worked just as well to yank them out by the roots?

She found her mother sitting in the kitchen, doing a bit of knitting. Elinrose sighed and sank into another chair.

"Still worrying about Mari and obsessing over everything you could have done differently?"

Elinrose released a long sigh. "The Forest said she'll come back and that she's with a companion who'll take care of her. It's just the waiting."

"Yes, the waiting."

"I'm glad that Faia and Mayblossom are getting along."

Mother looked up from her knitting to raise an eyebrow at Elinrose. "I hear a 'but' in that statement."

Elinrose shook her head. “There shouldn’t be one, and yet, as I watch them, all I can think of is all the years I’ve spent caring for and guiding Mayblossom through life.”

Mother slowly nodded, returning to her knitting. “She was a responsibility that should never have been placed on your shoulders, but you were determined to have it. After Raine’s death, you became her mother. But I don’t imagine that you plan to just dump the girl in Faia’s lap and run to the hills.”

Elinrose drew back. “Of course not...”

“Mayblossom may have a stepmother now, but she will always need the care and guidance of her Aunt Elin,” Mother promised. “She might not need you *as* much, but that will just free you to devote your time and attention to other matters. Oh, Elin! What will you do with yourself now?”

Elinrose tensed. Wasn’t that the very question she didn’t want to answer? All those years, taking on every responsibility offered to her, and now they were all gone, without a single by-my-leave from her. What was she to do with herself now?

The Forest certainly had its own ideas.

“Mother, you don’t remember your life before you came to the North Country,” she stated, to change the subject, though she knew she didn’t, really.

Mother tilted her head thoughtfully to the side. “I didn’t,” she acknowledged. “But, I must confess, since coming here to the Forest, snatches have been returning. I thought it was mere wishful thinking, at first, or familiarity bringing on some form of *déjà vu*, but I really do think they’re memories, now.”

Elinrose frowned, not wanting to hear what her mother might tell her, but knowing she needed to.

“What do you remember?”

Mother dropped her knitting into her lap and stared blankly into space, as though plucking pieces out of the past.

“The joy of growing things, a mother for whom I was never good enough, a father who loved me, a baby sister I adored.” Mother shook her head. “The loss of my father and sister, not understanding what happened to them or why I was left alone to my mother’s mercy. She had no mercy.”

Elinrose walked to her mother’s side and took her hand, not quite sure what she was doing.

Mother's eyes suddenly went sharp, and she yanked her hand away. "Don't give me so much of yourself. You're going to need it for what's to come."

"I'm sorry..." Elinrose stepped back, her brow knitting in confusion. "I just wanted to ... what do you mean, what's to come?"

"Oh, my dear Elinrose." Mother clutched her hand to her chest. "I've always known you were meant to be a queen. Promise me, you'll fight for your throne."

Elinrose shook her head. "Mother, the throne belongs to James. Even without my help, I'm sure he's ruling the North Country well enough, and I never wished to unseat him, I—"

"No, child. *Your* throne."

And before Elinrose could decide if she wanted to ask any more questions, there was a scratch at the door.

~

Elinrose had never been so happy to see Bear as she did when she opened the door, and there he was with Snowmari clinging to his back.

"I would have brought her yesterday, but I didn't think it was safe to move her," he explained as Elinrose helped her sister down from his back and guided her to the bed.

"Thank you, really." Elinrose cast him a grateful smile over her shoulder before she focused on Snowmari. "I'm so sorry, Mari. If I realized..."

Snowmari just smiled up at her tiredly. "I think you did realize. I just didn't realize you realized."

"And that's what I didn't realize."

Elinrose released a long sigh as she stared at her sister. The ice that *had* been constrained to just her hands had spread up her arms and was overtaking her face. Snowmari's lips were blue and puffs of frost came out with every word she said.

"I'm sorry that I've made you worry so much," said Snowmari. "It's amazing that your hair isn't whiter than mine." She finished with a tired laugh.

Elinrose brushed one of Snowmari's curls out of her eyes, sitting down beside her on the bed. "I thrive on stress. I thought you knew that."

"I do know it." Snowmari laughed again with even less energy. "You worry enough for the whole country combined and still complain that people

aren't causing you enough trouble."

Her eyes slid closed, and her breathing evened. Elinrose swallowed.

"It's been a long day for her," said Bear, settling down on the floor. "Ah, but I was disappointed to come to the cabin and find you gone."

"We weren't there for your benefit," said Elinrose.

"Ah, but I feel like I at least deserved a proper good-bye – not one by proxy through some very forgetful fairies who didn't even think to convey it until I deliberately asked where you had gone."

"I knew that was one of the risks we took in leaving the message with fairies," said Elinrose. "I'm sorry. We just wanted to get home, and Earnest said it was better if we were here."

"But you're still here in the Forest."

"Well, Earnest had to go find Faia before we left," Elinrose explained. "And then Faia arrived, and he hasn't." She shook her head. "And now I'm wondering if I can actually leave this Forest."

"Most people who step into this Forest never leave," Bear observed.

"I know." Elinrose caressed her sister's hand. "But for most people, it's because the Mistress is possessive and won't let them leave. She kicked me out – bribed me with a sister-in-law. It was the Forest itself that pulled me back. It wants something from me, but why should I give it?"

"I thought you just told your sister that you thrive on stress and are constantly looking for new things to worry over."

Elinrose stiffened. "I didn't say I *look* for things to worry over."

"And yet that's what you do, Elin."

Elinrose shifted her gaze to her mother, who sat down on the other edge of the bed. "I worry about the people I care about..."

"You take on responsibilities whether or not it's your place to do so," said Mother. "And, now here you are, offered one that's actually meant for you, and you'll turn away? Have you met all the people in this Forest? They deserve better than the Mistress who rules them, and I know of only one lady with a heart big enough to care for all of them. And with the power to wrest them out of my mother's control."

Snowmari woke with her hand in Elinrose's. She gave a weak smile. "Sorry about falling asleep on you."

"Don't apologize. Did you have good dreams?"

Snowmari lifted her shoulders in something of a shrug. "I don't know. I think I was cold, but I don't know. I've never felt cold before."

Elinrose leaned over Snowmari with a raised eyebrow. "You're always cold, Mari."

"But I don't feel it." She shrugged. "A person doesn't feel cold when the rest of the world is *always* warmer than them."

"I see," said Elinrose, pulling back. "I suppose that Cinders never feel the heat. I guess I'll have to go ask our neighbor about that."

"You're warm," said Snowmari.

"And I'm happy to share my warmth." Elinrose laid her other hand against Snowmari's cheek.

"Is she awake?" Lilly appeared over Elinrose's shoulder.

"You can bring her some of the soup," Elinrose instructed, nodding at Lilly and reaching for some pillows.

Snowmari took a deep breath as her sister helped her sit upright. "So, you really thought I had it all figured out? Despite how you never said a word and only ever went on about how I needed to stay warm and always behave like the princess I was."

Elinrose dropped her gaze and shook her head. "I always knew that you were a Frost, and I had to keep anyone else from realizing. I always held you, tended your injuries, denied every accusation that you weren't perfectly normal!"

"I thought I was that good at hiding it."

Elinrose shook her head in disbelief. "Did you think I was blind? Your cuts *ice over*, Snowmari!"

"True." Snowmari bit her lip. "I admit I've often questioned *how* you never noticed, but I assumed that the weather of the North Country disguised my ice. So, since coming to the Forest, I've constantly been expecting you to realize it was me, but then you never did..."

"It's hard to realize what one already knows," said Elinrose.

"I thought, when you found out, that you'd be afraid of me. That you

would turn on me the way that anyone else in the North Country would.”

“I’m sorry that I let you live in that sort of fear. I only wanted you to stay safe.” Elinrose squeezed Snowmari’s hand before pulling away to accept a bowl of soup from Lilly. “But part of that was safety from fear, and I failed at that.”

“Well, you’re only a few years older than I am, so I don’t think you have too much advantage on me when it comes to wisdom.”

Elinrose spooned some clove-spiced broth into Snowmari’s mouth. “I’ve always felt that outright acknowledging it would mean I would *have* to punish you according to North’s laws.”

“I understand,” said Snowmari after she swallowed. The warmth that spread through her was intoxicating.

“And here you are, with a broken heart freezing over because you didn’t think you had the support of your older sister, and you fell for a Wood Spirit who—”

Snowmari winced. “Elin ... truth is ... Willow didn’t break my heart. Not the way you think, at least.”

Elinrose frowned. “What do you mean?”

Snowmari closed her eyes, her last conversation with Willow playing over and over in her head.

I hope your sister is ready for the trials before her...

“Mari?”

Snowmari took a deep breath and opened her eyes, giving her sister a weak smile. “Willow was working for the Mistress.”

Elinrose didn’t seem surprised, but she raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“I suppose that makes sense to you, given how suspicious you were of him.” Snowmari sighed. “He was a Wood Spirit, and the Mistress rules this Forest, after all. But she specifically sent him to us. I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with him – he was meant to distract you.”

Elinrose’s brow knit, and she drew back, her shoulders sagging as though in defeat. “She doesn’t like that I came back to the Forest after I promised to stay in the North Country, as though I had any say in the matter...” She shook her head. “He was meant to distract me, though?”

Snowmari nodded. “He was going to save me, and you would be so grateful to him for it...” She trailed off with a shrug. “I don’t know exactly how it would have worked, only that he never expected me to be so foolish as to fall in love with him on sight. I was a ... I was a Frost after all.”

It seemed so strange to finally admit her magic aloud. Perhaps she understood Elinrose's silence far better than she thought.

"But you did fall in love with him," Elinrose prompted.

"And that proved to be its own form of distraction," said Snowmari. "You focused on my bad decisions. And that's why Willow left. Because he couldn't serve the Mistress like that anymore. He and I would never have worked – my magic is deadly to him – and I think I always knew it. I just ... wanted so badly to have some new form of normal and ... I don't know."

