
Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing
1
Author
Sachi Konzome
Artist
Harenochihareta

Table of Contents

Copyright
Character Page
Sophie, the "Monstrous Miss"
The Olzons and Sophie's Salon
Annie, the Princess
Yvonne, the Noblewoman
Scrumptious, the Cook
Arasyll, the Baron's Daughter
Lily, the Classmate
Sherlotte Olzon
Kurt Ozhorn, the Healer
Yaora, the Greengrocer
Amaryllis, the Daughter of the Sea
Kristoffer, the Student
Scarlett, the Actor
Isadora, the Dancer
Bonus Chapter: Annie Crocodile
Epilogue: Silver
Other Series

Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing Volume 1

Sachi Konzome

Translation by Dawson Chen
Illustration by Harenochihareta
Title Design by Arbash Mughal
Editing by Shana Vodhanel
Proofreading by A.M. Perrone and Charis Messier
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Salon de Sophie, Lady Monster *It's a pleasure to meet you. I can fix a piece of skin*

volume 1

© Sachi Konzome 2023
All rights reserved
First published in Japan in 2023 by MAG Garden Corporation English translation rights arranged with MAG Garden Corporation through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo

English translation ©2025 Cross Infinite World
All rights reserved. In accordance with U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the email below.

Cross Infinite World

contact@crossinfworld.com
www.crossinfworld.com Published in the United States of America
Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com
Facebook.com/crossinfworld
Twitter.com/crossinfworld
crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

First Digital Edition: May 2025

ISBN: 979-8-88560-184-9


Kurt Ozhorn
(22)
A wielder of light magic and healer, Kurt has been known for his quiet demeanor and talent since childhood. His path crosses with Sophie's when he investigates the legitimacy of her salon.
Sophie Olzon
(17)
Daughter of a wealthy trading family. She can heal, but only skin-deep. She opens her own enchanted salon to help others with skin-related ailments.
Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing


Yaoka
(13)
A country girl from a quiet farming town who becomes best friends with Angelina, the evacuee.
Angelina Bergameli
(13)
Born out of wedlock, Angelina is sent to the countryside at thirteen to escape the war—and her father.

Sophie, the “Monstrous Miss”

THE soft spring breeze carried the faint scent of salt and blossoms as it swept through the winding streets of the port city, where towering ships lay moored in calm waters. On the outskirts of the bustling town, nestled in an impressive stone-built estate near the docks, a scream pierced the evening air and shattered the stillness.

Bang. The door to the office flew open. One of the estate’s maids, breathless and disheveled, stormed into the lord’s private office, disregarding all decorum. Her chest heaved with panic, strands of hair escaping her bonnet, eyes wide and frantic.

“What is the meaning of this?” the lord of the house set his pen across the scattered papers before him and rose sharply.

“It’s Ms. Sophie!” the maid gasped, barely catching her breath. “She—she’s fallen out the window!”

Thunk. The writing desk trembled, and thick black ink spilled across its surface.

That had been the last thing the man had wanted to hear on the eve of his only daughter’s seventeenth birthday.



MY name was Mariko Tanaka. I was fifty-seven years old.

At eighteen, I got pregnant, dropped out of vocational school, and had a baby girl. By nineteen, I was a widow. My husband died in an accident, leaving me to figure out how to be both mother and father in that tiny, run-down apartment.

Our daughter was born with a skin condition. Something so awful, it was like her own body was attacking her. I used to sit in

that small, dimly lit room, holding her tiny fingers to stop her from scratching herself raw. “Don’t scratch, don’t cry,” I whispered. I told her not to cry, even though I was the one crying. I apologized over and over as if that would change anything. We’d fall asleep like that—me crying myself to exhaustion, her curled in my arms.

When she started kindergarten, she didn’t make a single friend. By elementary school, the other kids avoided her like she was contagious, calling her dirty. I blamed myself. Of course I did. I couldn’t even give her the basic gift of normal, healthy skin. It was my failure—her suffering was because of me.

Before the money ran out—the money that was supposed to replace my husband’s life—I found a job. Caregiving. Night shifts. Grueling work. But it was all I could get. No degree, no experience—this was more than I deserved.

But my daughter, despite everything, had a strength I never understood. We were poor. I was tired and absent all the time, and she was in constant pain from that cursed skin of hers. And yet, she threw herself into her studies. She became a doctor.

I don’t know how it happened. She never told me about her scholarship or college plans. She just handed me forms, and I signed and stamped them like it was nothing. And before I knew it, she had graduated from med school.



“I’M sorry.”

The night she got her medical license, we sat down for a small dinner—nothing fancy, just the two of us. It was supposed to be a celebration, but instead, I broke my promise to be happy for her. Tears streaming down my face, I apologized.

I apologized for having her so young. For the skin condition that made her life harder from the moment she was born. For the poverty. The thrift store clothes. The off-brand snacks. I couldn’t give her the life other kids had. I couldn’t even let her dream of the toys she wanted because she knew better than to ask. And when she was anxious about her future, all I could do was stand on the

sidelines because what did I know about being a doctor? A dropout like me had nothing to offer her.

Youth. Youth was all I had, supposedly. But before I'd realized it, I'd squandered it all, working myself to the bone. I was decrepit, exhausted, a shadow of the person I might have been. I called myself a mother, but what kind of mother had I been, really? A vessel to bring her into this world, but like a vessel, beyond that, I was empty.

In the middle of my sobbing, she wrapped her arms around me, cutting my apology short. And that's when I noticed—her skin. It wasn't as bad as it used to be. Over the years, it had improved. Now, only the changing seasons or an illness brought back the flare-ups. She had grown into a beautiful, calm woman, her eyes full of wisdom and kindness.

"You've always been in my corner, Mom." She smiled at me. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Her eyes grew glassy, and soon, the tears fell, streaking down her cheeks to match mine. That night, she told me it was her turn to take care of me. That she would repay everything.



MY daughter was thirty-eight when she came to me saying she had someone she wanted me to meet. Her first boy ever at thirty-eight. With her job as a pediatrician at a big hospital, she never had time for relationships. I'd grown used to that—just the two of us, working, eating dinner together, growing old side by side. So when she told me that, I had to admit I was blindsided.

She said he was a doctor too, working in Tokyo, but that he'd eventually inherit his family's clinic. That's when the alarms went off in my head. I braced myself for some arrogant, rich boy who thought he was better than her. But when I met him, he was soft around the edges—dopey, innocent, reminding me curiously of one of those steamed rabbit *manju* buns.

"I promise to make your daughter happy." Poor Mr. Rabbit Bun was sweating bullets. His suit looked stiff and uncomfortable as he

prostrated himself on all fours, bowing so low his forehead touched the floor. "I'll be in your care."

My daughter muttered something to the same effect.

Then, so did I.



"I just couldn't leave him alone," my daughter said that night as she scrubbed the flowery dessert plates we'd bought at a flea market years ago.

Makes sense, I thought.



THE morning my daughter and son-in-law left for their honeymoon, I had just finished a night shift. I unlocked the apartment—empty now for the first time in what felt like forever—set my keys down, kicked off my shoes, and reached for the light switch when it felt like someone had swung a baseball bat straight into the back of my head.

A home invasion? That was my first thought, but that didn't make sense. The lights were off, but it was still morning, so natural light should've poured through the windows. Yet everything looked wrong—dark patches smudged the left side of my vision. Then, my legs gave out. I tried to brace myself with my left arm, but it was limp, dead weight. I crashed onto the cold, unforgiving floor of the foyer.

I knew these symptoms. From the episode of *Family Medicine* I watched just yesterday. From all my training as a caregiver. This was a stroke—or was cerebral infarction the right term? But who cared about that in the moment? My head pounded with a blinding, searing pain.

With my working hand, I fumbled through my purse for my phone. My fingers trembled as I dialed emergency services. I inputted the number. My thumb hovered over the screen, one tap away from calling for help…when I stopped myself.

A scene from *Family Medicine* flashed in my mind.

"Thanks to early detection and quick action, Mrs. A was able to save her life. Now, she's on the road to recovery, with daily rehabilitation to get her back on her feet," the upbeat narrator's voice chimed in my mind. The camera on the screen had panned to an elderly woman, frail but surrounded by warmth—a pristine white bedspread and her family gathered around, smiling, loving. But I couldn't feel happy for her. Not when all I could see in those happy faces was the face of my only daughter.

I knew her. If I survived this, no matter how devastating the aftermath, she would be there. No matter what it took from her, she would care for me for the rest of my life. Her bright new marriage, the job in which she found so much fulfillment, even the joy of maybe holding her own baby girl in her arms one day—she would deprive herself of it all if it meant she could help me cling to life.

Why? I always wondered. Why would she sacrifice everything for a mother who had barely given her anything?

But the answer was never too far from me. This was the same girl who used to look at *me* with sympathy as *I* cried, rubbing ointment into her burning, cracked skin. The same girl who waited up late every night for me, her desk lamp the only source of light to save on electricity, studying in the cold, in the heat, through everything, always waiting, always enduring.

That little girl, who had known nothing but pain, had grown into the most compassionate doctor. That girl, who grew up without a father's love, became the most supportive wife. Her whole life had been one long winter, and now, finally, her spring had come. I couldn't let anyone take that from her. Least of all me.

The strength left my body, and the phone slipped from my hand, clattering to the floor. My head hit the cold tile, the sharpness of the impact reverberating through my skull.

Enjoy your honeymoon, my precious, darling baby girl.

The last thought left me as a hot breath, swallowed by the chill of the floor beneath me.



WITH a sharp gasp, Sophie Olzon bolted upright in her bed, her mind swimming with freshly unlocked memories.

The clatter of something heavy hitting the floor broke the silence. Sophie turned her head to the source of the commotion, where, standing wide-eyed in the doorway, was Claire, the family's plump and well-meaning maid. She stood frozen in place, a pitcher of water overturned at her feet.

"M-M-Milady!" she stammered.

"Good morning, Claire," Sophie replied, her voice unnervingly steady.

"Y-Y-Y-You're awake! I-I-I-I'll inform the household at once!"

Like a toy ball hitting an odd bounce, Claire jumped, then shot out of the room, leaving the overturned silver pitcher spinning slowly on the floor. Water seeped into the carpet. The dark stain spread wider and wider, but Sophie barely noticed. She stared at it, her mind still racing with the reality she had just woken to.

Who had once been Mariko was now Sophie. And Sophie was…

She felt the back of one hand with the other. That texture—that awful, awful texture. She looked down, and what was there, in place of smooth, youthful skin, was something dry and cracked like the bark of a withered tree.

Her hands weren't the only part afflicted. She knew it too well. This horrible, tough skin stretched across her entire body, hidden beneath her clothes, covering even her face. Boils and angry bumps marred her features, oozing a sickly yellow-green liquid that seeped through her pores.

"Milady."

The door opened soundlessly, and a different, pale-faced maid with graying hair stepped inside. Her posture was unnaturally stiff, as though a metal plate were strapped to her back beneath her pristine uniform—a theory Sophie had held since childhood, often trying to prove it.

"Martha," Sophie greeted.

The head maid, Martha, with her tightly wound silver-gray bun, aquiline nose, and thin lips set in a constant straight line, approached Sophie's bedside.

"Pardon my imposition," Martha said flatly, placing the back of her hand against Sophie's forehead, a practiced check for fever. Satisfied with her findings, she leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a murmur, "I've put away your diary in the usual place."

"My diary…" Sophie's memories flooded back. *I don't want to be a monster.* She had written those words, leaving the diary wide open on her desk as she made for the nearest window…

"Sophie!"

A voice, urgent yet lilting, pierced through Sophie's thoughts. She looked up just as a woman in a fine crimson dress rushed toward her—her mother. That familiar teardrop-shaped mole, usually an elegant accent beneath her eye, was now streaked with real tears. The mother threw her arms around Sophie, held her tight for a moment, then pulled away to look at her face. Her fingers trembled as they brushed across Sophie's forehead, her shoulders, her back, as if to confirm all of her was still there. "Oh! You're okay! Thank goodness, you're okay!" she cried, her long lashes fluttering shut as tears escaped through the gaps and rolled down her cheeks.

The scene hit Sophie with an unfamiliar sharpness, as though she were seeing everything clearly for the first time in her life. "Mother…" she whispered.

A deep, rumbling voice broke the moment from somewhere behind the mother. "When we heard you had fallen from the window, we feared the worst."

Sophie's beloved father stepped into view, emerging from the doorway as if he'd been hiding there, letting her mother rush in first. His platinum blond hair, tied into a neat ponytail, swayed slightly with each deliberate step. His emerald-green eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "You're still with us—that's all that matters," he said, his voice soft but tinged with a deep relief.

For a moment, his lips moved as if he wanted to say more, but the words seemed to fail him. Instead, he added, "You'll stay here and rest until you've recovered, my darling." With a hand firmer than the mother's but just as tender, he ruffled Sophie's hair. "Get better. Get well. That's all we ask of you."

Caught between the intense love in both their gazes, Sophie felt a knot form in her throat. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come. All she could manage was a quiet, broken sound. Here were the two people who loved her more than anything in the world. As the reality of what she'd put them through settled over her, she could no longer stop the tears.

"It's all right, darling," her mother soothed, gently stroking her head. "You don't have to say anything. You're here. You're safe. That's all we need."

Sophie said nothing, just watching in silent agony as flakes of her dry, cracked skin floated down like discarded fragments onto the bed with every gentle stroke.



SOPHIE Olzon, the only daughter of the wealthy Olzon trading family, was born with a rare and inexplicable skin disease. Even as a newborn, her skin was nearly devoid of smoothness. When she cried, her lips cracked and bled, and the sores she scratched raw oozed a strange, pus-filled liquid. No doctor could explain the cause, and no medicine could ease her suffering. For seventeen long years, she endured this affliction.

Her appearance earned her the cruel nickname "the Monstrous Miss" among her schoolmates. She had no friends—only bullies and the whispers, sneers, and stares that followed her everywhere. Eventually, the cruelty became too much. One day, without fanfare, Sophie left school, never to return. Her parents, kind in their words but helpless in action, reassured her that anything taught at school could be learned at home. And so, she withdrew from the world, confining herself to a single room in her family's sprawling estate, continuing her studies with home tutors.

At fifteen, unexpected news came: Sophie was magical. But the revelation came with a catch. Her healing magic, as it turned out, was unusually weak. The examiner, with a touch of sympathy, explained that she would likely only be able to heal minor, surface-level imperfections. Most would have been disheartened, but not

Sophie. She saw potential in even the slightest glimmer of hope. After all, countless people in the world were suffering from afflictions that seemed to "only" run skin-deep.

Magic—that infamous term given to describe phenomena beyond the purview of natural laws—was something Sophie could now feel within herself. It was invisible but undeniable, swirling beneath the surface. She clung to it, nurturing the warm, inexplicable force, coaxing it to grow stronger. This, she believed, was her path. A fragile but real purpose began to take shape. With time and effort, she might finally carve out a place for herself in a world that had always seemed to turn its back on her.