"I know," said Elinrose.

"But it wasn't the fact he left me. That he would return my affection or that we would actually work as a couple was never anything but an idle hope." Snowmari drew in a breath, and she could feel the ice creeping through her veins. "But to find out that I had spent all that time and energy in a relationship that was being used against you! I still don't understand what they want from you or anything about what that's about, but that doesn't matter. I was still the fool – and when I think about all the things I said to you. Voluntarily!"

"Hey." Elinrose reached forward and took Snowmari's hand again, and the brown of her eyes seemed deeper than Snowmari had ever seen them before. "I don't want you blaming yourself for anything, and I don't want you worrying, either. I want you to focus on getting better. Let me decide the best way to teach that Mistress that getting between the two of us is the worst decision she ever made."

Snowmari gave the best smile she had the energy for. "You need to stop chasing problems that aren't yours to solve."

"I do. You're right." The resolve didn't leave Elinrose's voice. "But I am never going to stop fighting the battles that *are* mine, and I suspect that I should have taken this one up weeks ago and saved you a great deal of pain."

Snowmari blinked and opened her mouth to protest, but Elinrose just held up another spoonful of soup. "Now, no more talking until you've finished eating. I don't want you to survive a broken heart only to waste away in starvation."

Snowmari gave a smile. Yes, there was the older sister she knew and loved so well.

~

Snowmari slipped in and out of consciousness as the days progressed.

Sometimes, Lilly or Mother took a vigil at her side, but it was almost always Elinrose. Even when Elinrose slept, it was at Snowmari's side.

But there was nothing new there.

Each time Snowmari woke, the ice had spread, and it was harder and harder for her to stay conscious. Soon, it took too much energy to speak, let alone move. Those around her continued to care for her and chatter cheerily to keep her spirits up, but even that was slowly slipping away.

She liked it best when Mayblossom was at her side, chirping away with some story or other. Snowmari recognized many as the ones that she'd told herself, but many were new. She was glad to hear her niece exercising her imagination.

She liked it least when she overheard them whispering about her and her spreading ice.

"It wasn't like this when my heart was broken. My ice never spread like this. I lost a little bit of control as I learned how to use my powers without emotion, as I was used to, but it never consumed me."

Faia's voice. Snowmari didn't hear her often, as she stayed away to protect Snowmari, but she knew her sister-in-law lurked about.

Her sister-in-law and the woman whose heart Bear broke. Snowmari wondered if Faia knew that she was so close to the man she'd loved. Did she know that he'd been turned into a bear?

"She's a stronger Frost than you are," said Lilly. "And what broke her all came too close together, and she fought too hard to stop herself from breaking. You also went to the Mistress quickly, who knew how to stabilize you. Elinrose, for all her raw power, was stumbling blindly."

"And she was pushing me away, besides." Frustration filled Elinrose's voice, and Snowmari wished again that she'd been honest with her sister from the start. That she'd had the sense to realize what Elinrose had *never* told her. "And I think she was too scared to stop herself from feeling."

"She was rejecting the ice," said Mother. "Rather than accepting the healing it offered, she shoved it away. It settled in her extremities first, but it's been spreading inward."

Just another way that Snowmari had been an utter fool.

"I don't know if she's going to recover on her own," said Lilly. "And we've done all we can for her. Elinrose, you can't keep pouring all of your energy into her. You're going to need it to face the Mistress, after all."

"She wanted you distracted, after all," said Mother. "Willow broke Mari's

heart so you would have a reason to focus. Are you going to let that go to waste?”

“Mother...”

“My mother never understood the bonds of family – I don’t know if she ever even loved my father – she talked ill of him often enough once he was gone.”

“I know, but—”

“Elin, I don’t think you have the luxury of waiting much longer. You’re weakening yourself by giving so much to your sister – and don’t you think you’ll be able to do so much more for her when you have the strength of the Forest itself at your fingertips? I know—”

Snowmari never heard what her mother knew, for sleep overtook her again.

Snowmari hadn't woken again since early the day before.

Elinrose chewed her lip as she stared at her sister, unsure what to do. Her plan *had* been to wait until her sister recovered, or at least stabilized.

But Snowmari wasn't stabilizing, unless one counted the fact that she was nearly frozen solid as "stable."

No one had spoken much today, but Elinrose could feel every eye on her. Waiting for her to make a decision. Waiting for her to leave her sister and face the Mistress.

Which would be all fine if only she fancied her odds. The Mistress had ruled the Forest for decades and had stolen power besides. Mother, Lilly, and Ash might swear that Elinrose was strong, and maybe she was, but it was raw strength, and she barely knew how to use it.

How could she risk losing and leaving Snowmari without any hope?

How could she just sit there and do nothing when it seemed that this was Snowmari's *only* hope?

Elinrose fidgeted with the wreath of daisies that was her current "lesson." She hadn't done it properly, she was sure. The concept of coaxing the plucked flowers into forming this circle themselves had proved beyond her, though weaving them the natural way had been wonderfully therapeutic.

Now it was done, and Elinrose was sorely tempted to rip the whole thing to shreds – not out of any genuine desire for destruction, but from sheer frustration at her situation.

She didn't even understand her powers. How was she supposed to fight a master?

How was she supposed to save her sister?

Mayblossom passed by, and Elinrose placed the wreath on her head as she forced a playful grin. "Want to take a walk with me?"

Mayblossom adjusted the wreath as she stared at Elinrose. "Are you going to talk to the trees?"

Elinrose raised an eyebrow. "And why would I want to do that? Trees don't have much interesting to say."

"Willow had a lot to say, and I thought some of it was *quite* interesting," Mayblossom answered.

"*Quite*," Elinrose repeated. She stood and held out her hand to her niece.

“I suppose we can go talk to some trees if that’s what you really want.” She glanced down at Snowmari and sighed.

“You’ll figure out your powers; don’t worry, Aunt Elin.” Mayblossom tugged her out of the house. “Then you’ll make Aunt Mari all better, and we’ll be happy again.”

Elinrose sighed. “I’m trying.”

“Mama Faia says you’re trying too hard. You want to make your magic make sense, and magic just doesn’t do that.”

“It would be helpful if it did.”

“She says it’s even more true for you, because your magic involves making living things do what they don’t always want to do. You have to ne-go-ti-ate.”

“That’s an awfully big word for a little girl.”

“I’m not as little as I used to be.”

Elinrose paused and stared down at her niece. “No ... I don’t suppose you are.”

“Right. And Mama Faia says that you might know a thing or two about negotiations, since you’re a princess and a big sister and all, but she says that you have to remember that plants aren’t like people. They don’t listen to logic. I mean, some are smart, like Willow, but most aren’t, and you have to use your heart.”

That’s what Lilly kept saying, but, truth told, the thought terrified Elinrose. She had spent her life keeping her emotions in check. It was how she protected Snowmari. It was how she kept gossip away from the royal family. She had bottled up so much – what would happen if she let it all out?

“And here we are!” Mayblossom cheerily declared, pointing to the line of trees.

Elinrose drew up short, just staring at her nemesis. Ah, if she had only known a year ago how much she would come to resent the sight of a tree...

“Aunt Elin!” Mayblossom put her hands on her hips as she glared up at Elinrose. “Do you really think that any of the trees will listen to you if all you do is frown at them?”

Elinrose raised an eyebrow. “Very well, then. What plan of action do you suggest, wise little niece of mine?”

“Well, I think that maybe the problem is that they keep telling you to do things that you don’t care enough about. If your magic takes feeling, then you have to care!” Mayblossom grabbed Elinrose’s hand and pulled her towards

the trees. “You got them to talk to you about Snowmari and bring her back because you love her so much.”

Mayblossom actually had a good point, Elinrose reluctantly acknowledged. “So what do you propose we do instead of flower crowns?”

“You need to ask the Forest to bring you Earnest, of course.” Mayblossom bounced on her toes. “He’s still wandering about, looking for Mama Faia, and since she found herself, we ought to let him come back.”

“And you think that is something I care enough about?”

Mayblossom rolled her eyes. “Of course. You love him. Aunt Mari says so.”

“And Aunt Mari is such an expert on my heart? She thought I didn’t know her at all, remember?”

“I think I trust Aunt Mari far more than you when it comes to your *affections*,” Mayblossom answered. “You’re in *denial*, you know.”

“Someone is *full* of big words today.”

“You smile more when he’s around,” Mayblossom stated. “And why wouldn’t you? He’s funny, handsome, and when he’s around, you feel like you don’t have to worry so much ‘cause he’s going to fix everything, rather than cause more problems.”

Elinrose released a long breath. Everything Mayblossom said was true, but there was just one other detail ... one very important detail.

Lilly.

They had danced around the subject of Earnest since Lilly’s confession that first day, and Elinrose still wasn’t sure what she felt about the whole situation. How she felt about him.

Much as Lilly might declare that she didn’t care for Earnest, much as she might have Henry over as much as possible to remind Elinrose where her affections lay, she would have to marry Earnest or he would turn back into a frog. And maybe if Elinrose wrested control of the Forest from the Mistress, then Earnest would be free, but at the moment, Elinrose cared more that *Lilly* would be free.

Her feelings toward Earnest were far too complicated and best not focused on while Snowmari lay frozen.

But what had been his intentions? Maybe she had merely allowed herself to be swept away by Snowmari’s enthusiasm. Maybe he was as friendly and helpful to any younger sister or friends he made in the Forest. Maybe...

He had no business courting another woman while he was pledged to

Lilly, even if Lilly might not be so faithful with her affections. So Elinrose *must* have read more into their interactions than he intended.

Unless...

She dared not even *consider* that unless. It made her think so much less of him.

And she didn't want to think less of him.

"Are you talking to the trees, Aunt Elin?" Mayblossom prompted, pulling at Elinrose's arm again. "Is this how it works?"

Elinrose sucked in a breath. "No ... I was just thinking."

"Don't think – you have to *feel*."