But then, when Sophie turned sixteen, everything changed. A flare-up of her disease ravaged her body like never before. Her bark-like skin spread, leaving not an inch untouched. Bandages, no matter how often changed, became soaked with foul-smelling pus almost instantly. Her skin split at the slightest touch—holding a spoon could cause deep, painful cracks. Each morning, she woke in a pile of her own skin, her eyes sealed shut by dried pus. Crying became unbearable. Every tear that fell left a stinging trail of pain as it rolled down her cheeks. She bit her lips until they bled, desperate to stop the tears, but they came all the same.

It was as if the gods had noticed her spark of hope—and snuffed it out with cruelty that felt personal, as if mocking her for daring to hope.

That had been the first time in her life that Sophie wanted to die.



FOR a while, Sophie lived as if she were already dead. Her days blurred together in bed, waiting for time to pass or for her suffering to end. Then, one day, the elderly doctor who treated her arrived with a younger face in tow.

Dr. Matthias Adolphin was his name, a rookie under the older doctor's guidance. He had soft chestnut hair and deep brown eyes,

and the moment his smooth, soothing voice reached her, Sophie knew—for the first time in her life—she had fallen in love.

Dr. Adolphin visited only twice a week, but each time, Sophie felt like she was walking on clouds. Her condition hadn't improved; the check-ups were as intolerable as ever. But now, she lived for those fleeting moments when he would touch her skin or say her name.

It was torture, yet she began bathing again. Even though pus soaked through everything she wore, she started choosing her outfits with care. She pestered Martha and Claire to style her platinum blonde hair—the one feature she proudly inherited from her father—into braids and updos. The meals she once struggled to eat now tasted delicious, seasoned with love. In a hidden corner of her diary, she scribbled "Sophie Adolphin," only to hurriedly erase it. Her studies, long abandoned when her disease worsened, suddenly felt worth pursuing again. She even rekindled her dreams of using her healing magic, imagining herself at Dr. Adolphin's side, assisting him with patients.

Her skin, however, didn't share in her newfound optimism. If it improved one day, it worsened the next—one step forward, one step back. But with Dr. Adolphin in her life, none of that seemed to matter. The world felt brighter, fuller. For the first time, she found herself eager for tomorrow.

One day, during one of his visits, Sophie noticed Dr. Adolphin sneaking glances at the vase of flowers by her bedside. "They're pretty, aren't they?" she asked, forcing a smile as she gestured to the delicate white blooms.

"Yes, they're lovely." He smiled warmly but hesitated. His gaze softened—bashful, almost—but it filled Sophie with dread. "They, um… They remind me of a friend of mine."

Of course. That was why his smile terrified her. It wasn't for a "friend" at all. It was for *her*. Someone precious to him, someone who held such a special place in his heart that the mere sight of those flowers made him think of her.

After that, Sophie pried bits of information from Dr. Adolphin, pretending to be a curious girl fascinated by love. He spoke of this

mysterious woman, explaining that he dreamed of marrying her—someday. But marriage was a distant hope, as they needed money and lots of it. His love had a lifelong illness requiring expensive treatments. The way he spoke about her was filled with love, sorrow, and every emotion in between.

That was when Sophie realized her first love had ended before it had even begun. The truth sank like a stone in her chest, but she forced a smile. The pain—well, she would decide to look past the pain, burying it deep into some dark corner of her mind where it couldn't hurt her.

Sophie was finally living now. Each day held something to look forward to. Dressing up was fun. Doing her hair was fun. Meals were delicious. Studying felt purposeful. Every visit from Dr. Adolphin filled her with bittersweet joy. Yes, there was a pang in her chest when she saw him, a stab of loneliness and longing, but those feelings paled in comparison to the happiness of being near him. Compared to the days when she wasted away in bed, this was a thousand times—no, a million times better.

Dr. Adolphin had given her this new life. He meant so much to her; she didn't want to taint the happiness he brought by acknowledging the darker emotions she was suppressing. So she buried them, stamped them down into every mental nook and cranny, convincing herself that life was good. That this—this was enough.



ONE day, Sophie received a summons from her father. The words he spoke drained the blood from her face. Yet heat rose it all the same: Dr. Adolphin had agreed to marry her.

Marriage.

Dr. Adolphin is going to be my husband?

That night, she scribbled "Sophie Adolphin" into her diary once more. She stared at the name and traced the letters with her fingers, but this time, she didn't erase it. A giggle bubbled up from deep inside—a giddiness she'd never felt before. It wasn't just an

emotional high; it was like her body had become weightless, floating on pure joy.

When the day of Dr. Adolphin's next visit arrived, Sophie dressed in her favorite clothes, had Martha style her hair just the way she wanted it, and waited in bed, heart racing with nervous excitement. This would be the first time she'd see him since the engagement had been announced. What would she say? What would he do? Her mind buzzed with endless possibilities.

But when the door finally slid open, the man who stepped through wasn't the bashful, rosy-cheeked doctor greeting his bride-to-be. Instead, a pale, trembling shell of a man stood before her, his face tight with fear.

It hit her then—a question she'd somehow forgotten to ask: *But what about "her"?*

No, not forgotten. In the haze of excitement, she had buried it, pushed it away, alongside all the other thoughts and feelings she didn't want to confront. Now free from its prison, it oozed out into every corner of her mind like a creeping, toxic sludge.



THAT night, Sophie wandered through the shadowed halls of the estate like a sleepless ghost. As she passed by a half-closed door, a muffled voice reached her ears.

"Well, you should've asked me!"

It was her mother.

"If you truly think a marriage bought with money—at the expense of true love—will make her happy, then I have nothing to say to you!"

Sophie's lips trembled.

Of course, she had known. Deep down, she had always known. There was no other explanation. Why else would Dr. Adolphin, who loved another with all his heart, agree to marry someone like her? Why would he forsake the woman he adored to marry a monster?

Because the monster's father had offered him everything he needed to save the true love of his life.

It was touching, really—a tragic, heart-wrenching romance. To save the woman he loved, Dr. Adolphin would sacrifice his own happiness, smother his love beneath a marriage of duty. For the price of *her* life, he would marry a monster and bind himself to a fate he didn't want. Sophie had known this all along—she must have. The giddiness, the fleeting happiness—it had all been a cruel deception she told herself to mask the truth she couldn't bear to face.

She had no recollection of how she made it back to her room. Her heart raced, her breath shallow as she reached for her diary, desperate for something to calm the storm inside her. But when she pressed the pen to the page, her hand shook too much. The tip stabbed through the paper, ink bleeding in dark, ugly smears. Tears welled in her eyes. She tore out the page in frustration and started to cry.

Why couldn't she let it be? Why couldn't this one fleeting moment of light be enough? Why did she have to know the truth? Her hands shook violently with the force of her sobs, but she began to write.

My beloved doctor. The one thing I treasure most in this world…and father bought him with money.

The ink smudged under her hand as she pressed on, the lines uneven, her grip too tight. But she didn't stop.

Why did father do this? Because he knew I loved him? Because he knew I wanted him to be mine?

She bit down hard on her lip, the pain not registering even as she tasted blood. Crimson droplets mingled with her tears, falling onto the page.

No. Father did this because he loves me.

The pen clattered onto the desk. Before she knew it, she was standing in front of the mirror in the far corner of her room. Her hand reached out, pulling off the cloth that usually covered it, and she stared into her reflection.

A monster.

In the dim light, through the tangled strands of her disheveled hair, she saw it—her skin, uneven and grotesque, glistening with

tears and pus. The lumpy, disfigured surface made her more creature than human. Her reflection shimmered under the foul liquid that oozed from her skin, turning her into something unrecognizable.

Why did it have to be this way? She could have been beautiful. She could have taken after her mother or father—either way, she would have been whole. But instead, she became *this*. An abomination. A creature so hideous that people recoiled at the sight of her.

The worst part wasn't even her reflection. It wasn't the ugliness staring back at her. It was that, despite it all, her parents still loved her. They treasured her enough to try and make her impossible dreams come true. Her father, so desperate to give her something, had bought a man's heart just to offer her a sliver of happiness.

Her mother had seen right through it. She had called him out, told him it wasn't like him to behave this way. Her father was a man of principles—a businessman who despised underhanded deals—yet here he was, trying to buy love. Her mother had said it would break Sophie's heart eventually—just not yet.

Sophie had never heard her mother, always so kind and gentle, speak with such force.

She pressed her forehead against the glass, then her hands. She traced the reflection of her uneven, swollen features with her fingers.

"You should've never been born," she whispered. Her voice cracked, barely audible, but the monster in the mirror heard.

The monster cried.

Sophie watched as dirty tears streaked down the reflection's disfigured face. She reached up and traced the path of one tear, dragging her finger through the reflected trail on the glass.

Poor thing, she lamented. *You ugly, wretched thing. You make everyone's life harder just by existing.*

Maybe she could turn a blind eye to it all. Pretend she hadn't overheard. Let the days pass, and eventually, she would become Dr. Adolphin's wife. She could live in the dream and convince herself it was real.

But then that monster—smiling so happily beside the good doctor, knowing the truth—would truly be a monster, inside and out.

I don't want to be a monster. She scribbled down hastily. *Take care, Mother, Father. I love you both so much.*

Sophie Olzon.

Signing her name on the page, she put it all down and opened the window.



SOPHIE'S memories ended there. She now lay in her bed, pondering the combined recollections of Sophie and Mariko, when there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," she called out, and in strode Martha, the head maid.

"I've brought more water, milady," Martha said.

Sophie thanked her politely as the pitcher landed on the bedside table with a soft *thunk*. Then Martha moved closer. "It's time to change your dressings," she announced.

Sophie thanked Martha again, then one by one, the bandages around her unraveled, loop by sickening loop. What had once been pristine white cloth was now stained with a nauseating green, yellow, and red pattern. Sophie used to find the sight revolting, a reminder of her condition, but now she regarded it with detached curiosity—something that surprised her.

"Thank you—for hiding my diary, Martha," Sophie murmured, breaking the silence.

It was a relief to know it had been kept from her parents. Though the thoughts she had written back then might have been true, Sophie could only imagine what kind of hurt that "truth" would've caused her parents.

"It was a terrible accident. We must all do what we can," Martha replied, her tone neutral, almost mechanical.

Everyone had heard the story: that Sophie, feeling faint, had opened the window for fresh air and, in a moment of weakness, slipped and fell. But Sophie doubted anyone truly believed it. The padlocked, boarded-up windows in her room were evidence enough.

Her father had said it was "just in case," but she knew the truth. They were a safeguard to prevent any more "accidents."

"Martha," Sophie said softly.

"Yes, milady?" Martha responded, her focus steady as she continued her work.

"I'm very grateful, you know."

Martha's hands stilled for the briefest of moments, then resumed unwrapping the bandages.

"I have a father who is both strong and admirable, a mother whose beauty is matched only by her kindness. I have you, Martha—always firm, but only because you care. Claire, whose very presence lifts the weight from my heart, and Raymond, with his perfect tarts that taste like happiness itself. I have books that let me explore the world beyond these walls, and I have magic—magic that's given me dreams I never thought I could have."

Martha stayed silent. Having finished unwrapping the old bandages, her hands moved to the fresh ones.

"I've been so blessed," Sophie continued, her voice trembling now, "but I never appreciated any of it." Tears slid down her cheeks, falling on her exposed skin. "Please, Martha, forgive me. I never meant to do something so stupid."

There was a sound like a sharp intake of breath. Then arms—warm and steady—draped around Sophie's body.

The old maid, who'd never let her heart spill beyond the boundaries of duty, had crossed that line and drawn Sophie into her arms, uncaring of the rough, blistered skin beneath her fingertips. She pulled away just enough to meet Sophie's tear-streaked face, her hand trembling as it touched her cheek, tenderly tracing the painful ridges that marred her beloved lady's skin.

"Oh, how many times," Martha's voice cracked, betraying the years of carefully concealed pain, "how many times I prayed to the gods to take your suffering and give it to me instead." She paused, her breath shaking, and in a hoarse, strained whisper of a yell, "From the time you were but a child, you were wise, compassionate, dedicated—and yet so burdened. Every sob you stifled, every sleepless night from the itching and the agony…I begged them,

milady. This old maid begged them, 'Why must something so pure, so innocent, be cursed with such torment?'

"When you came back from school, mud covering you after those horrid children had tormented you, and you quietly washed your clothes so as not to trouble anyone…I thought to myself—Gods help me—I thought I would hunt down every last one of those who hurt you and cause them the same pain they caused you."

"Martha…" Sophie whispered.

"If my very blood and bones and heart could serve as the cure you need, I would have gladly carved up my body, piece by piece, to offer it to you. If your salvation had required a deal with the devil himself, I would have sought him out and negotiated the terms, whatever they may have been. But…" Her voice wavered, catching on a breath. "That time never came. All these years, standing by your side, and never—never once—did the chance to truly be of use present itself. And now, look at me…worn and useless. What have I done, milady? What have I truly done for you?"

Tears dotted the sheets with quiet drops. "I despise this cruel affliction for what it has stolen from you. You, who should be known for your wisdom, hard-earned and so rightfully yours, for the beauty you inherited from your parents, for the compassion they instilled in you… And yet, all of it, hidden beneath the grip of this vile disease.

"And for all my sorrow, for all my hatred of this curse, I know my pain is nothing compared to what you endure. To carry this burden so gracefully, so tirelessly, always thinking of others, never wanting to be a source of worry… I cannot even begin to imagine the strength it must take, day after day."

"I had no idea…" Sophie said.

"Even then, my sweet girl, even then…"

You must live.

Please.



THAT night, the fragile, trembling voice of the head maid still echoed in Sophie's ears. Her thoughts swirled, not about whether

she wanted to die—she had made that decision instantly—but about the future. Since she had chosen to live, *how* would she live?

This disease would likely be a lifelong companion. That didn't mean she would rule out the possibility of improvement as she grew older. She would avoid aggravating the condition and use her newly recovered memories from another life to search for a cure. While she could take an exam and return to school, someone like her—someone different—would only stir up the worst in the other students. Before, it had stopped at mud-throwing and hateful words. But if it escalated into real violence, there would be real consequences for her tormentors. So, school was not an option. But she still needed to continue her studies and build on the foundation she had already laid. All knowledge was valuable.

What about marriage? That was a difficult matter. For now, she would ask her father to annul her engagement with Dr. Adolphin. Still, she held on to the hope of loving someone one day—the joy of holding her own baby in her arms. The part of her that remembered the preciousness of new life, the feeling of nuzzling a tiny palm against her cheek, refused to let go of that dream.

The word *work* escaped her lips. If marriage were postponed, Sophie would need to become independent. Two questions echoed in her mind: What did she want to do? What *could* she do? She gazed down at her hands for answers. There had to be a reason she was blessed with the power to heal skin and nothing else. To find the answer, she explored that newly unearthed cache of memories marked *Mariko*.

She remembered taking her daughter to hospital after hospital, clinic after clinic. The hour-long waits, the minute-long consultations that followed. She remembered doctors who wouldn't even look at them as they hastily prescribed whatever medicine would get them out the door. But one visit stood out. It had been on a bitterly cold winter day. Hearing of a well-regarded doctor, she and her daughter had boarded a frigid train to a small private clinic. She remembered the kettle whistling softly on the gas stove behind the elderly doctor as he examined her daughter's hand, face, and eyes. Then, with a slow nod, he exhaled and gently placed a hand on both their heads.

"It's been very tough, hasn't it?"

That was all he said, but those simple words unlocked a flood of tears. Physically, nothing had changed. But emotionally, it was a turning point. That small act of compassion in the dark, endless winter of their lives felt like the first light they had seen in ages. It was like stumbling upon a warm campfire after wandering lost in the cold wilderness. For the first time, Mariko and her daughter felt acknowledged. The struggle, the pain—they had been seen. That doctor's gesture, so effortless for him, meant everything to them.

Sophie had experienced death twice now. If she was still here, then this was her purpose. To become that source of light for others—as the elderly doctor had been for her. To be the light that could shine brighter because it had once been swallowed in darkness.



Sophie's power—the power to heal skin and nothing else—now intertwined with something more profound, awakened by Mariko's memory. It was steady, indomitable, and deeply…maternal.

This must be…

"Mom power!" Sophie declared, clenching her fists.

Yes, it had to be! She felt it deep within her, rising from her core. A force that granted resilience, the ability to endure anything life threw at her that hadn't been there before. It was the spirit of a single mother pushing sixty. One who had stopped caring or sweating the small stuff because she understood that most inconveniences were just that—inconveniences. And that at the end of the day, if you were still alive, that was victory enough.

Like a thick, dirty, stubborn old daikon rooted deep in the earth, Sophie was here, and Sophie was going to stay.

The unshakable soul of a seasoned woman combined with the fiery heart of a teenage girl. A dangerous combination.

"I am ready for you, world."

Sophie gripped the sheets. Skin flaked off her body. It no longer bothered her anymore. It was proof that she was alive.

I will not just live. I will push forward.

I am daring. I am strong. I am defiant, and I am unbreakable.

I will crawl, crawl, crawl towards the light.

"Are you ready for me?"

Sophie Olzon, on her seventeenth birthday, turned fifty-seven years old.

The Olzons and Sophie's Salon

"FATHER, I ask that you annul my engagement with Dr. Adolphin."

A tremor passed through the room. Johann's eyes widened in shock, nearly losing his composure, but Sherlotte remained still. Her sharp gaze lingered on her daughter. Something had changed since the incident. The fragile, delicate air of a porcelain doll, ready to shatter at any moment, was gone. Now, a calm, steady young woman stood before them—wiser, stronger, steadier.

Sherlotte, the mother, had watched her worst nightmare unfold the night Sophie fell from the window. Yet, deep down, it hadn't come as a complete surprise. Sophie, her sensitive and diligent daughter, had always borne her burdens in silence, never crying out for help, no matter how much she was hurting. She carried her pain alone. So when something too painful to bear came along, it was no surprise that she responded the only way she knew how.

It had been plain to Sherlotte that Sophie had fallen in love with Dr. Adolphin. Love had come late to their sheltered, home-schooled daughter, but when it finally did, it hit her like a squall, filling her sails and setting her on a brisk course. The girl who had once lost her will to live began to embrace each day as though it were her last. Though Sherlotte had been glad to see the change, she had watched with quiet unease. She knew well that a young girl's first love could magnify all of the heart's emotions, not all of which were good.

Johann, the father, was a self-made man who had built a thriving marine trading enterprise from the ground up within his lifetime. Once an ordinary sailor, he had risen to great success, recruiting former pirates—men who had served their time—to sail new trade routes and bring exotic goods to the port city. His

unparalleled reputation for fairness and uncanny ability to judge people and circumstances made him a respected leader. He commanded the loyalty of even the roughest men, guiding them to the farthest reaches of the realm.

From the moment he realized his daughter's budding love, Johann wanted nothing more than to see it fulfilled. Imagining Sophie's joy, he had approached the doctor with a sum so vast the man might never see its equal—and attached to it, a marriage proposal. His daughter's first true desire, and Johann tried to buy it. Even though it was a person. Even though what he sought could never be bought.

Had this been a grave lapse in judgment from a man renowned for his sharpness? Or was it simply the blind love of a father who cherished his daughter too much? Perhaps, in Johann's mind, he wasn't buying love. Perhaps he truly believed, in his heart of hearts, that Sophie was the most wonderful girl in the world, so much so that it was inconceivable that anyone wouldn't love her. Surely, any man who won her hand would be the happiest man alive.

But therein lay the fatal mistake of man. The love Dr. Adolphin felt for Sophie was what a doctor feels for a patient—kind, compassionate, but entirely platonic. Any woman would have seen through it in an instant.

Had Sophie realized that on her own? Or had she overheard his conversation with Sherlotte that night? The very thought of the latter sent a chill through Johann's veins.

On that fateful day, the groundskeeper had just mowed the lawn, and a fortuitously placed pile of grass clippings had broken Sophie's third-story fall. Though unharmed, she wouldn't wake. As Johann knelt at her bedside, holding her limp hand, he had all the time in the world to regret his mistakes. To reflect on the foolishness that had driven his daughter to the edge.

But Johann wasn't the only parent guilty of doting too much. Sherlotte believed in Sophie's worth just as deeply. She had been convinced that one day, a man would come along and love Sophie for who she truly was. Despite her protests that night, if asked

whether she believed Dr. Adolphin could come to love Sophie in time, she might have hesitated to say no.

Both parents wanted Sophie to find happiness, but neither had gone about it the right way. In trying to help, they had driven their daughter—already walking a fragile mental tightrope—onto a path where she felt there was no turning back. Sophie claimed the fall was an accident, and perhaps it was, though not in the way most expected. It was the story of one parent driving their child to the edge and the other, unknowingly, giving her a push.

Yet, despite these fatal missteps, Sophie was still with them. If that wasn't a sign of the divine, they didn't know what was. So now, as for Sophie's wish…

"We can make that happen, can't we, darling?" Sherlotte said first, breaking the tense silence.

"Sherlotte?!" Johann yelped, taken aback.

"Now, darling," she said with a patient smile. "Let's not fool ourselves. Dr. Adolphin already has a sweetheart."

Johann's eyes widened in disbelief, then desperately turned to Sophie. "What?! No. Sophie. Wait. Your mother's confused."

"It would be a loveless marriage," Sherlotte continued, unruffled. "Perhaps that sort of thing amuses the nobility, but we're simpler folk. There's little point in such an arrangement for us."

"But, but!"

Sherlotte touched his shoulder gently, her gaze soft but firm. "Darling, you know better than anyone that there's nothing more precious than a marriage built on true love. Do you know how I'm sure of that? Because *you* taught it to me."

"Sherlotte…"

They momentarily got lost in each other's eyes, reminiscing on a romantic past with just a hint of rose-colored nostalgia.

"Mother really has you by the throat…"

"What's that? Did you say something, Sophie?"

"No. Nothing, Father."

Johann cleared his throat. His face set into lines. "Sophie, is this truly what you want?"

Sophie met his gaze with quiet resolve. “It is. I don’t want this. I want what you and Mother have—a true bond, a love worth fighting for.”

Johann smiled weakly. “I can’t fault you for that. Very well, then. I’ll see to it that this whole matter is…forgotten.”

The usually composed father cast his gaze out the window to protect his dignity in front of his daughter and errantly twirled his facial hair to hide his embarrassment.

Sophie stifled a quiet laugh, casting a knowing look at her mother. Sherlotte caught it and returned a subtle quirk of her lip on the side only visible to Sophie.

See that? That is how you move a man, her mother’s look conveyed without a word.

Duly noted, Mother, Sophie replied silently, her smile widening ever so slightly. “I shall return to my studies and the honing of my magical arts. When I have reached the proficiency I desire…” she let her words trail off intentionally.

“Hm?” Johann raised a brow.

“There’s actually a second part to my request. Though, it’s not quite ready to be revealed yet. Until then, I ask only for your patience.”

“How…mysterious,” Johann murmured.

“Yes,” Sophie said with a playful glint in her eye. “I believe it will prove quite interesting.” Then, with a graceful nod and a slight bow, she excused herself from the room.

“She’s suddenly become rather headstrong, hasn’t she?” Sherlotte said.

“I’ll say. It’s like she’s an entirely different person,” Johann replied.

“Oh, but are you so surprised? Change is a woman’s prerogative.”

“Hah. Yes, I’m sure it is.” He let his laughter trail off, then gazed at the ceiling. “But I’m happy.”

Sherlotte blinked. “Happy? About what?”

He turned to look at her, his expression softening. “Sophie came to us and asked for something of her own accord. For the first

time."

"Ah, yes. That."

In that quiet moment, they shared a smile that spoke of their determination to support her, no matter what her mysterious request turned out to be. With a gentle tug, Johann pulled Sherlotte close, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, and hugged her.



"MS. FLORENCE, long time no see."

"Hello, Sophie. Glad to see you're well."

On this day, Sophie's magic tutor, Ms. Florence, arrived at the estate. An older woman of extraordinary talent, she was a light mage who, in a previous life, had served as the revered court healer within the royal palace. Healers like her were blessed by the light, wielding the rare power to rewind damage and restore the body in ways that seemed miraculous to those who witnessed it.

This was a world of sword and sorcery where magic was woven into the fabric of everyday life. Among the many forms of magic, the humble *spellstone* stood as the source of most practical magic for the common people. These mana-infused stones powered everything from household chores to grand ventures. While a rare few were blessed with the ability to manipulate the arcane directly, for the majority, spellstones were essential. Sophie's father, Johann, for example, had a powerful spellstone in his flagship that allowed his ship to sail faster and farther than any other vessel out there, its magic enhancing every journey.

At fifteen, every citizen—whether from the poorest slum or the grandest palace—underwent a magical examination. Discovering magical potential was highly coveted, as the country took responsibility for developing those with arcane gifts, offering power, status, and titles in exchange for their service.

When Sophie's light magic had been discovered, however, it was deemed so weak that the authorities chose not to call on her at all. If the power of a master mage was like a cannon blast, Sophie's magic was more like that of a child's toy squirt gun. No amount of

training or technique could overcome the bottleneck of her limited raw magical output. She could never heal severe injuries or perform the grand feats other healers accomplished.

Ms. Florence, on the other hand, had faced the opposite dilemma. Once a renowned light mage capable of incredible feats, her body's ability to channel mana had declined with age, and her magical prowess had waned. Unable to summon the same strength she once possessed, she stepped down from her prestigious position as court healer. In her twilight years, she had taken on the role of mentor, guiding young mages in the capital before retiring to this port town. Although she earned a more-than-modest sum tutoring Sophie, it was a hobby rather than a necessity. As a court mage who had worked to retirement age, Ms. Florence absolutely did not need the money.

"Oh?" Ms. Florence hummed as she completed her usual check on Sophie, eyes opening slowly. She brushed the back of Sophie's hand with hers. "Sophie, something's changed within you."

"Oh. Should I be concerned?" Sophie replied.

"No, no. The flow of mana in your body has…altered somewhat. It's as if there's no longer a blockage in the flow, or perhaps the path has suddenly widened."

"Oh. That's…interesting." *And definitely not because I, by attempting to commit suicide, unlocked the memories of a fifty-seven-year-old past self.* Sophie looked to Martha, who had just finished serving tea and was ready to leave. She shook her head slowly, no discernible expression on her face.

The wise, old teacher knew better than to pry. "How it happened is of no concern. Though I would ask: is there someone in this estate with an old injury—a burn, perhaps?"

Sophie thought for a moment. "Our cook, Raymond, has an old burn scar on his arm, I think."

"Would you call for him?"

"At once," Martha chimed in immediately from behind.



WHEN Martha returned, she brought a rather burly young man with her. His long blond hair was loosely gathered in a messy ponytail, and though he stood so tall that most had to crane their necks to look up at him, his ever-present, friendly smile softened any chance of intimidation. This was Raymond, the Olzon family cook. Still in his twenties, he had hung up his sea legs after an incident where he fell overboard and was nearly eaten by a shark, leaving him terrified of the ocean. By a stroke of luck, the Olzons hired him, and after becoming a landlubber, he discovered a love for baking. His tarts and treats had since become one of Sophie's few true joys in life.

"Now, can you tell me what I'm doing here, Ms. Martha?" Raymond asked, his tone mildly irritated. His hands were dusted with flour, clearly pulled away mid-task without explanation.

"Show your arm," Martha instructed curtly.

"What?" Raymond grumbled. "You do it; my hands are dirty."

"Harrumph!" Martha snorted and grabbed his arm, rolling up his sleeve to reveal a thick forearm marked by a dark, smoky burn scar. Ms. Florence stepped closer, studying it for a moment before turning to Sophie. "Sophie."

"Yes, Ms. Florence."

"Try to heal this scar."

"…Yes."

Raymond waved it off. "Oh, don't trouble yourself, milady. It doesn't hurt. No need to waste your magic."

Ignoring him, Sophie closed her eyes and placed her hands over the scar. She focused on her palms, imagining the skin beneath them as smooth and unmarked.

"All right then, who cares what I think," Raymond said, a little exasperated.

Ignoring him even harder, Sophie drew energy from within and channeled it to her hands, pushing it outward toward the scar. When she finished, she opened her eyes.

Raymond peered at his arm. "It looks…lighter? Or—wait, no, that's just the light."

Martha leaned in. "Hm…"

Either the blackened scar had lightened a shade to a deep, dark brown, or it hadn't changed at all. Sophie's brow knitted in frustration—it didn't work. Deep down, she had hoped something might change, but that seemed like wishful thinking.

Ms. Florence quietly studied Sophie. Then she said, "Sophie, what kind of injury did you imagine?"

"Raymond used to be a pirate, so I thought it might've been from a skirmish. Something involving gunpowder."

"Oh no, I got this baking muffins," Raymond interjected. "The oven blasted me with steam when I wasn't paying attention."

"How unexpectedly adorable," Sophie said.

"Sophie," Ms. Florence said. "Do it again, but this time, picture an oven blasting him with hot steam."

"Really?" Raymond grumbled, but Sophie—was already—ignoring him.

"Vocalizing intent often helps with the spellcasting process," Ms. Florence added. "It's not exactly an incantation, but saying a phrase you associate with healing while casting the spell can be helpful."

Sophie wracked her mind. "A phrase I associate with healing…"

Healing. Hurt. Pain. The words stirred something within her, and suddenly, a phrase from another life surfaced.

"*Pain, pain, go away*."

Martha's eyes widened. The language was unfamiliar. Was she speaking gibberish? No, it was just Japanese, straight from Mariko's memories. Sophie began to glow.

"*To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."*

She focused on the image of the oven blasting Raymond with steam.

The oven blasting Raymond with steam.

Warmth welled up from inside Sophie. Light bloomed across her fingertips, then trickled into Raymond's scar. Slowly, very slowly, she opened her eyes. The scar that had branded Raymond's arm…was gone.

"I… I did it, Ms. Florence, I did it!" Sophie shouted, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Yes, you did. Well done." Ms. Florence smiled, the warmth of a teacher's pride shining in her eyes. "Throughout your lessons, you've come to grasp how to weave your mana with your life force and how to harness that energy and store it for when it is needed. Now, with this final step, your spellcasting journey is truly underway.

"The key to your healing powers lies in three steps: First, you must picture the injury clearly and understand its cause. Second, you envision the healing—the way you wish the body to be restored. And lastly, you speak the phrase that will guide the magic, as you have done just now. Practice these diligently, for they are the foundation of your power. With time, you will come to heal many wounds."