Elinrose shook her head. Her feelings were too complicated, and all she wanted was for Earnest to be as far away as possible. Out of sight, out of mind, out of...

Were her conflicted emotions keeping him away?

She stepped towards the treeline with sudden conviction and laid her hand against a gnarled cedar that she knew had a strong connection to the other trees. Indeed, she felt it was only a few decades away from properly awakening.

She closed her eyes, and her mind surged through the trees' shared consciousness, searching for Earnest. Soon, she found him, marching very determinedly down a trail, though she saw a droop of despair to his shoulders.

Did she want to see him? Talk to him? Ask all the burning questions she had for him? Perhaps not, but she could use another pair of shoulders to lean on in the decision she faced. Maybe she didn't trust him with her heart, but she knew he would do anything and everything in his power to protect her and her family.

Bring him to me. She sent the order whistling through the trees with force. *I need him.*

~

Earnest had been miles away when she found him, so there was no conniving the Forest could do to deposit him at Elinrose's side immediately, so minutes later, she took her niece's hand and turned their steps back to the house.

Back to her sister and wondering if Snowmari would ever open her eyes again.

But she felt a little more confident. The thought that she had unconsciously willed the Forest into doing *her* bidding wasn't too much to hope for, and if it was true, then it meant that there was a little bit of power that didn't belong to the Mistress.

And even the slightest advantage was gratifying.

Mayblossom stayed close to her side the whole day, giving frequent conspiratorial grins. Of course, she didn't know Elinrose's hesitation and thought this was all some romantic game.

At a time like this!

But she supposed that her niece needed whatever distraction she could get right now. If it kept her from worrying about Snowmari, Mayblossom could speculate whatever she liked about Elinrose's affections.

It was all Elinrose could do to not wince when the knock at the door finally came, Lilly answered, and she shrieked his name.

"My, but the Forest has turned especially treacherous," Earnest announced as he surveyed the room. "I've never spent so much time just walking in *circles*."

"Well, you've made it back now," Lilly declared firmly. "And don't worry about having not found Faia. She arrived here not two days after you left, but we didn't have the means to let you know."

"And there was no reason to risk anyone else also getting lost among those trees." Earnest shuddered, and then his gaze fixed on Snowmari. "What happened?"

"Her broken heart," said Elinrose, standing. "It's healing wrong, and now I fear that only the Mistress's power can save her."

Earnest narrowed his eyes on Elinrose. "Somehow, I don't think she'll want to help you. Though..."

"I have a plan to convince her, if she doesn't want to help," said Elinrose, tilting her head as she stared at her sister. "But I need to get her *to* the Mistress."

She wasn't ready to tell him of her own relation to the Mistress and *why* the woman feared her so much. Lilly already saw Elinrose as a way out. She didn't want Earnest to do the same.

Earnest took a deep breath and nodded. "Then I hope she will."

"Yes." Elinrose glanced down and brushed her fingers against Snowmari's. "But we need to get to the Mistress. And Snowmari really isn't fit for travel."

“You’re going to take Snowmari with you?” said Lilly, putting her hands on her hips. “But I thought...”

“How else is the Mistress going to heal her?” Elinrose firmly declared, staring Lilly straight in the eye, daring her to contradict her.

Because Mayblossom had been right. As Earnest stood there, staring at her, Elinrose knew exactly how she wanted to proceed. Exactly how she planned to save her sister.

“I can carry her,” Bear volunteered, lifting his head from the rug where he lay. “It will be no trouble at all.”

“And I’ll go with you, to bear witness that she *can* do what you ask,” said Faia.

Elinrose nodded, glad for the allies.

“I would go with you, too, to once again use her favor towards me for your benefit, but I can’t,” said Earnest, shaking his head. “Not after how long I’ve been wandering the Forest.”

Elinrose tensed. “Oh?”

He turned and took a step towards Lilly, and her eyes went wide. “It’s tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” said Bear, sounding very concerned.

“If Lilly and I don’t marry by tonight, I turn back into a frog tomorrow.”

Elinrose kept her gaze fixed on the road before her. On the task before her.

She walked beside Bear, a hand on her sister, holding Snowmari on his back. Each step took her closer to the Mistress. Closer to her life changing forever.

But it hadn't been normal in months.

The Forest whispered around her. Surrounded by the trees as she was now, she no longer needed to touch one of them to hear.

It took barely more than a thought for her to ask the trees to take her straight to the Mistress, and most complied with grace. Elinrose got the distinct impression that they were bowing to her, though she pushed that thought aside.

She was pretty sure that the Mistress viewed her as a pretentious upstart already. She didn't want the trees encouraging that impression when all she wanted was to heal her sister.

If healing required ending that tyrant, however, so be it.

Not every tree was happy at her presence. Some were still loyal to the Mistress and regarded Elinrose with contempt. Some feared the Mistress too much to hope that Elinrose could save them and weren't willing to raise their support.

One step after another. Eyes forward. Don't worry about what the trees might say about her.

She was used to ignoring gossip. Granted, it usually wasn't whispered directly into her mind, but tree or fellow human, praise or condemnation, neither mattered if she didn't do her job.

And if there was one thing Elinrose was good at, it was getting her jobs done.

"The Forest does comply for you as it only does for the Mistress," said Faia, glancing at Elinrose out of the corner of her eye. "I know you're nervous, but we all believe that you can do this."

Elinrose nodded – it was rude not to – but neither agreed nor disagreed. She knew that her sister-in-law only wanted to bolster her confidence, but she only needed determination right now.

One way or another, Snowmari would be walking back whole and healthy.

The further she plunged through the Forest, the more she could feel it

fighting against itself. The trees that supported her, the trees that supported the Mistress, and those caught in between.

The Forest suddenly closed before her. The whole party drew up short, and Elinrose let go of her sister to step closer alone. Her gaze narrowed as Willow stepped onto the path.

“I hope you know that I really *don't* want to see you right now,” she stated.

Willow gave a wiggling shrug. “The Mistress doesn't care about that. Or, rather, she cares in that she's the one who sent me.” His gaze flickered to Snowmari, and his face fell. “Is she all right?”

Elinrose rolled her eyes. “No, you broke her heart.”

Willow glanced from Snowmari to Elinrose and back. “I never meant for anything like this—”

“But I'm pretty sure that your Mistress intended exactly this,” Elinrose answered. “After all, she wanted me to stay out of her way so she could continue to rule this Forest forever. I don't think she cares about the means, and if I gave up everything of myself to save my sister, well, that just means less for her to deal with, yes?”

“I suppose – but I want you to know, I really did care for your sister. I often wondered if there was a way we could make it work. But we couldn't...”

“I don't want to hear excuses.” Elinrose shook her head. “Either get out of my way, or I'm going to cut that pretty beard right off your face.”

“Honestly, you only need to pin him down – I'll cut it off for you,” said Faia, tilting her head to the side. “We can't let men walk about thinking that they can break the hearts of Frosts without any consequences.”

Bear gave Faia a terrified glance.

Willow took a step backward, glancing about himself. “I assure you, though, that I wanted nothing but—”

“You didn't want it enough, so please get out of my way.”

“You really want to get out of her way, Willow.”

Elinrose glanced behind herself to see that Ash had stepped out of the Forest and now stood next to her.

“Ash, I don't want to fight you...”

“You've been fighting me for as long as you have chosen to blindly follow every order the Mistress gives you, refusing to take responsibility for *your* actions.” Ash put a hand on her hip and shook her head. “‘Following orders’

doesn't absolve you of guilt. We have a chance to trade the Mistress for a good and kind ruler. Why won't you fight for that?"

"I want her to win, really. But the Mistress..."

Ash rolled her eyes to Elinrose, and Elinrose felt the general impression that the Wood Spirit was asking for permission. She nodded.

Branches reached out from the line of trees, wrapping around Willow. One caught in his beard and yanked it away from his face.

Ash glanced to Faia. "You wanted the honor?"

Faia nodded, an ice blade forming in her hand. "This is really for every Frost, and nothing personal to you. You just happened to get in our way." She sliced cleanly through his beard with a single stroke and then spun back around to face the Forest. "Now for the Mistress, yes?"

"Yes," said Ash. She waved a hand, and the trees pulled out of the path, taking Willow with them.

"We're nearly to the Mistress," said Ash, stepping past him. "He was sent to stand as the last barrier between you and her. Most trees with the ability to think for themselves realize that we don't actually have to do everything that the Mistress tells us to do."

"We ... weren't too cruel, were we?" Elinrose asked, staring at the spot in the trees where Willow had disappeared.

Ash shook her head. "Willow has always been weak-willed. Maybe this will finally teach him that he needs to grow a solid trunk."

"He did knowingly break your sister's heart," said Faia. She laid a hand on Elinrose's wrist. "Maybe she's been trying to protect him, but he was also trying to stand between the Mistress and us. Now let's go talk to her."

"Yes..." said Bear, staring at Faia. "Let's."

~

The closer they came to the Mistress's clearing, the closer Elinrose clung to her sister's side.

Was she scared? She wouldn't lie – yes.

Ash's assurances of the Forest's loyalty had been heartening, but the fact still remained that Elinrose didn't trust her untried strength.

She feared that she might end up disappointing everyone who had placed their faith in her – but in the end, her priority was Snowmari.

Elinrose *would* save her sister.

She felt a pop of pressure as they finally stepped into the clearing. They

were here. No turning back.

The Mistress sat in her throne, staring down at them, looking like a picture of annoyance.

“I’m here to ask another favor,” said Elinrose, folding her hands over her chest.

“You promised to leave my Forest forever,” said the Mistress. “How entitled are you?”

“I grew up as a princess, and was thus raised to ask for what I want,” Elinrose answered. “But, also, if you truly wanted me gone, you should have talked with your precious Forest about complying with that plan. It reached out to me and brought me here against my will, as I keep trying to tell you. I’ve merely done the best I could to live my life as normally as possible once it was so thoroughly disrupted.”