"Yes!" Sophie nodded vigorously. But her teacher's face grew more serious, tempered by a touch of sadness.

"But Sophie," Ms. Florence's voice became firm. "I want you to hold no illusions about the limits of your power. With your abilities, you'll only be able to heal surface-level wounds. You will not be able to mend broken bones or wounds that cut too deep beneath the skin. To heal the outside while the inside remains damaged can lead to greater harm than the original injury. Promise me this: you will tend only to superficial wounds, or those injuries long since healed, where scars alone remain. Overconfidence will only lead to disappointment."

"Yes… I promise."

Ms. Florence smiled kindly, taking Sophie's hands in hers. "But know this: many suffer from wounds that seem merely skin-deep, yet those marks still weigh heavily upon their hearts. Healers, bound by the laws of the state, are called only to tend to wounds of great consequence—those that endanger life itself. But what of the burns that mar a face? A tattoo of a life once lived? The pockmarks of a sickness now gone? These are the burdens some must bear, with no hope of relief."

"…Yes."

"You have a unique opportunity, my dear girl. Though your magic may seem weaker than others, though you were not called upon by the king to serve, these are blessings, not curses. There is

so much good you can do. Countless lives wait to be lightened by your hand. Use your power wisely. Carry yourself with confidence, never with pride. Let your hands heal with care, never in haste."

"Yes, Ms. Florence." A tear fell. "I shall strive with all my heart."

Ms. Florence nodded, her expression softening. "Good, Sophie. That is all I ask."



***"CONSIDER** this your graduation. You have no need of me anymore. But should anything trouble you, don't hesitate to write."* Those were Ms. Florence's parting words as she draped her shawl gracefully over her shoulders. She gave Sophie one last, knowing look before turning to leave.

Sophie followed her to the door, then out to the waiting carriage. She bowed deeply, her head low in respect, and didn't lift it until the carriage had rolled completely out of sight.

Ms. Florence had been a teacher who treated Sophie neither with pity nor contempt—she had simply treated her just as she would with any student. With just as much kindness, just as much strictness.

"Thank you, Ms. Florence," Sophie whispered to the empty road, her heart heavy with gratitude.



"FATHER, is now a good time?" Sophie asked as she knocked politely on the door before stepping inside. The atmosphere in her father's office seemed more solemn than usual. In addition to her father, another figure was in the room—a brawny man with hair buzzed short and a build that seemed carved from stone. "Mr. Silver, how do you do?"

In a gravelly, low voice, the man replied, "Is that you, Sophie? Grown up, haven't ye?"

Silver was the captain of one of the merchant ships in the Olzon fleet. A former pirate, his voice, just as his appearance would

suggest, still carried the freeness of the open sea. Though he had always been one of the few people to look past Sophie's condition and speak to her without hesitation, it was for that very reason that as a child, she had always disliked his rather…aggressive presence. That booming voice had once sent the scared little mouse inside of her fleeing to the nearest shadow.

But that was then. Now, standing before him, Sophie felt nothing of that old fear. He was just Mr. Silver—the big, loud uncle with a heart as wide as the sea he once sailed. However, she noticed with some amusement that he seemed even more muscular than she remembered. And more leathery.

"I apologize, I assumed my father would be alone." Sophie glanced between the two men. "I can come back later if—"

"No need for that, lass. We're nearly done anyway. Just talkin' yer poor father's ear off 'bout work—and, eh, some nonsense besides."

"Nonsense? What sort of nonsense?" Sophie's eyes gleamed. The former single mother with a penchant for gossip rags perked up her ears.

"Ye want in on it too, eh? Well, fair warnin'—there won't be a dry eye left when we're through."

"Then I'll ready the handkerchief," Sophie replied smartly.



THE story Silver told was one of second chances. A long time ago, when he had been a lowly deckhand on a pirate ship, his crew was captured, and the ship boarded. Silver had been locked away for a time. When he was finally released, he wandered aimlessly but always found his way back to the shore, where he stared longingly at the ocean he could no longer call his own.

One day, a beautiful woman found him by the sea and, quite literally, dragged him back to her home. He stayed with her, living off her kindness for a while before pulling himself together enough to find work as a longshoreman at the local port. Over time, the two

fell in love, got married, and were blessed with two wonderful daughters.

But despite his devotion as husband and father, Silver's wife noticed the faraway look in his eyes whenever he gazed at the sea. That longing never fully left him. One day, for reasons Silver never fully understood, she rushed home with a help-wanted poster from a growing trading company—the Olzon family name printed in bold at the top. She practically pushed him out the door to apply, telling him it was his chance to be on the water again.

He applied and was hired on the spot.

Silver became a renowned captain, his name respected across the seas. As the years passed, he spent more time on land, his seafaring days slowing down as his daughters grew up, married, and had their own children. Now, he spent his weekends playing the role of the strong, doting grandfather.

"That's a wonderful story," Sophie commented. Though she couldn't help wondering when her handkerchief would come in handy.

"Me daughters take after me wife, thank the sea for that," Silver continued. "Just the other day, they come into town, hands full of tickets to that fancy new bathhouse they built. Said it was for me and the grandkids, bless 'em. Thoughtful, they are, always lookin' out. They know this old leg still gives me trouble—on account o' that wound I took."

Sophie knew of the bathhouse Silver spoke of—a grand and lavish public establishment, funded by a wealthy patron's excess in both material and spirit. With separate baths for men and women, pools infused with vibrant colors and exotic scents, and the option to enjoy meals or drinks while relaxing, it was the epitome of indulgence. Despite the hefty entrance fee, the bathhouse was so popular that reservations had to be made well in advance.

"My, the bathhouse with one's grandchildren. That sounds like a grand old time!" Sophie said, smiling at the image of the grizzled old pirate splashing in the colorful baths with his grandchildren perched on his shoulders.

"But here's the thing," Silver said, his tone dropping a notch.

Sophie instinctively straightened up.

In one swift motion, Silver yanked off his shirt. Flustered, Sophie covered her eyes—though she couldn't help but peek through the gaps between her fingers.

Silver turned, his broad, weathered back facing her. "Ye can't go in there if ye got one o' these."

"I see," Sophie murmured. An intricate tattoo was sprawled across his back. A skeleton, beautifully detailed, yet bizarrely adorned with large, voluptuous breasts.

"When their granddaddy got turned away at the door, me grandkids bawled their little eyes out," Silver continued. "Told 'em it was all right, let 'em go in—didn't want their tickets to go to waste. But when we got home…I broke down. Didn't think I'd care, but I did. Not like I regret the ink—it's part o' who I was—but I didn't reckon on it affectin' me grandkids like that. So, let this be a lesson to ye. Even if ye think ye've met the love o' yer life, don't go carvin' his name into yer skin."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sophie replied easily.

"You'll do more than keep it in mind!" Johann roared, slamming a fist onto the table.

"Mr. Silver," Sophie said.

"What is it, lass?"

"Would you like it removed?"

"That's a grim hobby ye got, skinning the hide off an old man."

"That's not exactly what I had in mind." Sophie grinned. Quietly, she put away the handkerchief that she hadn't needed. "Would you tell me the story of how this tattoo came to be?"



"BY all the stars," Johann murmured, rubbing his eyes in disbelief. "By all the flickering stars!"

He ran his hands all over Silver's back. Still unsatisfied, he slammed his cheek against it, rubbing his face into the smooth skin.

Silver nearly jumped back. "What in the blazes are ye doin', director?!"

"It's completely smooth. Completely unblemished and smooth, Silver!"

"Yer pullin' me leg."

"It seems I got it all. Thank goodness," Sophie said with a relieved sigh. She handed Silver a hand mirror, and he twisted his large frame around to get a good look.

"Well, I'll be a barnacle's beard! Haven't laid eyes on me own back in the flesh in forty-some years," Silver said.

"Then today marks a joyful reunion," Sophie quipped. The thought of him proudly showing his spotless back to his grandchildren brought a smile to her lips.

After studying his back, Silver turned and looked Sophie straight in the eye. "Lass."

"Yes, Mr. Silver?"

He broke out into a wide, toothy grin. "Ye've grown up into a fine young woman, haven't ye?"

"Thank you," Sophie replied demurely.

"Ye don't hide from me anymore."

"You knew?"

"Course I did!" Silver bellowed with laughter. He dropped a rough, calloused hand, big enough to engulf Sophie's head, and ruffled her hair gently. Sophie giggled, and Silver looked at her the way a grandfather might. "Thank ye, Sophie."

"You're welcome. Please send my regards to your grandchildren."

In high spirits, Silver hummed a cheery tune as he left the office. Only Sophie and Johann were left. Johann was still half-stooped and in full cheek-rubbing mode, even though the rubbing post had left.

Sophie turned to her father. "Father."

"Yes."

"This the second part of my request."

"Yes, agreed, whatever it is."

"I would like to open my own salon."

"Yes, agreed!"

Johann had broken.



"SOPHIE! It's from the royal court! They've replied!"

Johann burst into the room, holding a single letter high in the air. His eyes flicked excitedly between Sophie and Sherlotte, who had just had their tea-tasting session unceremoniously interrupted.

It had been Sherlotte's idea, after Sophie's "skin-deep healing magic" took a more serious turn, to notify the magical authorities at the royal palace about Sophie's new developments. She had been turned down before, but they submitted a formal inquiry anyway—just to be thorough.

A month had passed since then. Johann had led the charge, ensuring every detail was perfectly in order, and every document was submitted in the proper format. Now, at last, the reply had arrived.

The letter from the royal palace, sealed and no doubt written with the finest language and the most elegant penmanship, had captured the attention of everyone in the room. Even Martha, quietly waiting on the tea session, leaned in with eager curiosity.

Most Esteemed Johann Olzon,

I am deeply grateful for your recent correspondence regarding the magical talents of your daughter, Ms. Sophie Olzon. After careful consideration and due deliberation, we regret to inform you that we have decided not to proceed with her appointment as a healer at this time. We sincerely apologize for not being able to fulfill your expectations and humbly ask for your understanding in this matter.

May you and your household continue to flourish, and we extend our best wishes for Ms. Olzon's future endeavors. We are truly thankful for your time and effort in this matter.

"My! A rejection letter! I thought I'd never see one of these again!" Sophie exclaimed.

"You've seen one before?" Johann muttered, scratching his head. "Never mind that. This means you won't be called on to serve at the palace."

"Indeed," Sophie replied. A small card fluttered out from between the folds of the letter. "Oh? What's this?"

In contrast to the simple, no-frills bureaucratic feel of the letter's paper, the card was a pleasantly textured, high-quality cardstock.

P.S. Should Ms. Olzon discover a means to reverse the ravages of time and smooth away the marks of age, I would be most eager to hear of it. You may reach me at the address provided below.

The room fell into stunned silence, the postscript's elegant phrasing barely masking a blazing determination that seemed to radiate from the very page.

"How about it, Sophie?" Johann finally asked.

"I've never tried it."

"I see." He fell into thought. "Martha?"

"Yes, milord."

"Those wrinkles, how long have you had them?"

Martha's eyes narrowed with a cutting glint. "Hard to say, milord. Do you make a habit of tallying the creases in your trousers?"

He seemed to get the message. "No, I don't! Excellent point, Martha! Now, Sophie?"

"I'll give it a shot. Excuse me, Martha." She held her hands over Martha's brow. "*Pain, pain, go away."*

She envisioned something stretching taut.

"*To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay.*"

She opened her eyes and Martha's deeply wrinkled brow…was still just as wrinkled. Sophie's shoulders drooped in disappointment. Seeing this, Johann scrambled to say something to comfort his daughter. "Well, perhaps Martha's…hidden valleys were a bit much for a first attempt. Why don't we try your mother instead? Her crow's feet aren't too—"

"Darling?"

He froze. He ratcheted his neck around. Right beside Martha and her "hidden valleys" stood his wife, smiling. But at the same time, she wasn't smiling.

"They're not crow's feet, darling; they're laugh lines."

"Right. Right you are, my dear. Um. Sophie. Why don't you try again? This time with your mother's…laugh lines."

"Sure…" Sophie gulped. "Mother, might I hear about when you first noticed your…"

"Sophie?" The voice was even colder this time. "Have you ever noticed the exact moment the skin forms on a pot of hot milk?"

"P-Point taken." Sophie expelled a steadying breath. This time, she held her hands over her mother's…laugh lines. "*Pain, pain, go away."*

Taut, she chanted in her mind. *Taut.*

"*To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay.*"

Gingerly, she opened her eyes. The cheerful lines radiating from the corners of her mother's eyes were…still as cheerful as ever. Holding up a mirror to check for herself, Sherlotte sighed sadly. It seemed that even the most beautiful of women had their hang-ups.

"Well. We can't say we didn't try," Sherlotte said.

Sophie nodded. "Perhaps my magic can only remove irregularities that wouldn't be a part of the skin's natural state."

Raymond's healed arm had matched the rest of his tanned skin perfectly. Silver's back had been just as leathery and weathered as his age suggested. The exact mechanics still escaped her, but it seemed her magic didn't create new, supple skin—it merely restored it to whatever state it would have been in without the blemish or scar.

"And it can't heal anything that comes from within," Sophie added quietly. She gently brushed the back of her hand, feeling the familiar bark-like texture.

Healing herself had been the first thing she tried. The pockmarks and craggy texture had cleared away for a moment, revealing smooth, beautiful skin. But before Sophie, Martha, and Claire's joyous hooting had even subsided, the bumps and sores

reappeared. It wasn't long before the last patch of clear skin vanished once more.

Martha had cried in front of Sophie for the second time that day.

Sophie likely understood the cause of her condition. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that Mariko understood. It seemed to be an immune disorder, similar to the dermatitis her daughter had once suffered. It was an allergic reaction, and her body was overreacting in the fight against the allergen, damaging her own body in the process. It was an internal condition—treating the skin would be futile without addressing the root cause.

Johann gently stroked Sophie's back. "I suppose we'll let the palace know."

"Yes," Sherlotte nodded. "It's unfortunate, but it may have been for the best."

Johann quirked a brow.

Sherlotte dabbed the corners of her eyes delicately. "If Sophie could smooth wrinkles, she'd be locked away in the palace as the royal wrinkle-smoother until the last drop of mana was wrung from her."

He started to laugh. "There's not a chance. They're just wrinkles!"

"Darling?"

He immediately stopped laughing. "Yes."

"You would be wise not to underestimate a woman's vanity." She made a show of smoothing out her laugh lines, then smiled. But again, her eyes didn't smile. They glinted. And her voice was unusually ominous. "It has the power to sway kingdoms and topple empires."

Sophie and her father clutched each other in terror.

"At any rate, that should be the end to all the tedium," Sherlotte said. "We've done everything—followed the proper channels, notified the authorities, and even received their official rejection. Sophie?"

"Yes?"

“The guest room on the southern side of the first floor is all yours. It’s a bit cramped, but cramped is just another word for cozy, isn’t it?”

Sophie’s face brightened. At this, Sherlotte smiled.

“You’ve earned this, Sophie. Make it count.”



A crowd of men had gathered in one of the spacious halls of the Olzon estate. Long tables were in neat rows, with the more important figures seated toward the front. At the head of the room, a single man stood at a lectern, addressing the assembly.