“Yes, I know that my subjects have been *terribly* rebellious lately.” The Mistress fixed her gaze on Ash. “Rest assured, the leaders will be well-punished once I’ve dealt with you.”

Elinrose raised her chin. “You know, I would have stayed in that cabin, not bothering you, minding my own business. But you had to meddle. You had to send a man to break my sister’s heart.”

“It wasn’t my fault that she was so weak-willed.”

“No, she wasn’t. She may have been scared and foolish, but her will was far stronger than I ever knew.” Elinrose took a step forward. “And now, well, you should know that I will do anything for her.”

The Mistress glanced towards Faia. “I suppose you’ve been told that I can cure a Frost’s broken heart.”

“I did tell her as much,” said Faia.

“Child, you healed yourself – all I did was give you a place to stay while I delivered vengeance to the man who hurt you,” said the Mistress. The clearing suddenly shifted, and the Mistress stood directly before Elinrose. “So, tell me, little upstart child, what do you want?”

“What I already said.” Elinrose didn’t even flinch – she could feel the Mistress’s fear. “If you can cure my sister and save her from her ice, then you will never again need to fear me taking your precious Forest from you.”

“What are you doing?” hissed Ash, glancing fearfully out of the corner of her eye.

“Exactly what I said I would do – save my sister.” Elinrose held Ash’s gaze for several seconds and then focused again on the Mistress. “So you can

either help me, or you face the consequences.”

“Consequences.” The Mistress repeated the word with a scoff. “Yes, let’s consider the consequences. Either I can deal with you here and now, or I can let you wander off and keep gathering strength. Even if you promise to let me be, you’re too much like your mother. Your heart is too soft. You’re going to second guess yourself and come bother me again. And, clearly, telling you to leave the Forest won’t work. My trees and their rebellion and all. So, we seem to be at an impasse, and what *am* I going to do?”

“Yes. What are you going to do?” Elinrose stepped closer to Ash. “Because I think you’re scared of what’s going to happen if you *do* try to ‘deal’ with me. I think you know how strong I am and how much of the Forest has already chosen me over you. You’re scared that you’re going to lose.”

“And yet you’re bargaining.”

Elinrose tilted her head to the side. “Call it mercy. Call it my own share of fear. Yes, I am bargaining. Save my sister, and I’ll go away and never be your problem again.”

“Yet we already established that you can’t do that,” said the Mistress. “Perhaps you should sweeten the deal, my child. How much is your sister’s life worth to you? Because she is dying. We can both feel the decay. Every second, it’s that much harder for her heart to beat.”

“Very well then.” Elinrose glanced to her sister and drew a deep breath. She’d guessed from the start that it would come to this. Had hoped it would, even, and feared it. “I guess you’re just going to have to do to me what you did to my mother. Yes, I know what you did to her, and I do not fancy living like that.” She focused on the Mistress again. “But I’ll do that for my sister, *Grandmother*.”

The Mistress lifted her chin. “You’re as much a fool as your mother ever was.”

Elinrose swallowed. “I love my sister. I don’t expect you to understand, as you were willing to destroy your own daughter, but here we stand.”

The Mistress lifted a hand, and Elinrose raised her own. “But you have to heal her first.”

“Is that so?” asked the Mistress. “And why would I give you what you want before I know you can’t retaliate against me once I’ve weakened?”

“Because you’ve asked of me a far greater price than you’re paying yourself,” said Elinrose. “At least let me see my sister’s smile one last time

while I know who I am. Let me slip into oblivion knowing that she's okay."

"We brought you here to save the Forest," said Bear, taking a step backward, even as the Mistress stepped towards them.

"I told you. I'm here to save my sister – and I thought you loved her. Surely you understand what I'm doing."

The Mistress regarded him with amusement. "Oh, you love her? Oh, my dear young man. You do have a problem." She turned again to Elinrose. "I suppose we can compromise. I'll draw power from you to save your sister, and perhaps you'll have a chance to say goodbye. Shall we find out just how strong you are?"

This wasn't *quite* what Elinrose had hoped for, but she knew she couldn't push much harder.

"That sounds acceptable."

Elinrose's heart hammered in her throat as she and Faia lifted Snowmari down from Bear's back. They laid her out on the ground, and then Elinrose lay down beside her.

She took Snowmari's frozen hand and drew in a deep breath. "Don't worry," she whispered. "In a few minutes, this will all be okay."

The Mistress laughed. "Who knows if she'll agree with you? After all, she's about to lose the sister she knows and loves."

Elinrose forced a shrug, refusing to let herself think of what would happen if her plan didn't work. As the Mistress's hand covered her forehead, she closed her eyes and sent up a silent prayer to Austere.

She wouldn't be able to do this on her own. And if Austere had put her in this time and place to save this Forest, then He had better see to it that it happened.

After all, Elinrose had done everything she could to get herself here. She couldn't fail.

"I'm told this can be a bit painful, especially when done all at once. I just thought I'd warn you."

"Thanks for the consideration." Elinrose squeezed Snowmari's hand, just as it felt like her very soul was ripping apart.

Her life flashed before her eyes. There wasn't much of it, but it was precious all the same.

Her mother's smile, her father's laugh, James' penchant for trouble, Snowmari's love of life, and watching Mayblossom learn and grow.

That was what the Mistress wanted to steal from her. And maybe she would be sent home to a new set of tomorrows, but she wouldn't be the same Elinrose living them.

She tried to hold back. To dig in her mental heels and keep the Mistress from draining her, but the Mistress was strong, and Elinrose was in a compromised position.

Laying on her back probably hadn't been her brightest plan.

I don't know what you're doing, but if you're going to fight her, and you need strength, I'm here.

She knew Ash's voice far too well to dismiss it. Elinrose sucked in another breath, latched on, and pulled.

“What are you doing, child?” The Mistress’s question was patronizing, as though she couldn’t believe that Elinrose might be fighting back.

Well, let her not believe. With a deep breath, Elinrose lifted her free hand and wrapped it around the Mistress’s wrist.

“I ... changed ... my ... mind.”

Elinrose grit her teeth as she yanked on the Mistress’s magic with all she was worth.

And the Mistress was already caught in a link between them and couldn’t pull away. Neither could escape. Only one would emerge from this battle. Each had already committed too much.

Elinrose’s perspective shifted, and she and the Mistress stood alone together among the trees they fought over.

“Well, well, well, child.” The Mistress shook her head as they circled around each other. “I guess you aren’t so much like your fool of a mother as I thought. You *will* take what you want, no matter the consequences.”

Elinrose kept her distance, but she kept pulling. She could feel the strength of the Forest behind her. “If it was about what I *wanted*, then I would be back in the North Country living my life as I always have. But this is about what’s best for this Forest, and it seems that it’s chosen me over you, and if you can’t accept that – you’re the one with the problem, not me.”

“Yes, we have a problem,” said the Mistress, pulling back. “Someone really is full of herself and really does think that she knows best. A girl after my own heart, if I do say so myself. I think I would like you, Elinrose, if you weren’t in my way.”

“Unfortunately, the feeling isn’t mutual, nor do I think that it’s even close to true,” Elinrose countered. “You care too much about yourself. When have you *ever* done something for someone other than yourself?”

The Mistress tensed, and her grip on her power slipped. “Child, I think you forget how much longer I’ve lived than you have.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten how long you’ve ruled as a tyrant over this Forest.”

“This Forest!” The Mistress scoffed. “What should I care about the opinions of my inferiors – and especially those mindless trees. They can’t *really* think for themselves.”

“They think well enough to choose me over you. And there’s no such thing as ‘inferior.’”

The Mistress’s gaze narrowed, and she tightened her hold on her power.

“You have no idea what I’ve lost and what I’ve lived through. My dear Elinrose, your mother should thank me that I never placed this on her shoulders. Because her heart is too soft to outlive everyone she cares about.”

Elinrose drew in a breath, but stood her ground. “Every position of leadership requires sacrifice. If you can’t accept that, then you don’t deserve that position.”

“Says the girl who thinks she can claim a Forest *and* save her miserable excuse of a sister.”

“And you think I can’t?”

The Mistress laughed. “Don’t forget where I have my other hand.”

Elinrose reflexively squeezed her own hand that held her sister’s. “You can’t...”

“Our bargain was her healing in exchange for your power – and you’ve already broken your end of it.” The Mistress gave a cruel smile. “I assure you – I *can*.”

Elinrose held tighter to her sister – yes, she could *feel* the Mistress pulling at Snowmari now, too. How had she let them slip into this position?

She had no energy to spare to further banter. Elinrose pulled back on her sister, channeling back the energy she siphoned from the Mistress.

A terrible cycle of give and take and theft. Elinrose didn’t know how much longer she could last in this constant ripping at her very being. But it *had* to be longer than the Mistress.

“Tell me who you lost,” she demanded, whirling to face her opponent again. “They must have been dear to you for you to carry all this bitterness. I want to know all about them.”

“*Still* with the demands!”

“Do they deserve to be forgotten? Why don’t you just say their names? Come now – I might not remember them once you’re done with me, but at least they’ll have lived again for a few more moments.”

The Mistress drew in a long, slow breath.

“You don’t have to rule a magic Forest to know loss and pain,” Elinrose added. “And you can keep living without letting it destroy you. You can let them go without forgetting. My brother lost his first wife. We just lost our father. I’m losing my sister. Pain is *life*. But I think you’ve let yours destroy you.”

The Mistress blinked, breathing harder. Her grip on both Snowmari and Elinrose was slipping.

Images flashed. Women, girls, men, boys. Elinrose didn't recognize any of them, but she knew a sense of who each one was. A sister and mother who she'd had to fight to gain this position. A Father who could never look at her after that day. A boy who she'd liked, but who could never accept her for herself. A best friend who died in childbirth. A husband who betrayed her. The children who abandoned her.

"What would they think of you?" asked Elinrose. "If each of them stood here and saw you, would they like they what they saw?"