“And that concludes this month’s sales report,” Johann said, his voice carrying over the thirty-odd men before him. Though the room was large enough to hold them all, the broad, burly frames of the men made the space feel cramped, almost stifling.

“Now, before we break for the usual feast, there’s one more matter to address.” He turned slightly, speaking toward the door. “Sophie.”

“Here.”

A light, feminine voice pierced through the door, immediately disrupting the gruff, masculine air inside. A stir rippled through the hall.

Everyone in the company knew of Sophie Olzon, the director’s daughter, though few had personally met her. As the story went, she was seventeen with a beauty said to make flowers blush but afflicted by a mysterious skin condition that earned her the sobriquet “the Monstrous Miss.”

One man, who had once encountered Sophie by chance in the labyrinthine halls of the estate, had described her like this:

“Ye all know me. I’ve got a heart of iron. I’ve stared down twenty men with blades drawn, never so much as blinkin’. But when I saw her, there was a flicker. Just a flicker, mind ye! Of somethin’ close to fear.”

The twenty-man thing was an exaggeration—a typical tall tale, as pirates liked to tell—but this man had sailed the high seas for

over two decades. If he said he had felt fear, there was something to it.

That was the status of Sophie Olzon among the company, something akin to an urban legend. One that was now to appear before them.

The men gulped. The door swung open.

A young girl in a long-sleeved maroon dress stepped into the room, her flawlessly tended platinum blonde hair swaying gracefully with every measured step. Her every motion exuded refinement, her presence alone immediately softening the rough, masculine air. A beam of light streamed through the window, setting the sheer veil draped over her face aglitter with soft, enchanting light.

Awed whispers stole through the crowd. "She's pretty…" murmured someone—the only man in the room whose jaw wasn't on the floor.

The dainty figure stopped in a pool of light. Though a lace veil concealed what lay beneath, her poised stance spoke of quiet beauty—more like the surface of a moonlit pond than a field of blooming flowers.

The figure spoke. "Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you all for allowing me time from your busy schedules to speak to you all today. To show my appreciation, I shall keep this brief."

"Even 'er voice's pretty," some idiot interrupted.

Clonk. Somebody clocked him over the head.

Unfazed, Sophie let her gaze drift over the room, meeting each man's eyes as if addressing them personally. "My name is Sophie Olzon, and I have been blessed with light magic. Under the guidance of my tutor, I've nurtured this gift into something that allows me to heal. However, my abilities are humble. The palace has not called upon me to serve, and thus, I regret I cannot offer much respite to those of you who brave the high seas."

"Yer pretty, so we forgive ya!"

Clonk.

"The only wounds I can mend are those upon the skin—old scars, burns, tattoos. Restoring damaged skin to its original form, as it were. But my experience is limited, so I cannot claim to know all

that I can or cannot heal. It's a strange predicament, I admit. Without the help of others willing to let me treat their wounds, I cannot fully grasp the limits of my own powers."

Gruff voices filled the air, one after another.

"Ow, my scar!"

"Och, me tattoo's actin' up!"

Doomf! A deafening noise thundered through the room. Every head snapped toward the front, where Johann had stomped a gaping hole into the floor, splinters flying in all directions.

Her father having reclaimed the silence for her, Sophie spoke once more. "If I may, I come to you today to ask a favor: spread word of my services. I do not ask you to trust my abilities blindly, which is why I propose a demonstration. Does anyone here have a scar they'd like erased or a tattoo they wish removed? I'm afraid I must ask for the story behind the mark, for without that knowledge, my fledgling magic may falter."

"Me!" Before Sophie had even finished speaking, a hand shot up from the back, where the new hires sat. The man had two large welts on his head—likely the idiot who got himself smacked twice earlier. He bounced forward eagerly.

"And what is your name, sir?" Sophie asked.

"'S Duncer, miss!" the welted new hire replied with a slack, toothy grin. Was it the bops on the head, or did he always have such poor motor control over his face?

"Mr. Duncer, what happened to your face?"

"Just born ugly, miss!"

Sophie gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry. I can't help with that."

"'S fine, miss! I've grown used to it! What I want ya ta help me with is this!" Duncer rolled up his sleeve, revealing what looked like bite marks from a vicious creature.

"Goodness. Might that be from a crocodile, a shark, or some other fearsome ocean creature?"

"'S from a dog, miss! Bit me when I was a youngin'. I thought it was the neighbor's dog sittin' in his doghouse, so I went to pet on it, but turned out it wasn't the neighbor's dog at all! It was a stray, and

he weren't tied down, so it chased me. And I ran a long way with my pants around my ankles 'til I tripped and fell headfirst into a cesspit. My arm got caught on the lip, and he got me good right there."

"Is there anyone else?! Literally anyone else?!" the room roared in unison. He was the last person the company wanted to make first contact with Sophie, lest she think they were all this clueless.

"You poor thing," Sophie said. "That must've been traumatic."

"Naw, but I sure stunk for days after."

"Somebody grab him!" The room vibrated with murderous intent.

"Then, Mr. Duncer, would you mind if I try healing your arm?" Sophie asked.

"Please! I'd settle just for ya ta massage it, honestly."

Sophie reached out and splayed her slender fingers over Duncer's scar. *"Pain, pain, go away."*

Her voice was soft. Calm.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

The room gaped at her in silence. Her incantation was incomprehensible to them, but somehow, it stirred memories of gentler timers—a mother's soft breath on a scraped knee, the tender rub of a hand on a bumped head.

"Mom?"

Homesickness glistened in the eyes of the rough, burly men. Sophie's body began to glow, the light gradually gathering in her palms. Then, as it faded, a gentle breeze swept through the room, marking the end of the sensation.

"Ah!" Duncer yelled. "'S gone! 'S actually gone!" A simple, unfiltered reaction. Duncer sure lived up to his namesake. "Thank ya, miss, thank y—" He froze.

"Huh?"

He leapt back in fear.

"Huh-hu-hwaaaa?!"

"Oh my, it seems my veil has blown off."

Sophie slowly raised her head; the men's eyes locked on her in shock.

That moonlit maiden was no more. Replaced, she was, by a grotesque figure. Painful-looking pockmarks and sores covered every inch of her face; beads of yellow and green pus oozed out from every pore.

The room fell silent. Every gaze was fixed pointedly on Sophie. This was the nature of man: when confronted with something they wish to avoid, they find themselves unable to look away.

Sophie stood tall. She raised her head proudly. While any other girl her age might have hurried to cover herself, she flaunted her face before them.

"As you can see, I am a monster." For the first time today, her voice faltered slightly. "Call me that if you wish, I won't mind. But rest assured, this isn't contagious." But it quickly regained strength as she spoke. "I plan to open a salon right here, in this very estate, offering treatments just as you've seen. For one year, I shall open my doors to all, without regard for birth or standing, and I shall take no fee, striving only to offer the best of my abilities. I have prepared leaflets explaining how to make an appointment. So all I ask is that, if you encounter anyone who might benefit from my services, you kindly pass the word along."

She produced a stack of leaflets. In total silence, she passed out a copy to every man present. Boldly, at the very top was the heading "Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing." Below, the leaflet provided details on the salon's yearlong duration and how to schedule an appointment. It also gave full disclosure about the grotesque condition of the young Olzon girl who would be administering the treatments, along with reassurances that her affliction posed no risk of contagion.

A disclaimer followed, explaining the skin-deep nature of the treatments and listing examples of treatable conditions, though success was not guaranteed during this pilot phase. The leaflet noted that treatments were free, but each patient was limited to one appointment within the year. Finally, it stressed that a full and honest recounting of how the blemish occurred was essential for proper healing. Everything was clearly laid out in simple language,

ensuring that even those with little education could easily understand.

After allowing everyone a chance to read, Sophie snapped to attention, stiff as a board, just like Martha had taught her. "You all sail the farthest reaches of the world, visiting ports and harbors most could only dream of. You've seen lands and people from all walks of life, and today, I humbly ask that you carry word of this salon with you on your journeys. Let the world know of this place where scars, burns, and tattoos can be treated. Where even the marks of a life left behind can be healed.

"Spread tales if you must, embellish them if it helps. Tell stories of a monster who can heal the skin and lighten the burden within. I don't care if you speak of me as the girl who dares to fix others while her own face remains broken. Mock me if you will. Just speak of me. Tell all those who suffer from something that 'only' mars the skin that there is a place they can come to. If I can heal even one more soul and offer hope to just one more person, then every rumor, every word, will have been worth it."

Politely, deliberately, Sophie bowed her head.

The room gaped at her, their leaflets wilting limply in their hands.

This was the director's daughter. There was no need for her to do this. One word from Johann and his men would've mobilized all the same. But she chose to be here. To stand before these unfamiliar men, display her disfigured form, and plead with them in person.

Did she realize that by doing it this way, this would be the first time these men—hardened, roughened souls mistreated by both man and sea—would be asked a favor with such earnestness and respect?

Sophie swept her gaze across the slack-jawed crowd, then bowed again. "I apologize for any discomfort caused and appreciate your patience today. Thank you so much for your time."

When Sophie stopped speaking, a hush descended over the crowd.

Then, a clap.

Then another. Then another. Then sharp, ringing applause filled the room.



Sophie raised her head in disbelief. Every rough, weathered hand beat for her, and every deep, gravelly voice called her name in praise.

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about! Yer a man's man, miss!"

"Mock ya? Ya kiddin' me? I'll beat up anyone who does!"

"Go to hell, Duncer! Ms. Sophie, yer a gem, but go to hell, Duncer!"

"Not a day my momma lived without regrettin' her burned face! If only she met you before she died!"

"Screw you, Duncer!"

"My wife could use your help, miss!"

"She just said she can't fix ugly, you idiot!"

"Duncer!!!"

Duncer, still in one piece somehow, picked up Sophie's fallen veil and approached her sheepishly "'M sorry, miss. I was just a little surprised, that's all."

Sophie took the veil and smiled. Never before had she seen a full-grown man act so much like a scolded puppy. "It's all right."

Duncer glanced up, his eyes quietly studying her face. "You really are pretty, miss."

Sophie giggled. "Thank you."

Then, with a final polite bow to the crowd, she turned and left the room, shutting the door just in time to muffle the wave of hostility that erupted against Duncer.

"Martha," she said, trotting up to the old maid waiting outside, "do you think I did all right in there?"

Martha's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I think you did admirably, milady." Sophie's eyes prickled as she noticed.

"Oh, how you've grown," Martha murmured.

Sophie smiled. "Have you always been such a crybaby, Martha?"

"It's my age, milady. Now, come along. Tea is ready."

Raymond had baked a fresh batch of his delicious treats. Hearing this, Sophie leapt with both feet off the ground in a little hop. That earned a stern glare of disapproval from Martha, but all Sophie could do was giggle.

“Surely, you’re not planning to abandon me just yet?” Sophie teased playfully.

“I shall live for as long as milady wills,” Martha replied.

“Will you now? Then, sixty more years?”

“Of course. As long as you wish.”

With light hearts, they strolled down the corridor to their destination, following the aroma of freshly baked goods in the air.

Annie, the Princess

RESTLESS, Sophie absently twirled the tablecloth with a gloved finger. She sat down, then shot back up—*that painting is crooked!* She approached it and paused—*no, wait, it was perfectly straight after all.*

"Please relax, milady," Martha said.

"I *am* relaxed," Sophie replied.

If only she were.

She returned to the table, her fingers finding the tablecloth again. Martha sighed.

Since that day in the meeting room, the Olzon sailors had spread tales of Sophie's salon wherever their travels led them. At first, their efforts seemed in vain. Reactions were lukewarm at best—many dismissed it as the setup to some sailor's joke or a laughable novelty. But that all changed when a letter arrived, unexpected and weighty, addressed to the Olzon estate.

It was from a certain foreign dignitary from a distant southern kingdom. They would be visiting the port on business and, in an unusual detour, planned to stop by Sophie's salon. The letter was cryptic at best—no name, no hint of their reason for visiting, just a proposed time and date scrawled with a surprising air of finality.

Sophie had written back to the sender right away, confirming the appointment.

In anticipation, she had cleaned and organized the room allocated for the salon, transforming it into a haven of curiosities. She scattered it with souvenirs her father and his sailors had brought from every far-flung corner of the world: smooth stones in unexpected colors, bones from unidentifiable creatures, and books penned in indecipherable scripts. Intricate lacework draped over

tables, while seashells in every hue glittered in clusters, resting against astonishing nut husks as large as fists and worn wooden masks that, though worn and faded, surely once boasted brilliant colors.

Game pieces and sets carved so finely that they looked like sugared sweets were in a corner with rolls of exotic woven fabrics. Then there were coral fragments straight from the sea, dark glass perfume bottles from distant lands, and quills and glass pens of every shape and size filling every bit of remaining space. For evening visitors, she'd arranged the strangest assortment of lampshades and ancient silver candlesticks.

This mad, mismatched collection of oddities—something straight from the back shelves of a foreign bazaar—seemed at odds with the room's stately surroundings. Yet, it was exactly what Sophie had envisioned. If she'd so wanted, her father would have gladly transformed the room with the finest furnishings, dressing it in elegance fit for a noble salon. But that wasn't what Sophie had in mind.

Not for a place meant to be a refuge, a hideaway where those weary and self-conscious could find some small comfort. People had come here, after all—willingly—knocking at the door of a "monster" in hopes she could ease their troubles. The last thing Sophie wanted was a formal, imposing space that might make them hesitate at the threshold.

That cozy-looking kettle, belching steam in that doctor's office—*that* was the feeling she aimed to conjure. A space that felt worn, lived-in, comforting, brimming with curiosities to catch the eye and spark questions, even from the shyest of souls.

Afternoon sunlight poured through the windows. On the table where Sophie sat, a vibrant bouquet of tropical flowers stood beside an assortment of Raymond's finest treats. Each small confection, topped with jewel-like candies gleaming atop golden dough, invited guests to pause, linger, and contemplate which one to try first—a miniature treasure chest of sweets promising a moment's delight.

Ding, ding, di-ding! The gentle tinkle of a bell sounded. That was Claire. To avoid the need for knocking, Claire stood outside to

announce each guest with a soft shake of the bell. This time, though, the chime wavered, cut short—*perhaps nerves over this first visit,* Sophie mused with a smile.

"Enter," she called, blushing beneath the wrappings and veil that covered her face. She had thought it fine to meet her guest bare-faced, given her open advertisement as a monster, but Martha had been rather adamantly against it.

"Pardon me," came a soft, polite voice from the doorway. Then, the door swung open with a plap.

With a *plap*?

A wet, dark gray—almost green—*scaly* hand appeared gripping the doorknob.

Plap. Plap. Plap. A crocodile walked in on two legs.

"You're a crocodile," Sophie said.

"I am a crocodile," the crocodile replied.

"You can speak," Sophie said.

"I always excelled in foreign languages in school," the crocodile replied.

Despite the bipedalism, despite the gown draped over its body, despite the shiny red ribbon tied around its neck, a crocodile had unmistakably just walked into the room.

"Well met, Miss Sophie Olzon," it (she?) said, bowing. "My name is Annie Crocodile, of Crocodilia, the Crocodile Kingdom. A pleasure." It (she?) then tilted her head and gave Sophie a coquettish, sidelong look.