"They're not standing here. I am."

"Yes. You are. And so am I – your granddaughter. And I'll speak for them. I don't like what I see."

The Mistress took a step back, her face twisting. "You little..."

And then she gasped and collapsed.

Elinrose's eyes flew open, and she sat up to find Faia with her hand on the Mistress's back, pouring ice into the tyrant. The Mistress's left hand, laid on Snowmari's forehead, was frozen up to the elbow.

"You forced her to pull too much," said Faia, a slight smirk lifting the corner of her mouth. "And she was pulling from a Frost. I just decided to speed the process up."

"Thank you."

Faia's smirk fell. "You can thank me more by finishing the job. I'm pretty sure that Mari and I only have her vulnerable."

Elinrose nodded, grabbed the Mistress's hand in both of hers, and pulled with everything she had in her.

The whole Forest opened up to her and poured itself into her mind and being.

~

It'd been whispers before, but now it was conversations. The life of every tree in this Forest was an intrinsic part of herself in ways she couldn't understand.

She didn't have to reach for it. Indeed, she wondered how the Mistress had been able to do anything with this cacophony in her head. Maybe that's why she'd gone mad.

Elinrose let herself drift through the Forest's collective consciousness. If she focused on a small piece at a time, she could block the rest out.

She'd just accepted responsibility for a whole bunch of trees and the

people who lived among them. A bit staggering, but she had to focus.

Focus...

Her gaze went unconsciously to Earnest. She couldn't see as much of the village, cut away from the trees as it was, but he and Lilly were tucked away near the tree line, talking while the rest of the people seemed to gather for celebration. She was smiling, as Elinrose had never seen her smile before.

Her heart squeezed as Earnest bent to press a kiss to the top of Lilly's head.

She pulled away, knowing better than to watch.

Well, let them be happy together – that was all that Elinrose could really ask for, wasn't it? She didn't know Earnest well enough to be jealous, after all. And Lilly deserved a prince.

Taking deep breaths, she pulled herself back into her own body, carefully shutting out the noise of the Forest. Bear and Faia stood before her, watching her.

"The Mistress crumbled into dust," said Faia. "We took it to mean that it worked."

"The Forest looks good on you, Elinrose," said Bear.

Elinrose swallowed, blinked a few times, and then focused on her sister, who lay on the ground beside where she knelt.

"I think I can save her now," she said, laying a hand on her sister's frozen cheek.

"Let's hope you can," said Faia. "This is why you came here, after all."

Elinrose licked her lips and bent over her sister, pouring all the life she could into her sister.

Because life might be fleeting, but she would fight for every drop she could give the people she cared about.

Snowmari ran towards the sun. After so long frozen in a block of ice, the warmth was intoxicating.

Except it wasn't the sun. And she wasn't running. She *was* the block of ice.

She couldn't breathe. But why would a block of ice need air?

She needed air!

"Mari, stay with me."

Elinrose's voice sounded so far away, but the warmth spread to Snowmari's chest. Slowly, greedily, Snowmari sucked in a whole lungful of air.

She still couldn't move, couldn't even open her eyes, but she kept breathing, and the warmth kept spreading.

"Mari, hang in there. Mari, I love you."

Snowmari recognized the voice. It was Elinrose. Of course, her sister hadn't abandoned her. That was something Elinrose just couldn't *do*.

Another breath. And another.

Snowmari opened her eyes. Elinrose leaned over her – except it didn't *quite* look like her sister.

"Did you do your hair differently?"

Her voice sounded weak and pathetic in her own ears.

Elinrose drew back, brushed a curl behind her ear, and then frowned. "Don't distract me, Mari. You're still more ice than yourself right now."

"I'm a Frost. Ice is what I am. Give it up. You're never going to change what I am."

Elinrose took one of Snowmari's hands. "I promise that's the last thing I want, Mari, but you need to be a bit less ice than you are now. I also want you to promise to not go off and let any more charming Wood Spirits break your heart. In fact, I've sent out a decree that if any of them even *look* like they'll prove like a distraction to you, I'll be severely displeased."

Snowmari blinked and focused on her sister. "I won't go breaking my heart again, I promise. So I'll be safe, even though those trees don't care a thing for your decrees or displeasure."

Elinrose glanced away. "Yeah. About that."

"Elin..." Snowmari sat up, squinting at her sister. "Are you green? Or are

my eyes not working?”

Elinrose lifted a hand and stared at it, drawing in a long, deep breath. “No, I think your eyes are working. I should have expected this. She was green, after all.”

“*Who?*” Snowmari tilted her head to the side as she stared at her sister. Elinrose wasn’t just green, but her hair was down and loose about her shoulders, rose vines tangled through her curls – complete with thorns, leaves, and a cluster of giant blooms right over her left ear. Her dress was woven of rose petals and more leaves. “You kind of look like a Wood Spirit yourself right now. Elin, what happened to you?”

Elinrose opened her mouth, took a deep breath, and then pressed a hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry, thinking is still hard right now. This ... all of this. It’s all so overwhelming.”

A cold hand landed on Snowmari’s shoulder. “What your sister is struggling to tell you is that she just fought the Mistress and took her place as the ruler of the Forest,” said Faia. “And given how new she is to her magic in the first place, it seems to be especially difficult for her.”

“Elinrose has magic?” Snowmari’s eyes widened as she stared at her sister.

Elinrose stood, running a hand down her dress. “I know, it sounds just so crazy, I agree. I still don’t know what all to make of it, but I promise explanations. Just as soon as I finish sorting through all of the voices.”

“You’re hearing voices?” Snowmari looked down at her hands. “I suppose that has to be much harder than trying to keep from spreading ice on anything I touch.”

Elinrose bit her lip, nodded, and then sucked in a sharp breath as a truly green woman approached. A female Wood Spirit. The two stared at each other, as though holding some silent conversation. Elinrose nodded, and then, a second later, her shoulders drooped in visible relief. The Wood Spirit gave a gesture of respect and then melted into the trees.

“Ash is going to keep the rest of the Forest as quiet as she can,” Elinrose explained, focusing again on Snowmari. “Which is surprisingly difficult. Trees are talkative.”

And then she pulled Snowmari into a tight hug. “Oh, Mari! I did it! You’re here! And whole! And back to the you I know and love so well.”

Something that was either a laugh or a sob caught in Snowmari’s throat. “Hopefully, I’m a me who’s not such a fool as I was before.”

Elinrose squeezed her tighter. “I loved you just the way you were. I promise.”

“Really?” Snowmari pulled back to arch a skeptical eyebrow at her sister. “Because the way you could go on about all the things I could never do right, I sometimes wondered...”

Elinrose shook her head with her own expression of disbelief. “I only wanted you to be the best version of yourself possible! Not wanting you to make mistakes didn’t mean *changing* you.”

“Well, I suppose if I made fewer mistakes, then you would have less to nitpick, and we both know just *how* much you love nitpicking. So, I suppose, if I hadn’t been an utter fool, you would have been miserable.”

Both sisters laughed, and Snowmari dove back into the hug. It felt so good to let Elinrose hold her without worrying about her ice.

Finally, Elinrose pulled away, nodding in satisfaction. “You’re going to do just fine.”

Then she pulled away and turned to Faia. “The Forest has a long memory. The Mistress was right when she admitted to not healing your heart. Now, I’m not going to force anything on you, since you’ve learned to live with yourself the way you are, but if you would like, I can finish what she only did halfway.”

Faia opened her mouth. “I...”

“You can think about it. You might even want to talk to James about it. You married him, after all. He probably ought to at least be warned that you’re making such a change.”

Faia shut her mouth and nodded, giving a small smile. “Yes. Thank you.”

Elinrose drew back and bit her lip. “I should talk to my brother.” She spun around, threw herself into a throne made of tree branches, and flicked a finger. A pathway opened in the trees before them. “Would it be too much to ask that you take a message to him for me? Tell him that the Forest has a new Mistress and that she would like to discuss alliance?” She sat up straight, frowning. “Except I don’t think I’ll be calling myself that. I don’t know what title I’m going to take, but not Mistress.”

Faia inclined her head. “I told him that I would return with you and your family.”

Elinrose flicked another finger. “The path will take you through the village and and you can fetch Mother and Mayblossom. Don’t ... don’t tell him what’s happened to me. I want to tell him myself. But he does deserve

explanations and assurances that we're safe."

Faia nodded again and turned down the path. The trees closed behind her.

Elinrose turned her focus to Bear. "Now, you ... I don't think I really need to ask if you would like me to reverse the state that the former Mistress has you in."

Bear raised his head from his paws and lifted himself to his all-fours. "Ma'am, I assure you I fully deserved..."

"I refuse to believe that *anything* she did was 'deserved,'" Elinrose cut him off with a wave of her hand. "And even if it was, I think you've paid your penance. Wouldn't you agree, Mari?"

"I think the only one really qualified to make that call would be the woman who just walked out of the clearing."

Elinrose glanced towards the trees and then back to Snowmari. "Mari, what would you say? Does he deserve to stay a bear?"

Snowmari stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. "After everything he's done for us? Most certainly *not*."

"That's what I thought." Elinrose waved a hand towards him, and he shrank into himself, his fur melting away to reveal a man. Snowmari's heart gave a flutter. A very *handsome* man.

An unbidden smile curled her lips as she took in her now-human Bear. He was still tall, with broad shoulders and thick brown hair and beard, and he stared down at Snowmari with gorgeous green eyes.

If she'd known that *this* was the man underneath the fur, she never would have stormed out of the cabin on that fateful morning – and she certainly would never have given that Wood Spirit a second glance.

He pulled away sharply and focused on Elinrose. "Thank you. I ... really, you..."

The corner of Elinrose's mouth lifted, and she waved a careless hand. "Unlike my predecessor, I wish to have good relations with my neighbors, and that's as much with you, Crown Prince Barend of Farra, as it is with my own brother. And, after the loyalty and service you've shown my family, how could I not?"

Barend. Snowmari mouthed the name and smiled brighter. It suited him.

He dipped into a bow. "What sort of man would I have been to just leave you stranded?"

"So, an alliance sounds acceptable to you, Barend?" asked Elinrose. "I would well understand if you and your brother never want another thing to do

with this Forest, but I hope that we can work something out.”

“I hope so, as well.” Barend shifted and glanced down at Snowmari. “And, to begin with, I very much hope that you will consider marriage as part of it and allow me to court your sister.”

Elinrose arched an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware that you weren’t already doing that.”

Barend opened and shut his mouth and then slipped into a grin. “Well, court her properly.”

“I want my sister to be happy,” said Elinrose. She raised an eyebrow as she glanced to Snowmari. “But, I will ask that you both have a bit of patience. I just inherited a whole Forest, and I’m going to need her at my side to anchor me, for the foreseeable future.”

“Of course.” Barend reached for Snowmari’s hand to give it a quick squeeze before dropping it awkwardly. “Thank you.”

Elinrose waved her hand and opened the Forest again. “Why don’t you go find your brother and let him know you’ve been set free. Neither of you is tied to the Forest anymore. You can...” She trailed off and focused on Snowmari. “You can go with him and talk. You and I have things to discuss, too, but I’ll let you talk to him first.”

~

Snowmari and Barend didn’t talk much for the first several minutes. They just walked, side by side, bumping arms against each other as if trying to remind each other that they were there.

“So ... my sister gave you back your humanity, but you’re still pursuing a Frost’s broken heart?” Snowmari bit her lip as she glanced up at him.

“Neither of those things diminishes your value,” said Barend. He looked down at her with a smile. “You’re strong. Even with your broken heart, you loved the people around you with every drop of your being. And, because of that, I would really like to make you my queen.”

Snowmari opened and shut her mouth and then glanced up at him with another awkward smile. “I don’t know about that. After all, I am just a foolish little Frost who...”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that.” Barend stopped walking, took her hand, and twisted her around to face him. “Because I would be incredibly intimidated by a woman who never made a mistake in love, because you know the mistake that I’ve made.” He laid a hand against her cheek and

stared down at her, long and intense, slowly pulling her closer. “You’re so beautiful, and...” He tilted his head to the side, frowning. “And I’ve really missed having hands.”

Snowmari tilted her head to the side. “I expect you did. And, I wonder, was there anything else you missed?”

He tilted his head to the side, his thumb caressing her cheek. “Well, I can think of a few other things. The ability to go home and see my parents. The ability to...”

Snowmari sucked in a sharp breath as he bent closer – and, just as his lips hovered against hers, he pulled back with a cry of alarm and glared at the trees.

“They just...” He opened and shut his mouth, frowning. “It was said that the Mistress could see anything within the Forest. Now that your sister’s taken her place ... I think, maybe, I need to proceed carefully.”

Snowmari took a step back and stared at the trees, shaking her head in disbelief. “Elin!”

The Forest opened up in front of her, and there Elinrose sat, still seated in that tree-branch throne. “Yes, my dearest sister?”

“You...”

A grin played at Elinrose’s lips. “I gave him permission to talk. I didn’t leave the two of you unchaperoned.”

“Have we just been walking in circles around your clearing?”

Elinrose tilted her head to the side, considering. “No.”

Snowmari blinked and shook her head. “Well, then.”

“Do the two of you need more time to talk, or can I have my sister back now, Barend?”

Snowmari shrugged and stepped back into the clearing. “Come back and see me, when you can, Barend. I need to keep my sister off of a power trip.”

“Very fair.” Barend tilted his head to the side and gave a small salute. “I shall be back to see you again, Mari. New Mistress who is still looking for a new name for herself. Somehow, I don’t think ‘Princess’ would quite cover it, either.”

The Forest closed, and Snowmari took a deep breath and turned back to her sister.

“You’re not going to be *too* mean to him? I like him, after all. Please be nice, this time.”

Elinrose stood, and the throne melted into the ground. “I absolutely will

not. You like him. And he knows what he's getting into."

"I think you need to find something else to do with your time than to just meddle with my love life."

"I just accepted responsibility for an entire Forest," said Elinrose. "So, I do assure you, meddling with the men you like is ... well, it's not the least of my concerns, but neither is it *quite* my highest priority."

Snowmari raised an eyebrow. "Elin. You..." She took a deep breath and shook her head. "You have magic too, now."

"I always did." Elinrose reached for Snowmari's hand. "It was my magic that gave you the ability to control yours. I just didn't know I was doing it."

"Well, thank you, then."

"Mari..." Elinrose squeezed Snowmari's hand tighter. "I'm going to live a lot longer than you are."

Snowmari blinked. "You will?"

"Yeah. Someday, I'm going to live in a world without you in it." Elinrose glanced down and chewed her lip. "Mother ... she may well outlive you, too, but she's merely a daughter of the Forest. She isn't tied to it the way I am."

Elinrose was still explaining things completely out of order, but Snowmari knew when her sister needed comfort. She squeezed Elinrose's hand back. "Lucky for you, I don't plan to die any time soon."

"I don't intend to let you."

Snowmari gave a small laugh. "Of course not."

"But I do want you to go on to live your own life." Elinrose laid a hand on Snowmari's cheek. "I want you to be happy. And, yes, I think Barend may well be the man who will do that for you. So, if and when the time comes, you will have my blessings. I just want you to be sure. Don't get carried away in a rush of emotions."

"I don't suppose *you* can marry, Elin. Or would your longer life make that ... harder. I mean, Father and James both did it, but losing a spouse is hard, and..."

"Actually, a husband is the one person with whom I can share my extended life." Elinrose tilted her head to the side. "I will marry, someday. But it will have to be the right man. Someone I can stand to live with for decades."

Snowmari nodded, glad that her sister could have this comfort. "You know, if Barend is the crown prince of Farra, then that would make him Earnest's brother. And you and Earnest..."

Elinrose pulled away. “No...”

“Oh, come *on*, Elin!” Snowmari threw up her hands. How could her sister *still* be in such denial? “You love him! I see it in the way you look at him. And he—”

“And he just married Lilly.”

“What?” Snowmari shook her head. “But he and you ... she and Henry! How!”

Elinrose opened and shut her mouth before shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter how. But I think they’ll be happy together, so what do my feelings matter?”

The very Forest shuddered around them. Snowmari gasped as she realized just how much of an iron fist her sister kept around her emotions.

“You loved him. You really did love him.” She shook her head and swallowed. “Elin ... you healed my heart, even as your own was breaking.”

Elinrose’s shoulders shook, and the trees were closing in around them. Snowmari wrapped her sister back into a hug and held her tight, even as Elinrose finally let go of everything and sobbed into her shoulder.

The Forest closed around them in a cocoon of branches and leaves.

“Well, Elin, I could say that I’m surprised that you singlehandedly staged a coup to take the Mistress’s throne from her, but I would be lying.” James shook his head. “I’ve always known you were capable of anything you set your mind to.”

Elinrose raised an eyebrow. “It wasn’t single-handed. The Forest had already accepted me as its new leader, and I could never have done it without Mari and Faia. Especially Faia. Barend was a bit useless. He just stood there, watching, despite being a bear, though I do understand why he wouldn’t do anything against the Mistress. It all turned out all right in the end, and my point was, I merely was the spearhead, and I couldn’t have done it on my own.”

“And I’m still proud of you, little sister.” James inclined his head towards her. “Though, if you wanted a throne so badly, I don’t know why you didn’t just leave me in this Forest and take mine. It would have been much simpler. And I wouldn’t be left ruling without you at my side.”

“I’m still at your side,” said Elinrose. “Just ... as your neighbor and not as your advisor. And, honestly, I think I’m able to do far more for North’s people here than there. Trade can be restored, as well as spring and maybe even summer.”

“So, you’re saying that our nearly permanent winter was also the Mistress’s fault?” asked James.

Elinrose shrugged. “Well, it certainly wasn’t the fault of any Frost – not even Mari has that sort of power, and she’s one of the strongest there’s been. What can I say? My grandmother was a very bitter, cruel woman. She hoarded everything to herself, and I don’t even begin to understand her – despite having access to her memories. Which is weird, but I’m slowly learning how to sort out my own thoughts from the Forest’s.”

“Well, I guess I don’t envy you there. Though, sometimes, I would do anything to know what my people truly think.”

“You’ve spent the last seven years traveling about, talking with the people. I think you have an advantage. So, trust yourself. You’re going to do just fine.”

James gave a hesitant smile. Elinrose knew that her words had meant the world to him. “Yeah. You, too, little sister.”

“Though, why you needed permission to be a good king from the little sister twelve years your junior, I shall never understand. No more underestimating yourself, James. Though...” She stood and let her throne melt back into the Forest. “You’re always welcome to let Mayblossom come stay with me. Not all the time – she’s a princess and should learn to live in that world. But I would be lying if I said I wouldn’t miss her, and if you need it...”

James raised an eyebrow and pulled Elinrose into a hug. “Well, my little sister who’s far too wise for her years, especially now that she has access to the memories of an entire *Forest* ... I think it would devastate both you and Mayblossom if I took the stance of ‘No, you can’t ever see each other again.’ Because I know you’re more of her parent than I’ve ever been, and even if I do plan to step up and finally be the father she deserves, I don’t think I’ll ever compare to her Aunt Elin. You rule a *Forest*.”

“You’d better step up and be the father she deserves.” Elinrose tilted her head to the side as she pulled back. “Because I will send her back to you if I think she’s spending too much time with me, much as I love her. I have a lot of rebuilding to do in this Forest, too.” She sighed and turned to Faia. “Besides, she now has an amazing mother to teach her the ways of life.”

“She certainly does.” James gave Faia a giant smile.

Yes, he definitely was in love again.

“Well, Faia, have you considered the offer I made you?” Elinrose asked.