Snapping out of it, Sophie quickly returned a perfect, Martha-approved bow, then came back up. "I'm Sophie Olzon. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Silence. Then suddenly, she whisked the platter of treats off the table. "Martha, these won't do! Fetch Raymond—get the fresh meat he was going to serve for Father's dinner tonight! We need it for tea!"

"Please, no need for that." Annie elegantly raised a stubby, clawed hand. "I happen to be rather partial to baked goods."

"Oh, I see," Sophie eased the platter back onto the table, only to reach for the teapot next. "Will tea suffice? Or would you rather

prefer, ah…raw blood?”

“Tea will suffice,” Annie said. “I’m quite fond of the blend your father supplies us with. May I sit?”

“Please. Make yourself comfortable—the sofa is wonderfully soft.”

“Then I shall lie down. It’s more comfortable for me to stretch out my body. Would you join me?”

“On the sofa? Won’t I be in the way of your tail?”

“Then you may sit in front of it.”

“Thank you. Might I ask—are you rather partial to people as well?”

“If you mean as a delicacy, alas, no. I haven’t yet had the pleasure.”

“Not even a teeny-tiny, eensy-weensy nibble?”

“No. Not even a teeny-tiny, eensy-weensy nibble.”

With that, woman and crocodile sat side by side on the sofa, an odd but companionable pair.

“Surprised?” Annie asked.

“A bit,” Sophie replied. “I hadn’t expected things to get off to such a scaly—I mean, rocky start.”

“Hah! Indeed.” Annie laughed—the crocodile laughed. Then, they took a quiet moment to enjoy the treats. Annie ate elegantly, her clawed fingers handling each morsel with an almost impossible grace.

“Now then, Ms. Crocodile,” Sophie said. “Would you mind sharing the tale of how you came to be as you are?”

“Please, call me Annie,” she replied. “You’d be indulging me. I’m a princess. I rarely get to speak with someone my own age as an equal.”

“A princess!” Sophie said in wonder.

“I am, but is that all I am? It’s hardly a title I’ve earned. In fact, I sometimes wish it was a title I could un-earn.”

Sophie caught the tinge of loneliness in her voice.

“Seeing me like this, you might find it hard to believe,” Annie began, “but most days, I look like any ordinary seventeen-year-old girl. It all began when I was twelve. Each month, when the moon

reaches its fullest, my head burns painfully as if aflame. I fall into a deep sleep, and by morning…well, I'm like this for about two more nights before I change back. That first time—well, I caused quite the stir. They nearly skewered me, thinking I was a crocodile who had swallowed the princess! Fortunately, I kept my voice and wits, or I wouldn't be here to tell the tale. The full moon—that was yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Now that you mention it…" Sophie recalled that bright, delicious-looking pie in the sky the previous night.

"I remain like this for three days after the night of the full moon. On the third day, I slip into a deep slumber—not eating nor drinking nor stirring at all—simply lying still as if enchanted. And when I wake, I'm returned to my usual self."

"That is…fascinating," Sophie murmured. She wondered what it felt like to wake up in a completely different body.

Annie interrupted her musings with a deep sigh. "In that first year, my father, certain it was a crocodile's curse, summoned every healer, shaman, and priest from lands far and wide to offer me their prayers and incantations from behind veiled screens. But it didn't work. On nights when the moon burns bright and full, the transformation still takes hold. Silver lining is it lasts but three days and bothers no one—so long as I stay hidden. Eventually, I persuaded him to leave well enough alone. But when Silver spoke of this salon, I knew I had to stop by."

Annie's reptilian eyes fixed on Sophie. "I'm already seventeen—unmarried, for the moment, though not for much longer, I expect. Many offers have already come—second and third princes from neighboring realms, as it's custom in my land to marry from beyond our borders. Understand, though, my concern. I would choose one of these men to be my consort—wrench them away from everything they know to bind them to a role scarcely more dignified than a stallion, if you'll pardon the image. What would they think of a wife who vanishes three nights each month, like clockwork? Infidelity would be the kindest rumor. It could tear the trust we'd need to govern well and raise a family."

A wife who vanishes for three nights every month… Sophie turned over the thought in her mind. Annie could come up with any number of excuses, but none would veil such a regular absence. Not to mention the uncomfortable vigilance the palace attendants would treat the would-be husband.

"I take it telling him outright is out of the question?" Sophie ventured.

"It is," Annie replied. "Not that I wouldn't want to, but things are rarely so simple. My transformation is essentially a state secret. If I disclosed everything and he called off the engagement, it would be a political disaster. And yet, waiting until after the marriage, blindsiding him with the truth would be no better. That could drive a man to madness, perhaps even see him fleeing the country. As you know, men—especially noble men—aren't always as hardy as they seem."

"An impossible choice," Sophie murmured. Then something struck her. "And yet, you're sharing this secret with me now."

Annie's mouth quirked slightly at the edges—what Sophie assumed to be a mischievous smile. "Yes. But before I entered this room, I was brought in a cage. Should you and your maids run into the streets screaming, 'The princess of the Crocodile Kingdom is an actual crocodile!' what do you think would happen?"

The answer pulled a resigned sigh from Sophie's lips. "They'd say the Monstrous Miss's sickness has finally claimed her mind, along with her servants' sanity."

"Precisely. A charge I'll hardly deny if it comes to that."

Sophie was the daughter of a successful merchant—aka nobody. Her word carried absolutely no weight, a fact Annie clearly understood.

"As you shouldn't," Sophie replied, unruffled by the truth in her words.

They shared a brief pause, each taking a sip of tea as if to wash down the bitter truths they had laid bare.

"So, Sophie. Do you think you can heal me?" Annie asked.

Sophie hesitated. "I'll certainly try."

She placed her hands over Annie, unsure where exactly, but decided to start with what seemed like could be called a forehead.

"Pain, pain, go away."

Hm, but this is a crocodile.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

Can crocodiles even survive on mountains?

Sophie finished her incantation and opened her eyes. The scales on Annie's hide were…still there, as slick and dark as ever.

Her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "You journeyed all this way…and I couldn't help."

Annie's golden, reptilian eyes blinked in that slow, unsettling way. "It's all right. I read the flyer. You can only heal 'skin-deep.' Best case scenario, I'd be a crocodile with smooth, human skin."

"Touché."

They studied each other for a moment.

"Annie, if I might ask something…rather impolite."

"Ask away."

"You don't seem very disappointed."

Annie smiled. As much as a crocodile could, anyway. "I suppose I'm not," she said, then laughed haughtily. As haughtily as a crocodile could, anyway. "Tell me, Sophie. Do you know what Crocodilia is known for?"

Sophie's eyes sparkled. History and geography had always been her favorite subjects. "Crocodile leather. Crocodilia has been famed for it since ancient times. With an abundance of fine hides year-round, the kingdom developed a deep tradition of leatherwork. And to adorn the crafted pieces, your artisans became some of the finest gold and silversmiths in the world. Aside from that, I suppose your warm climate and the trade in exotic fruits and rare flowers."

Annie's eyes narrowed appraisingly. "You know your history."

Sophie flushed, her smile widening. How she loved discussing this sort of thing. She could wander through the history of the Crocodile Kingdom year by year if given half the chance. But even with all the time in the world, she knew it would never be enough, let alone the brief span of their appointment.

Annie caught Sophie's gently simmering enthusiasm, smiled, and continued. "But here's something you might not find in the history books. We Crocodilians have a large, centralized facility dedicated to processing hides."

"Really? I didn't know that," Sophie replied, intrigued.

"No outsiders are allowed inside—to protect our unique methods. There, crocodiles are brought in from our farms and sometimes hunted from afar. They arrive alive, treated with utmost care to preserve their hides—just for the artisans to rip them off their bodies whilst alive. The crocodiles thrash and bellow in pain as their hides are stripped, but it can't be helped. Living crocodiles produce far more desirable leather. A river runs beside the plant, its waters forever tinged red from the blood of those skinned alive."

Sophie couldn't say anything.

"When they finally fall still, we butcher them, using every part. Their flesh fills our tables, their hides bring wealth and renown—the prosperity of our kingdom flows from that river of blood. Crocodile flesh, blood, and skin—pain and suffering. That is the foundation of our kingdom's legacy."

With that macabre truth laid bare, Annie angled herself toward Sophie, presenting the full edge of her profile—and her sharp, sharp teeth. "So if this is the crocodile's curse, then I bear it gladly. For no one is better suited to bear it than I, Annie Crocodile—heiress to the kingdom and all its transgressions."

A fierce pride was in Annie's bearing, a dignified devotion so intense it struck Sophie as breathtaking. "That is…incredibly noble of you."

"Thank you. By the way, you've written in your flyer that this salon is to run free of charge for a year. Do you plan to reopen it as a paid establishment afterward?"

"That is my intention, yes, as long as I get the necessary approvals. How did you know?"

"You're the daughter of a merchant. Who better to understand the value of compensation for a worthy service? And this *is* worthy. I saw what you did with Silver. To erase a tattoo that size? It's miracle work. And he even told me you can remove scars."

"I do believe so, yes."

Annie's eyes unfocused, gazing off into the distance. There was a sad crease on her brow. "In my country, many impoverished rely on crocodile hunting to survive. Rarely colored or patterned hides can't be farmed, so we depend on hunters. A single prized hide can sustain a family for months. Every day, they flock to the river, hoping for a windfall."

"Is that not dangerous work?"

Annie shook her head sadly. "None more so. Many lose their lives to the waters each year, and even more suffer horrific injuries. It's a job for men, usually, but in the poorest families, even women are forced to join. For men, the scars from a crocodile bite are badges of honor, but for women…it's different. Those with bite scars are called 'crocodile refuse,' marked as damaged, unworthy for marriage."

"That is…horrible," Sophie whispered. Cultures varied. Beliefs varied. And as an outsider, she knew it wasn't her place to judge. But still, her heart broke for those women—no, those *girls*—bearing such disfiguring wounds, only to be shunned with a cruel name.

"Most can't afford proper treatment," Annie continued. "Unmarriageable, they're left to scrape by however they can. But most artisans only take men as apprentices, so the work available to them is menial, trivial tasks that pay pittances—or grueling labor, hauling hides and meat. Some…resort to prostitution. There is a *ridiculous* superstition that, despite crocodile refuse being unfit to marry, spending a night with one will bring the blessing of a rare, colorful crocodile the next day."

Sophie's heart shattered. For these young, helpless women, already injured and scarred, yet enduring even more suffering under a society that offered them nothing but scorn and superstition. She bit down on a trembling lip and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief—a reaction Annie studied carefully.

"It's an archaic, frozen mindset, one I long to shatter," she said. "But the old men in my kingdom resist any change, clinging to tradition. It frustrates me beyond measure. Those women are not

‘refuse,’ they’re human beings. If no one has the will to change that, then I shall do so myself.”

Realizing Annie’s intent, Sophie’s eyes widened. She looked up at Annie, who met her gaze steadily.

“Yes,” Annie said. “That’s where you come in. When you’ve reopened your salon and I’ve ascended the throne, I want you to come to Crocodilia regularly. I’ve come to you today not just as a patient but as the queen-to-be to claim your future—so to speak.”

She licked her teeth menacingly. But Sophie tilted her head, bemused. “Claim me? Like I’m some rare, high-demand item? You’re my first client—I’m running a ghost salon here.”

Annie’s eyes glinted. “For now. But that will change soon enough. Surely, you know, as a woman, what the demand is for your gift. You will be touching countless lives. Fortunately, mana has its limits, or you’d be working around the clock to the end of your days. So yes, that’s why I’m here—to reserve your services for the future, Sophie.”

“Why not make full use of me now while my services are still free?”

“Because neither I nor my people are beggars. Every service must be given its due worth. A fair price is the best guarantor of a lasting relationship—wouldn’t you agree?”

Annie’s eyes conveyed it all—this was no joke, but something she felt very strongly about. Sophie sat up straight, sensing the gravity of the moment. “Very well. Would you prefer we set this arrangement down in writing?”

“That won’t be necessary. For now, I am no queen—just Annie.”

“In that case.” Sophie extended her pinkie finger.

Annie tilted her head. “What is this?”

“Consider it…a promise of a promise.” Sophie reached out and hooked her clawless pinkie around Annie’s clawed one. Or at least, what she thought was Annie’s pinkie. “I, Sophie Olzon, promise to one day visit Crocodilia regularly and, at their queen’s request, offer my healing to any Crocodilian who seeks it.”

“Ah,” Annie murmured in understanding.

“I cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye!”

"What?" That understanding disappeared.

"Pinky promised!"

With that familiar chant from another life, Sophie pulled her pinky away, leaving Annie dazed by the strange ritual. Her long tail shot up stiffly in the air in shock, then slowly slithered back down. "By the way, Sophie," Annie asked, a rare hesitation lacing her words.

"Yes?"

"Could I…see your face?"

"Ah. Of course. There's no point hiding it, is there?"

Sophie took off her veil, then unwound the bandages, layer by layer, until her face lay exposed, raw, and unmasked in all its rough, gory glory.

Annie's crocodilian jaw hinged open. Thinking she had offended Annie, Sophie quickly added, "I know it's…difficult to look at. But rest assured—it's not contagious."

The silence thickened. Sophie waited for some reaction. And then it came: "My. How beautiful you are, Sophie."

Sophie blinked, startled. Did it disappear? She touched her face, but no, the bumpiness, the roughness, the sliminess—it was all still there. "Am I?" she asked, half in disbelief, half in resignation.

"Yes. Far more than I expected. The rumors were so exaggerated, I half-expected to be greeted by some manner of orc. But your face, Sophie, it has a magnificent structure." Her gaze held Sophie's. "Not a trace of a crocodile in sight."

They shared a warm laugh. Then Sophie, after a moment, said, "Annie, about your consort."

"Yes?"

"Would it truly be impossible to wed someone from your own country? Say, a man who loves—is deeply passionate—about crocodiles?"

Annie's mouth hinged open again. Sophie resisted the absurd urge to place an apple on her tongue. Instead, she mentally thumbed through the pages of history she so adored, flipping to the chapter on Crocodilia. She recalled the facts burned into her mind through night after night of reading and rereading:

"The custom of Crocodilia marrying outside its borders stems from its history, doesn't it? In the early days, when the tribe that would become Crocodilia was small and closely related, marrying outsiders helped avoid the risks of inbreeding. It also forged alliances for the island nation, beset on all sides as it was by potential enemies. But that was ages ago. Crocodilia has flourished since those times; its population has grown. Assuming no important political ties are left to nurture, is there truly a reason to keep clinging to that ancient tradition?"

Sophie clasped Annie's hands tightly, her gaze earnest.

"For generations, the Crocodilian royal family has treated foreign spouses with the utmost sincerity. Isn't it time to turn that care inward, to seek a match among your own people? Imagine the story that could be told—a dutiful Crocodilian princess who, following her heart, chooses a fellow Crocodilian for love over politics."

Annie's reptilian eyes widened. Sophie squeezed harder.

"Maybe it's even what your people would want—a purely Crocodilian heir, a marriage that symbolizes your kingdom's strength and self-reliance. You could show them your true self before marriage. If they accept you, then great. And if they don't, you could…disavow them, just as you said you'd do with me. But would that really happen? I believe someone born in Crocodilia, raised with the same reverence for crocodiles, would find your form anything but frightening. They might find it divine. Maybe even…endearing. Isn't that what you deserve, Annie? Someone you can be entirely honest with, who loves you—both sides of you—with all their heart?"