Faia nodded. “Mari has assured me that it won’t change the person I am. Just help me be the best version of myself. And if I’m going to be a wife and mother, I want to be able to feel again.”

Elinrose smiled and laid her hand against Faia’s heart. “Also, just so we’re perfectly clear – James might only be my half-brother, and you might have only married him, but I fully consider you as much my sister as Mari herself. You have a family.”

Faia gasped as warmth spread through her. She stared at Elinrose with widening eyes. First, a smile spread across her face – a real, true smile – and then a tear leaked out of her eye as a sob pulled itself out of her chest.

Elinrose withdrew her hand as James stepped up and wrapped his arms around his wife, pulling her close as her emotion overwhelmed her.

“There are a lot of things that she’s been through, that she wasn’t able to properly feel because of her frozen heart,” she explained. “Be gentle with her. Give her time.” Elinrose waved a hand for the trees behind her to open. “And

I'm going to give the two of you space.”

James nodded and pressed a kiss to the top of Faia's head.



Elinrose let her thoughts drift through the Forest. Melding. Mixing. Transforming.

She didn't sleep anymore. That had been one of the easiest things to adjust to with the changes to her mind and body since joining with the Forest. Her body didn't need rest – or even food – the way it did before. She was sustained by the Forest itself.

It was an odd existence, but she grew a bit more used to it each day. Even the constant whispers were slowly fading into her mind's background voice. Perhaps the strangest part was being connected to a tree who had romantically pursued her sister, but she pushed Willow as far away as possible, and Ash kept a careful eye on him.

As for Snowmari herself, she was staying at the Rose Cabin again, instead of the village. For Elinrose's sake, she didn't want to see Earnest and Lilly. Elinrose didn't want to see them, either, so she didn't push the issue.

Most days, Elinrose spent in the cabin with Snowmari, but she also had duties to the Forest. And Snowmari also still slept.

The Forest was quieter at night, but not by much. Plenty of wildlife still stirred, and, of course, trees never slept.

But as the sun rose, she made her way back to meet with her sister for the day. Snowmari wasn't awake yet, but Elinrose...

Elinrose paused and frowned. Someone sought her. There was a certain weight to the footsteps that she'd quickly learned to recognize. Pausing, she closed her eyes and sought out the applicant.

It was Earnest.

Elinrose took a deep breath. Earnest was looking for her. Actively. She couldn't tell if he sought her for herself, as her position, or some combination thereof, just that she was his goal as he moved through the Forest.

She didn't have to let him find her. She could convolute the Forest to deliver him right back to the village. She could let him wander forever. She could send him straight to Willow and let the two entertain each other.

But...

She knew she couldn't avoid him forever. He lived in her Forest. He might very well become her sister's brother-in-law. And, well, no matter how much

she tried to put him out of her mind, she wanted to see him again.

After all, who else better to help her rebuild the communities of her Forest than the man who'd been given freedom to explore at his leisure? Earnest wanted to rebuild the cities that had once existed here, and she wanted his vision.

She took a deep breath and continued on to the cabin. It would be so much easier to face him with her sister's support.

Snowmari was chattering away with Jenna as Elinrose arrived, just as the fairy was setting breakfast out on the table.

"Are you joining me or are you just going to glare while I eat alone?" Snowmari raised an eyebrow as she sat down at the table. "Because you know I hate when you do that."

Elinrose raised an eyebrow of her own as she sat down and grabbed a blueberry muffin – just because she didn't *have* to eat anymore didn't mean that she couldn't, unlike how it was with sleeping. And food was good for nerves.

"We have a visitor coming," she said. "Earnest should arrive in an hour or so."

Snowmari blinked as she stabbed her eggs. "Earnest? Why is he coming?"

Elinrose shrugged. "I only know that he's specifically looking for me. And, well, we are friends. And he's Barend's brother. And I..."

"And he broke your heart."

"Because you encouraged me when I told you there was nothing."

"There was something."

"He helped us home and was trying to do it again, except you were icing over." Elinrose glared at the muffin. "He did it out of friendship to James, not for me."

"Him marrying Lilly makes no sense, though. She loves Henry."

Elinrose shrugged and took another bite of her muffin.

"Elin..."

"Mari, he married Lilly, and that's that. My feelings change nothing."

"I'm sorry, but as your younger sister, it's my job to keep you from hiding from your feelings." Snowmari raised an eyebrow. "No matter how hard you try, you just can't seem to let go of him."

"Well, he has as yet to leave the Forest, so it's impossible for me to completely put him out of mind." Elinrose shrugged.

Snowmari stared at Elinrose long and hard. Then she sighed. "You're

impossible, Elin.”

Elinrose finished her muffin and stood. “Don’t be too hard on him when he gets here. None of this was his fault. And I do hope that he and I could still be friends. So, please, help me put anything romantic aside and treat him civilly.”

“I don’t know how well you can succeed at that, but you’re welcome to try.” Snowmari rolled her eyes as she took another bite of her eggs. “So, is that all you plan to eat?”

Elinrose nodded. “I could use something to drink, though.”

Snowmari scoffed as Jenna set a glass of water in front of Elinrose. “You’re turning into a veritable plant, sister.”

“I am the Forest now, you know.”

“I really try to not think too hard about that.” Snowmari wrinkled her nose. “I mean, I’m proud to see you accepting yourself for who you are, but ... did you have to be *quite* so ... different?”

“Are you feeling inferior, my dear snowflake of a sister, because I assure you...”

“Oh, I assure you ‘inferior’ is not the word I think of.” Snowmari danced some ice about her fingertips. “‘Almost normal,’ now ... that would be far more accurate.”

“Well, I’m glad that I can make you feel ‘almost normal.’” Elinrose grinned as she stood. “And you can’t imagine how proud I am of you to see you finally accepting yourself for who *you* are.”

Snowmari grinned back.

The knock at the door took far too long and yet still came entirely too soon. Elinrose carefully schooled her nerves as she answered. She suspected that her forced smile was too broad, but at least she was smiling.

“Hello! To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit? I’m afraid we no longer need your help to get home. This ... this is my home, now, and Snowmari can come and go at my whim.”

Earnest rubbed the back of his head as he shifted uncomfortably in the doorway. “I heard about that. The, uh, the Forest looks good on you.” Fortunately, he turned to Snowmari as Elinrose’s cheeks warmed. “And you’re looking good, too. Glad to see you, you know, not freezing to death.”

Snowmari folded her arms over her chest. “I also find myself glad that I didn’t die. Why don’t you step inside so we can shut the door?”

Earnest quickly nodded and hurried into the house, and Elinrose closed the door behind him. “How is Lilly?”

“Well enough.” Earnest gave a small smile. “I think that marriage really suits her. I’m not surprised – she’s always been so kind and nurturing. It’s good to see her happy.”

Elinrose nodded and motioned to a chair. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

“And your mother, niece, and Faia?”

“They’ve returned to the North Country, but we thoroughly expect frequent visits in the future. Part of our improved relations, you know.”

Earnest nodded as he sat down, and Elinrose took another seat. Silence drifted awkwardly through the room.

“Have you eaten?” asked Snowmari. “I’m sure Jenna would be happy to find you something.”

“Breakfast would be appreciated, yes.” Earnest gave her a smile. “I must confess that I set out this morning on an impulse and didn’t even think about food.”

“Really?” said Snowmari raising an eyebrow as she handed Earnest a plate of eggs. “And just what sort of impulse was that? Were you really just so eager to ask about our family and see for yourself that I am no longer an ice cube and Elinrose is now part rosebush?”

Earnest swung his gaze back to Elinrose, his eyes widening. “Part...” He quickly shook his head. “No, I ... well, Barend told me that I should come

talk to you. I don't know why. I put it off, and I put it off, and ... well, now I'm here."

Elinrose bit the inside of her cheek. Yes, he was here. "So, are you and Lilly going to stay in the Forest? I'm not the tyrant my grandmother was – anyone can come and go as they please, as far as I'm concerned. And I know you have your own kingdom, so..."

"I probably should go home." Earnest glanced away and took a deep breath. "But I can't seem to bring myself to do that. I've lived at the mercy of this Forest for the last five years, four of them as a frog, and I don't know how to reinsert myself into the politics of court. And, besides, Barend and I have been avoiding each other for so long, well ... our relationship is strained right now."

Elinrose shared a glance with Snowmari. "Well, I would personally recommend that you repair your relationship. You never know when it's too late. Time is precious. Life is short."

"I know. I've heard." Earnest swallowed and focused on the wall. "But a lot has happened, these last few years, and we've both suffered a lot for his mistake. And I don't know if I can..." His gaze swung back to Elinrose, and he stood sharply, handing his plate back to Snowmari. "I don't even know why I came here. I'm sorry. I'll just be on my way." He reached the door, but then paused, squared his shoulders, and turned back to face them. "Thank you for breakfast. And, Elin, I wish you and my brother all the best. I really do."

Elinrose sat in shock, processing his statement, and only jumped up and rushed after him as he walked outside.

"I'm sorry, do you think that there is something between Barend and *me*?"

Earnest drew up short and spun back around to face her. "Isn't there? He told me that you were the one to break the Mistress's magic on him and restore his human form. That means..."

"I inherited my grandmother's magic, it was in my power to restore him, so I did. If anything, I *broke* any bonds between us."

"But you would make him the perfect queen..."

"I don't know if you've realized this, but I am my own queen. And even before I accepted responsibility for the Forest, my loyalty was to my home country first."

"Besides," said Snowmari, stepping up beside Elinrose. "She couldn't have broken his spell by love, anyway. He had to win the heart of a Frost."

Earnest shifted, tilting his head to the side as he stared at the sisters. "It

had to be a Frost?”

Elinrose nodded. “Willow stealing Snowmari’s heart first and breaking made it complicated, which is why I went ahead and released him. As far as I was concerned, he’d done enough, and I wanted to give their love a chance to develop without influence from magic. I set you free of it, too, though...”

The way Earnest stared at her was making her head spin. So intense. Searching.

“So, you’re entirely free?”

Elinrose glanced towards the Forest. “As free as anyone can be after they accept responsibility for an entire Forest. Certainly not free enough to accept the courtship of a crown prince.”

Earnest shifted and slowly nodded. “But your heart...”

How could she admit that *he* had stolen her heart? “I have not made the search for a husband my priority. I will need one, eventually, but there’s no need to rush.”

Snowmari wrapped a hand around Elinrose’s arm and squeezed tightly. She said nothing, but Elinrose was glad for her support.

“No ... I don’t suppose there is.” Earnest shifted again. “Look...” He trailed off and seemed unwilling to finish his thought. “Maybe I really should be going.”

“Why did it upset you so much to think of your brother with Elinrose?” asked Snowmari. “I mean, if you thought it was going to completely ruin your relationship with Barend, that’s pretty serious.”

“Mari...”

Earnest opened and shut his mouth, shifting awkwardly. “Look, maybe I wasn’t thinking straight. I just...”

“Aren’t you and Lilly happy together?” Snowmari glanced up at Elinrose. “Elin seemed to think that the two of you were happy together.”

“She’s happy with Henry.”

Elinrose sucked in a breath. “But you...”

“I couldn’t go through with it.” Earnest shook his head and took a step towards them. “I knew her heart would never truly be mine, and ... I realized that mine would never be hers.”

It was Elinrose’s turn to flap her mouth silently as she struggled for words. “But she’s a sweet girl. Surely...”

“She’s not you.”

Elinrose sucked in a breath as Snowmari’s hand fell away from her arm.

“You know, I really need to go water the roses,” Snowmari chattered brightly. “Will the two of you be all right? I think the two of you are going to be all right.”

“But we ... we don’t water our roses...” Elinrose stared helplessly after her sister, but Snowmari was gone.

“You said that finding a husband wasn’t your priority.” At the sudden nearness of his voice, she swung her head around to see that he now stood over her. “But could I ... is there any way for me to try to change your mind?”

“I...” Elinrose swallowed. “Earnest. I didn’t have to let you find me this morning. I almost didn’t.”

“And what changed your mind?”

The amount of hope that filled his voice made Elinrose dizzy.

“Because as much as I hated the thought of you with Lilly, I wanted your help to rebuild the communities and cities that my grandmother destroyed in her bitterness.” Elinrose took a deep breath. “I chose to put romantic feelings aside because even if I couldn’t have you as my consort, I needed you as an ally.”

Earnest reached for her hand, and she let him take it. “I’d be more than happy to be your ally.”

A smile came unbidden to her lips, but then she fought it aside as she focused. “I need to know, though. Why?”

“Why would I fall in love with you? Why wouldn’t I fall in love with a princess who marched straight into the heart of a dangerous Forest to save her brother? The *Mistress* was afraid of you.” He shook his head. “I’ve never met a woman like that.”

“But you were already engaged.” Elinrose shook her head. “I don’t care if it was arranged by magic, you had no business even looking at another woman.”

Earnest dropped her hand and ran his through his hair. “I had no business holding Lilly to the engagement when I knew she didn’t love me.” He twisted away and took a deep breath. “If it makes you feel better, I wasn’t trying to pursue you. Not for myself, at any rate. I thought you would make the perfect woman for Barend, though, and since he wasn’t there to court you, I figured...” He turned back to her with a frown. “You would really prefer me over him? He saved you when you were lost...”

“But you saw me home.” Elinrose dropped her gaze. “I count Barend as a

close friend – I hope to have him as a brother soon – but that’s as far as it goes between us. Two neighboring monarchs who each has a younger sibling who they desperately want to keep safe, yet we know we can’t do that.”

“I think your sister is safe enough.” Earnest took her hand again.

Elinrose gave a small smile as she met his gaze again. “I know she is. I just worry about my roses. Snowmari and water usually result in ice.”

Earnest chuckled. “I think they’re going to be just fine, too.”

“So, you’ll do it, then? You’ll help me rebuild what the Mistress destroyed? You’ll stand by me as consort and help me rule the people who dwell in the Forest?”

“I’d like nothing more.” Earnest took a deep breath. “A bit of an irregular proposal, though. Especially when you thought I was a married man, just minutes ago.”

“Well, I am a reigning monarch, so it’s only natural that I make the offer, especially when I suspect we already have your brother’s approval.” Elinrose lifted her chin. “And while I don’t generally rush into things, I don’t believe in waiting once I decide what I want.”

“And I’m what you want?”

“I’ll still give you a chance to court me properly.” Elinrose smiled up at him as she laid his hand against her heart. “But I would like to share my connection to the Forest now. The ritual doesn’t take very long.”

“Sounds fair.” Earnest continued to stare at Elinrose with an intensity that made her knees weak.

“I should probably give you a few warnings – give you a chance to escape while you still can.” Elinrose squeezed his hand. “This will give you a share of my connection to the Forest. You’ll basically become a strong Sensitive, but with a direct connection to me. You will also share my extended life. A day will come when we’ll have outlived everyone we currently know and care about, and yet we’ll still look young and strong.”

“Not aging is something I wouldn’t complain about.”

Elinrose raised an eyebrow and dropped her hand from his. “And someday, we shall have a daughter who will take my power from me, and you will need to stand by her as an advisor, setting aside the fact that this will end my life.”

“Well, that sounds a bit more ominous...”

“It’s important. It’s the Forest’s life cycle. If you cause her any reason for bitterness, you can very well doom the Forest to another tyrant like my

grandmother.” Elinrose narrowed her eyes. “It’s not going to happen tomorrow. By then, we’ll both be ready to move on to the Ever After. But it may well be the most important task you’ll have as my consort.”

Earnest nodded. “Very well. You have my word.”

“Oh, I will.” Elinrose smiled again and put her hand against his heart. “I need you to repeat after me.”

She led him through the vow – of faithfulness to her and to his duties as her husband, companion, liaison, and the father of her children.

He took a deep breath as they finished. “So, that’s it? And your vows?”

“Mine aren’t spoken.”

Elinrose pulled him close, pressed her lips against his, and breathed the magic of the Forest into him.

“That’s it,” she said as she pulled away. “We are now irrevocably bound together and to the Forest.”

She wasn’t sure how, but the green of his eyes was even stronger than before.

He wrapped an arm around her waist as he swayed unsteadily – she didn’t blame him. The noise of the Forest was intimidating.

“I don’t think that was a proper kiss,” he muttered, pulling her closer. “Do you mind if I make another attempt?”

“You’re welcome to as many attempts as you like.”

~

“Okay, the two of you are *definitely* getting along.”

Elinrose jerked away and twisted around to face her sister. “Look, we...”

“Do I look upset? I mean, he’s only about half as charming as his brother, but we both know how your tastes run.” Snowmari folded her arms over her chest. “I just think that you might want to take things slow. After all, you did think he was a married man, not even an hour ago.”

“Well, I left the village with the understanding that was going to marry Lilly by nightfall, so what else was I supposed to assume?” Elinrose glanced up at Earnest with a raised eyebrow. “Especially when I checked in on him and saw her smiling.”

Earnest tilted his head to the side. “I released her from our engagement and allowed her to marry the man she actually loved. Of *course* she was happy about that. Especially when night fell, and I didn’t actually turn back into a frog.”

“You have to admit, it was a far more natural conclusion than your assumption about me and Barend.”

Earnest shrugged. “I’m used to girls favoring him over me.”

“But we’ve established that you’d never met another girl like me.” Elinrose grinned. “I very much prefer you.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Earnest pressed a kiss to the top of her head and then pulled back with a frown. “You have thorns.”

“I do.” Elinrose tilted her head to the side. “And they are attached at the roots, just like my hair, so please be careful of them.”

“Noted.”

“Now, I was serious when I said that you need to repair your relationship with your brother.” Elinrose squeezed his hand. “And you probably should let him know about ... this.”

She raised his arm and pushed up his sleeve to reveal a rose vine wrapped around his arm – not a living vine, like those growing through her hair, but one that was colored into his skin.

“This marks you as my consort,” she explained. “You can keep it covered if you want, but be aware of it. I don’t know who, outside of the trees, will know what it means, but you never know. And I do know it’s not a common fashion statement among men.”

Earnest bent to take another kiss from her lips. “Well, I am certainly looking forward to the adventures ahead of us, and since there’s no time like the present, well ... I’ll see you again soon.”

“If you’re off to see Barend, be sure to send him my love,” said Snowmari.

“I’ll do that.” Earnest gave a small laugh as he sized her up.

“You really need to learn how to practice what you preach,” said Snowmari, wrapping Elinrose in a hug as he disappeared from the clearing. “And you thought I was rushing in without thinking.”

“I’ve done plenty of thinking,” said Elinrose, hugging her sister back. “There really never would have been anyone else. I needed to stake my claim before any other girls realized just what an amazing man he is. I must admit, I had my doubts, but, well ... he let her go at the cost of his own human existence. He had no idea that I had set him free of the spell.” She sighed. “He saw me home, and there’s no one I would rather have to help me build my new home.”

“Just as long as you don’t make me wait forever to marry Barend. We

don't have an extra-long life ahead of us. We have to make every moment count."

Elinrose laughed. "And I have complete faith that you will." She tilted her head to the side as she stared at the trees. "You know, I think I've decided what to call myself."

"Oh?"

"The Gardener."

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And thank you so much for reading my story, lovely reader. I do hope you enjoyed it and that I managed to shine a new light on these characters and their struggle, whether you love Austen's first major novel or not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kendra E. Ardnek is the penname of Kendra Roden, a Christian author who makes her home in the Piney Woods of East Texas with her herd of giraffes and clutch of dragon babies, alongside her honor guard of nutcracker figurines. When not writing, you can usually find her sitting in a box, because she might actually be a cat, and she's frequently been known to act before she thinks.