Annie's mouth opened and closed a few times until it finally drew closed for good.

Then it opened it again slightly. "There is…someone like that," she murmured.

And then something remarkable happened—a lightening of color crept over the dark scales of her face. Could this be…a blush?

"There's a researcher retained by the royal family. He's absolutely fascinated by crocodiles. Sometimes, I wonder if he might actually be in love with them. If he has time, he'll sometimes just spend hours at the farms, watching them, captivated. Every year he

produces more reports than all the other researchers combined. He's so devoted that he's never considered marriage, even though it was that time and then some."

Annie's entire form seemed to glow, her body quivering slightly. Gone was the stoic, dignified princess, and in her place was a young woman, tender and vulnerable, a sight that warmed Sophie's heart.

"You love him, don't you?" Sophie asked softly, a smile lighting her face. She could almost picture it: the gawky researcher intently gazing at the crocodiles while the princess stood at a distance, quietly admiring him.

Annie's jaw snapped shut, but she nodded, unable to deny it. "I've…" A single tear slid down her scaly cheek—a tear from a crocodile, but not a crocodile tear. "I've always told myself I'm a princess." More tears followed, luscious and pure like giant, glistening gemstones. "That someone like me can't—shouldn't—know love."

Plip, plip, plip. As the tears fell, Sophie pulled Annie in her arms, feeling each sob shudder through her as she reflected on what had been laid bare before her today.

Annie's transformation at twelve—what if it hadn't been a curse but a gift that came entwined with the awakening of her heart? Perhaps it had been a blessing from the very islands that had nurtured her, a subtle push toward the man she was destined to be with. What if it had been a reward for the compassionate and wise queen she was becoming—one who didn't flinch from the crimson river, who met the sacrifices of both man and creature with an unyielding gaze, knowing they fed the roots of her kingdom?

Sophie wanted, desperately, to believe it. For Annie, whose sense of duty bound her so firmly, who would sacrifice love itself for her country, who carried her power with such weight and grace—surely, she deserved that and more.

Until those last gemstone tears dried upon those beautiful, scaled cheeks, Sophie continued to stroke her rough, hardened back.



"MILADY, you have a visitor."

In the middle of taste-testing Raymond's newest creations in the kitchen, Sophie looked up at Claire with a faintly troubled expression.

"She did mention that her arrival is unannounced and that it's no trouble if you're otherwise occupied. Shall I relay your regrets?" Claire clarified.

"*She*?" Sophie asked. "Who is it?"

"Well, it's…"

Sophie stepped outside to see a grand carriage stationed by the front steps. The door swung open, and a young woman emerged: sun-kissed skin, almond-shaped eyes with golden irises, and double eyelids. Her jet-black hair cascaded past her waist, framing plump red lips and a flirtatious, sidelong glance that came with a tilt of her head.

Sophie smiled immediately. "Annie!"

"Hello, Sophie," Annie replied, matching her smile.

Now that Sophie thought about it, it had been three days since Annie's last visit. This was Annie in the flesh, her eyes gleaming with quiet wisdom, her laugh bright and hearty, just like the warm lands she came from.

"I wanted to see you again before I returned to Crocodilia," Annie said. "And to give you this." She held out a beautifully crafted crocodile leather purse, its amber sheen catching the light, each detail as intricate as art, down to the last rivet.

Sophie's eyes widened in wonder, then unexpectedly narrowed as she looked at Annie with a hint of concern. "Sorry. It must've hurt."

"Oh, don't worry, it's not my skin," Annie quickly quipped.

As it was technically a gift, not payment, Sophie accepted the purse with gratitude.

"And here's another," Annie said, this time handing Sophie an unexpectedly hefty piece of goldwork. It had no discernible shape, though it sort of resembled a piece from a jigsaw puzzle.

"What's this?" Sophie asked.

"Consider it proof of our transaction. In my country, this marks you as a personal guest of mine. It's very important, so don't lose it."

Though Annie spoke lightly, it was clear this was no ordinary token—it was an emblem of serious diplomatic weight reserved for exchanges between VIPs. Hardly the sort of thing you'd hand to a seventeen-year-old girl you'd only just met. Sophie's palms grew slick with sweat as she took hold of it.

"I can't accept this," she said uncertainly.

Annie's eyes immediately narrowed on her like a predator on its prey. "It's not for your peace of mind. It's for mine. If you think I'm naïve enough to bet my country's future on a 'pinky promise' or whatever, then you've sorely misjudged me."

She held Sophie's gaze a moment longer, then the fierceness faded into something softer, more familiar. "You truly surprised me that day, you know? If you'd been just any ordinary young lady, I wouldn't have revealed all that I did. I didn't have high hopes for even a 'Monstrous Miss' to stay composed while facing me in that state, let alone keep up an intelligent conversation. If you'd fainted, I would have simply left, let you think it was all a strange dream." A chuckle escaped her. "But instead, the first thing you asked me was if I preferred fresh meat or raw blood! Who would've expected such pluckiness from a dainty little maiden?"

"I was in shock," Sophie protested with a sullen pout.

"Then, even in shock, you handle yourself with grace."

"Maybe I do."

At that, Sophie couldn't suppress her laughter any longer, and the two shared a moment of levity. Then silence fell between them, and they looked at one another anew.

"I plan to tell father my thoughts on marriage as soon as I return," Annie said, her tone steadier. "I'd considered every tactic, every calculated approach to win him over. But in the end…I think it's best to leave aside any manipulation and simply speak from my heart."

Sophie nodded in quiet agreement. What better way was there to reach a father's heart? And would he have reason to reject either

way? Would he really refuse his daughter, who bore the burden of his lineage alone, the chance to marry for love? The man Annie chose was unmarried, a loyal servant in her father's court—there was no threat, no danger to their secrets. Surely, he'd see the sense in it.

"But if you end up having a row and need somewhere to flee, you're always welcome here," Sophie said.

"My, how reassuring. It's like I suddenly have an army of a million strong at my back."

They shared another laugh.

Annie gave a final bow and climbed back into her carriage. Sophie returned the gesture, watching the carriage roll away, disappearing slowly into the distance. The goodbye was quiet—perhaps too quiet for two teenage girls who might not see each other again for quite some time. As the carriage vanished from view, Sophie offered a silent prayer for the princess: for her future as queen and her happiness.



IT was nearly half a year later when news from Crocodilia broke: their princess had married a researcher, one of her own. Hard to believe that princess had once been here, sitting in this very salon—a figure so noble, so unfathomably distant from an ordinary town girl like Sophie that it hardly seemed her place to offer congratulations.

Yet, on that day, they had shared tea, exchanged sweets, and engaged in the kind of conversation that touched deeply.

May you find peace and live happily forever after, Sophie prayed, her hand drifting over the soft cushions where Annie had once sat. In her hand, the golden puzzle piece caught the light, glinting as if to smile in response.

Yvonne, the Noblewoman

DING, *ding, ding!*

Claire's bell, not shaky at all this time, announced the arrival of a new client. Sophie shot up to her feet from being lost again in the deep intricacies of the tablecloth.

Five days after Sophie saw Annie off, another request for her services arrived at the household. The letter lacked the regal flair of Annie's, but with its precise grammar, flowing script, and floral-adorned paper, it was clearly from someone of high standing.

The exact name was redacted, yet it came from a noblewoman in a neighboring country. She wrote that she had a large mole that had troubled her for many years and now sought Sophie's help removing it.

"Another request from someone of high status," Sophie had muttered as she read through the letter.

"That's just the nature of it, I suppose," Johann replied. "Word has reached only the most influential trading circles. And traveling to a different country to meet with a healer, well… That's not a service one can afford unless they've got deep pockets." But sensing that disappointed Sophie, he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and pulled her in for a hug. "While I rest easier at night knowing all your clients come from high places, that's not what you want, is it?"

"No," Sophie replied, gently shaking her head.

She had nothing against treating the wealthy—she just wished her services could be more egalitarian. She wanted to treat those just scraping by—say, a single mother and her child.

"Why don't we try getting the word out to humbler establishments?" Johann suggested. "Local taverns and public

houses and the like? We can start small, so you're not overrun with requests all at once, and see how it fares from there."

"Thanks." Sophie looked up at him, her heart full, and returned his hug. Many fathers might wish to give their daughters the world, but how many truly could? At that moment, Sophie felt the depth and breadth of her father's love.

A petite woman walked into the room, her posture ramrod straight. She was, if Sophie had to guess, in her late fifties. She wore understated but luxurious purple attire, and her blonde hair, streaked with gray, was elegantly pinned in a bun. The only jewelry she wore was a simple silver ring on her left hand—making her very unadorned for a noble. Yet her gait, the movement of her arms, and her manner of walking without disturbing a single fold of her clothing all exuded a quiet, proud elegance.

She held a folding fan in front of her face. The fine lines on her brow hinted at wisdom, and the crinkles at the corners of her eyes conveyed warmth. Though only her upper face was visible, it was clear she had been quite beautiful in her youth. She regarded Sophie with curiosity and peculiarity but no disgust or hostility.

Her eyes crinkled some more, then she bowed. "A pleasure, Ms. Sophie Olzon. I am Yvonne. I come to you about a personal matter, so I trust you'll understand my withholding my family name."

Her voice carried a strength and presence that belied her petite stature. Not in the sense that it was intimidating but rather suggestive of a woman who had truly lived—a life shaped by experience rather than one lived in luxury and pampering.

Sophie perfectly returned the bow. "The pleasure's all mine, my lady. I understand you've traveled quite a distance to see me—thank you for that. And, of course, you're welcome to keep your family name to yourself."

She offered Yvonne a seat, then took her own. She gestured for the tea—and that's when Yvonne's eyes, peeking over her folding fan, glinted with a hint of mischief.

"Would you mind taking a drink first?" Yvonne asked.

Sophie was briefly taken aback but quickly obliged. Perhaps she feared poison? Not wanting to make a big fuss, Sophie made a show of taking a sip.

"Now, about the mole I wanted removed today," Yvonne said, unusually fast on the heels of that sip.

Sophie scrambled to set the teacup down and swallow, but with a snap, Yvonne shut the folding fan. Her face became visible. Under her left nostril sat a large, dark, *dense* mole.

Positioned just so, it almost looked like a…

Like a…

"Like a booger, is it not?" Yvonne said.

Sophie's cheeks puffed, lips trembled, barely holding back the tea.

Yvonne leaned back as if she was disappointed the spit take hadn't happened. Then she suddenly leaned back in. "Look at the booger!" She snapped her fan open and shut. "Booger, booger, booger, booger!"

Sophie's entire body quivered. Her face turned purple. Finally, even as Yvonne squirmed in front of her, Sophie managed to swallow. Only then did Yvonne finally retreat, looking like a disappointed child who had failed a prank. "I was so close," she muttered wistfully. With one last snap, she shut her fan and placed it on the table. Sophie supposed that had been the whole reason she'd brought it. She had thought it was some sort of foreign aristocratic fashion, but no, just a prop for a gag.

Still clearing her throat from the hasty swallow, Sophie finally composed herself. "A-A-A-Ahem! My lady. Would that be the mole you want removed today?"

"You mean the booger?"

"It's… It's a mole." Sophie quivered again. *Don't laugh… Don't laugh… This is a serious matter, it's not polite to laugh…* But the more she thought about it, the more her shoulders heaved. A noblewoman saying the word "booger" over and over again? There hadn't been anything more absurd!

Sophie directed her attention to other parts of Yvonne to steady herself. Milky white skin and tastefully applied makeup, she was the

picture of sophistication—and yet, that mole. That darn mole. It was never too far out of sight. Sophie knew she shouldn't look—couldn't look—but her eyes were drawn to it against her will.

Suddenly, Yvonne broke out into a smile. "You're very kind, aren't you, Ms. Sophie?"

Sophie froze. Had Yvonne noticed what she was doing? If so, how rude she must have seemed!

Yvonne expelled a long, laden sigh. "Most people who meet me for the first time don't bother hiding their contempt. And who could blame them? A snobbish noblewoman with an unsightly booger under her nose—what better example of karma?"

"It's a mole," Sophie repeated.

"It's actually proven useful if you'll believe it—makes for an excellent judge of character. If they look at me and show even a hint of mockery, then they're out. But truth be told, I think I've grown rather weary of it."

"And so you want it removed?" Sophie asked.

Yvonne sighed again. "You need my story, don't you? I must warn you, though, it's a long one."

Yvonne had been born the only daughter of a baron. When she was four, her mother passed away from illness, leaving her to be raised by her father, her wet nurse, and various household maids. With her family's holdings nestled in the countryside and surrounded by untamed natural beauty, Yvonne spent her youth exploring fields and forests, growing up to be a hardy, tomboyish girl. That mole on her face had always been there, though it began as a small, almost imperceptible mark that grew along with her.

When she was six, her father sent her to a school for noble children, and it was there that she first earned the name: "Booger-nosed Yvonne." She would feel the eyes upon her and hear the whispers shared between boys who delighted in her tears, gathering around her as she cried, pointing and laughing as they chanted her new, unwanted title. Even at that young age, Yvonne understood her position. She was a middling baron's daughter from the middle of nowhere. It was her lot in life to be teased. There would be no

retorts, no sharp comebacks; all she could do was cry, run, and find whatever small, hidden corners offered her solitude.

As she grew bigger, so did the mole. She began to lower her gaze, her hand instinctively lifting to obscure her face. And as the girls she once called friends turned into young women, the conversations slowly but surely slipped out of her reach. When talk turned to new fashions, cosmetics, the first notes of romance—she felt their fleeting glances, brief but piercing, underscored by those thin, knowing smiles that said it all: *as if you, with that face, could understand any of this*. So, with time, she drifted further into the background, unable to bear the weight of those smiles any longer.

"Young women are a uniquely self-conscious lot, wouldn't you agree?" Yvonne remarked with a wry smile.

"But in your case, I don't think that self-consciousness was misplaced," Sophie replied, her tone serious. She recognized the jest in Yvonne's words, but there was a point to make here.

Sophie thought—no, *knew*, that Yvonne had been beautiful in her youth. That had been why the boys teased her. That had been why the girls tried to exclude her. If that mole had grown on a plainer girl's face, Sophie would wager that nobody would've paid her any mind.

"You're very kind," Yvonne said, her face blossoming into a timeless smile. Then she continued her tale. "Around fourteen, fifteen was when I started to really get a grasp on this whole 'loner' thing. In fact, I rather liked it. Reading, eating, and studying are much easier when there's nobody to distract you."

Yet it would be untrue to say Yvonne's days unfolded without their trials. When she spoke to a boy with her right side turned toward him, only for his gaze to falter, him to walk away as she turned; when shrill laughter seeped from the far end of the room, contained but unmistakably cruel; or when a teacher, well-meaning but unable to disguise their pity, would glance upon her face and mutter under their breath, "How unfortunate"—in those moments when her heart felt especially heavy, Yvonne would seek refuge in

the small, neglected rear garden at school. It was a shadowed, unadorned patch, scarcely more than a few flowerbeds harboring blossoms that bore no names—nothing close to the grand displays of the main garden—but it offered her solace.

When the elderly groundskeeper retired, Yvonne quietly assumed his work. She dug, weeded, trimmed; her hands grew rough and calloused, her clothes soiled by the earth. It was hardly fitting for a girl of her station, but those simple, unremarkable flowers—so tucked away that no one would even notice, let alone care if they had wilted—became her only friends.

Yvonne poured herself into their care. When faced with a challenge beyond her understanding, she would go to the library. If that failed, she found herself at the local florist's door or beside her house's gardener, gently but earnestly pleading for guidance. In her moments of hardship, she wept for them; when loneliness pressed upon her, she would sing to them. With those flowers, she was all right. It no longer mattered if others whispered or if she felt utterly alone—here, among these silent blooms, she was understood. These modest flowers carried her, almost without notice, all the way to her graduation day.

"And do you know what comes next for a noble girl after graduation, Ms. Sophie?" Yvonne asked.

"That must be marriage," Sophie replied after a pause.

"Indeed."

Technically, Yvonne should have received a proposal while still a student, yet no such offers had come her way. As an only daughter who needed to bring a husband into the family, arrangements would have to be made one way or another—be it taking in a relative's child as an heir if she married out or any number of considerations. That her father's side had remained silent on the matter until now was, to say the least, a puzzling oversight.

Seeking answers to this question, Yvonne returned to her family estate the break before graduation. When she arrived, the estate

was…oddly empty. Where had that vase that had been there all her life gone? That painting? That carpet?

"No…" Sophie's breath caught in her throat.

"Indeed. As I stayed at school mucking about with my flowers, my family had declined—dramatically, so."

Yvonne pressed the answers out of her father. He had gotten into futures trading, lost all their money, and plunged them into significant debt. If he couldn't repay it by the next due date, their entire estate could be at risk.

Running a rural barony was certainly far from lucrative, but Yvonne couldn't fathom why he'd resorted to such reckless schemes. As more of the tale unfolded, however, it became clear: this wasn't mere folly on her father's part. He had been swindled. The story was one as old as time—conmen, a few clever words, and a rural baron left stripped of his wealth and pride.

How could my father be so foolish? Yvonne wondered bitterly. But the longer she looked at him, the more his frailty came into focus: his stooped posture, his graying, thinning hair. She began to understand there was more to it than gullibility or recklessness—he had been lonely.

Yvonne's father was a reserved man, had few pastimes, and couldn't hold his liquor. He had lost his wife early, had no close friends, and his only daughter had been sent away to boarding school. His only company became the ever-dwindling servants who remained as he buried himself in the work of the estate. To those skilled in deception, he must have seemed an easy mark. They flattered him with warm words, shared the kind of easy jokes that implied friendship, and then came the pitch—a business idea dressed up to make him feel sharp, sophisticated, like a shrewd investor. A casual assurance, "You're the only one I can trust with this." And just like that, the money was gone.

All he had wanted was a little company—they gave him that. To feel valued—they gave him that, too. To feel heard, even admired—

they offered him precisely that, only to take everything else in return.

In a painful irony, both Yvonne and her father suffered the same loneliness, yet neither had spoken a word to the other. Yvonne, unwilling to burden her father, had avoided coming home, deeming the travel expense needless. And, not wanting to feign joy or excitement over a school life that felt distant and cold, she filled her letters with terse, indifferent phrases.

The only difference was that Yvonne had her flowers.

No, perhaps that wasn't strictly true. Her father had his flowers, too. But they had arrived in the form of genial businessmen.

"I had made up my mind to lose everything—our title, our estate—and to live more simply," Yvonne continued. "I would have to work, but thankfully, I had many references if I wanted to become a working woman. All I ever did was study so that at least put the teachers on my side."

Yvonne straightened, and something in her gaze grew sharper, rekindling the fierce resolve she had held back then. For a moment, it was as if she had slipped back into that younger self—the girl who had resolved to forgive her father, surrender her heritage, and take on the weight of supporting them both, no matter the cost.

"But then we received an unexpected letter," she said softly.

It had been a marriage proposal.

"From another baron nearby. We were of the same rank, but their family held far greater wealth and tradition. It took us entirely by surprise. We feared it might have been another elaborate scheme, but after some deliberation, we decided we had little left to lose. So, I donned my mother's old dress and walked headlong into whatever trap awaited us."

Yvonne and her father set off alone to that first meeting—no matchmaker, no chaperone, nothing of the sort. They arrived at an estate that, while aged, had been maintained with care. In the drawing room, Yvonne sank into a plush, well-worn sofa that seemed to envelop her.

On tenterhooks, they waited until…!

"A bear appeared," Yvonne said.

"A bear!" Sophie gasped.

Yvonne laughed, the lines around her eyes crinkling even deeper with amusement. "Well, a bear of sorts. A big, burly, wonderfully fluffy bear of a man, and with him, Mr. Bear's charming mother and an even more colossal bear of a father."

But the face of this particular bear seemed familiar to Yvonne. Then she remembered—he was the same boy she had glimpsed countless times, running with his martial club past her secluded garden, always standing out because of his unmistakable size and presence. And now, here he was, standing before her.

"The garden. That's where he said he first saw me," Yvonne said. A soft, pink blush crept over her cheeks. The old woman, embarrassed like a little girl.

After a brief yet cordial gathering with their families, the young couple drifted onto the estate grounds, stepping into a garden alive with blooms in every color and form.

"You know, we've never spoken before," Yvonne said matter-of-factly.

"I know," Bear replied quietly. "But I've been watching you."

This bear had watched her tend to the garden, this petite girl who nursed her flowers through heat and frost, caring for them as if they were her own. He had seen her squatting in the soil, dirtying her fingers as she pulled weed after weed without a thought to herself. Each time he glimpsed her looking sad or lost, he'd wanted to reach out, to say something kind, but the words always stayed lodged in his throat. A girl as delicate as her might be startled by someone as big and imposing as him, he had thought. And so, every time, he had told himself, *Tomorrow, I'll speak to her.* And then the day would come and go, one tomorrow after the next, until graduation passed, and he had never said a word.

"Pretty?" Yvonne's voice softened, almost in disbelief. "Have you really looked at me—all of me? Perhaps…not from this angle?" She turned, thrusting her left cheek towards Bear.

Bear blinked, a touch confused. “That’s…the side of you I’ve always seen. You were usually turned this way, with your left side to me and the right side toward the wall.” His gaze faltered. “But seeing you like this, I have to admit…your beauty takes me by surprise. Had I glimpsed that other side of your face before, I might have felt too intimidated to propose.”

He told her he learned about her story from a close teacher, overhearing the phrase, “It’s a shame—she’s such an intelligent girl,” which hinted at Yvonne’s circumstances. That was when he’d made his stand—the first time he’d ever spoken his truth in front of his parents, rejecting their marriage plans and telling them he had someone he wanted to be with.

Bear knew the full extent of her father’s debt, down to the last coin—a detail that left Yvonne visibly stunned. He then offered to take on the debt himself, to step into her father’s place. It was clear that either he or his parents had gone to great lengths, spending resources to investigate the family they were aligning with.

And despite all he knew, he still wanted to be by her side? Still looked at her now with such sincerity it felt almost blinding?

“I know this is sudden, and I apologize for prying into your troubles, but I couldn’t help myself.” Bear lowered himself to one knee, his arms opening wide, his voice thick with emotion. “I’ve been watching you for so long. I love you. I’m begging you. Please—will you marry me?”

Out came the proposal—no pretense, no catch, just honest feeling. Yvonne looked at him—his trembling arms, his face flushed bright red, the effort it took just to meet her gaze. That was all she needed. Without a second of hesitation, she leapt into his open arms.

The embrace was soft, warm, and enveloping, exactly what one might expect from a bear. He held her tightly, and together, they cried their hearts out.

Yvonne took a graceful sip of tea, setting her cup down without a sound. “My father took in a relative’s child to carry on the barony.

I've been blessed with two sons—one married out, the other married in—granting me four wonderful grandchildren."

"How marvelous!" Sophie gasped.

Yvonne chuckled shyly. She lifted the hem of her otherwise simple dress just enough to reveal its lining, embroidered with an intricate pattern of blooming flowers. "I do love keeping up with the latest styles, treating myself to the newest fabrics and designs," she confessed. "Perhaps because that was a privilege I denied myself when I was younger. Actually, that's why I came into town today—there was a sale on patterns and fabrics I couldn't resist."

That youthful urge to dress up, though she hadn't indulged it back then, had lingered in Yvonne's heart. And her understated, unflashy elegance—Sophie could fully get behind that.

Yvonne's face settled into a warm, contented smile, an expression that drew an admiring breath from Sophie. To think that the quiet, lonely girl from the garden, holding back tears as she knelt in the dirt, had grown into a woman whose life was so rich with joy and purpose. "You're very blessed, my lady," Sophie said.

Yvonne's eyes crinkled with immediate warmth. "Yes, I truly am."

Sophie was glad to learn Yvonne's story had a happy ending. But that only begged the question…

"You're thinking, 'Why now?' aren't you, Ms. Sophie?" Yvonne asked. There was a knowing glint in her eye as if she was certain she had perfectly read the doubt flickering across Sophie's face.

Sophie nodded slowly. Certainly, the mole had been the source of all of Yvonne's troubles in her youth, but it had also brought her that wonderful bear of a husband and everything she now cherished.

"You wouldn't be wrong to think this mole has given me more than it's taken," Yvonne said. "When my eldest brought home his now wife for us to meet, I was a bundle of nerves—I could only imagine how she must've felt. But when we saw each other for the first time, we just broke into laughter. She has moles, too, you see. Not one quite as large as mine, but many scattered across her face. And the way she'd shield her face with her hand was so endearing,

so shy. It swept away all my ideas of playing the wicked mother-in-law."

"Marvelous," Sophie said. That had to be a jest—playing the mean mother-in-law? Surely, Yvonne hadn't a trace of malice in her. Even in this short meeting, Sophie could tell: pettiness wasn't in her nature.

"I've seen my father cross to the other side, raised children of my own, watched my grandchildren enter this world… There's little left for this old granny but to await death's gentle embrace. So truly, it even strikes me as odd." Her gaze grew distant. "Maybe it's because I've fulfilled my purpose, passing on my bloodline. Or perhaps it's knowing that my own time is drawing near. But lately, I've been haunted by memories from my earliest days."

"Of your…earliest days?" Sophie asked, intrigued.

Yvonne nodded. "Memories from when I was a baby. Strange, isn't it? Who can claim to remember that far back? But I do. I remember lying there, on the ground, looking up at my mother as she loomed over me."

The summerbugs' song droned like a static hum, layered thickly over the muggy summer air.

Yvonne could only see the lower half of her mother's face. There was a mole beneath her nose—exactly where Yvonne's was. It was dark and bulbous, catching a glint of moisture.

In her mother's hand was a sewing needle, its tip glowing red from the candle flame it had just left. The point wavered in Yvonne's vision, trembling as it inched closer to her face. Her shoulders ached from the firm grip holding her down, yet she didn't react. She only watched, curious, as the needle drew nearer, closer still.

The summerbugs' cry swelled. She felt the sweat prickling on her brow, her gaze tracing the shaky light of the needle's tip, finding a strange beauty in its unsteady path…

"And that's all I remember," Yvonne said. "It's the only memory I have of my mother."

When she'd once asked her father whether her mother had a mole, he'd replied yes, though visibly taken aback. All the lovely figures the portraits in the house portrayed showed no trace of it—the mole had been erased at her mother's request to the artist.

When she'd asked what kind of woman her mother was, her father had told her she was kind and loving, someone who cradled her baby in her arms, gently humming lullabies to lull them to sleep.

Yet it puzzled Yvonne: if her mother had been so loving, why was her only memory of her mother not one of love but something far darker? Why had her mother tried to burn her own child's face? What could she have done to deserve such cruelty? And stranger still—why had there been no scar left from it?

The mystery burned at Yvonne. The memory was too vivid to be some figment of her imagination. "Lately, whenever I see this booger in the mirror, it brings it all back."

"This mole."

"Those lips pursed so tightly they went bright red. The needle's tip glowing the same hue. I'm reminded that her blood runs in my veins—the blood of a woman who pinned her own daughter to the floor, threatening her with a red-hot needle. I'll be holding my grandchild, singing softly, and then a chill will run through me: *What if I were to do something so terrible to this innocent child in my arms?* The very thought frightened me. I never felt this way raising my sons. But then, when I was steeped in worry, I saw the advertisement for your salon. It felt like fate. So I thought—why not try to rid myself of this worthless booger once and for all? To bury that awful memory along with it."

"If I may, milady," Sophie said hesitantly.

Yvonne looked at her to continue.

"Might your mother have been…trying to burn the mole?"

"What?" Yvonne's eyes widened.

Sophie hurried to append, "Your mother—crying as she held that red-hot needle, trying to keep you still—was desperately holding you down so you wouldn't move, wasn't she?"

"She was crying? When did I mention she was crying?"

"In your recollection, you mentioned her mole was glistening with moisture."

"Oh…"

"If your mother had the same mole, do you perhaps think she was trying to spare you the same hardships she had faced growing up? Perhaps she thought that if she acted while you were still an infant, your skin would recover more easily."

If it'd been an act of blind rage, why go through the trouble of heating the needle? Why choose a method that, although still painful, would cause the least harm if her goal had been to lash out in anger? It was only a mole, but to someone who had lived under its shadow, it may have felt like a curse. Each time she saw it on her daughter's face, it must have torn at her—a reminder of her own pain, a dread that her daughter would endure the same. Until, one day, consumed by fear, she had tried to burn it off, trembling, tears in her eyes.

In the end, she hadn't been able to follow through. The thought of hurting her child had stopped her. Sophie was convinced of it—so much so that she offered this truth to Yvonne, daring her gently to suggest a more plausible tale.

But Yvonne said nothing. She only sat there, caught by the quiet clarity of it all, the youthful gleam in her eyes dimming as she suddenly seemed every bit a grandmother of four.

A silence stretched between them. Then, like an old habit come back to haunt her, Yvonne lifted a hand to cover her mouth. "Of course," she murmured.

Her gaze lowered, seeming to settle on an invisible memory—a tiny child lying there before her, eyes wide and trusting. She lifted her fingers to the mole on her cheek, the touch softer this time, infused with a gentleness that had long been absent.

"It *was* a memory of love…"

Her gaze drifted as if her perspective had flipped to that infant on the floor. Her eyes grew distant, trembling as though tracing the path of that glowing needle once again. Then, slowly, she closed her eyes, surrendering at last to some truth she had buried deep within her.

“Ms. Sophie.”

“Yes?”

“Did you know that a kind of potato will soon be on the market?”

“A kind of potato, you say?” The sudden shift in topic threw Sophie.

“Yes,” Yvonne replied. “It’s a hardy, drought-resistant cultivar, able to flourish even in the driest soil and yield large, nourishing roots. They say it has a hint of sweetness and nuttiness, almost pastry-like. Quite filling and full of nutrients.”

“Goodness, I had no idea! That sounds like a miracle—something that could save countless lives!”

Sophie’s thoughts leapt to the people in the dry regions of this world, where drought and famine were real and ever-present threats. To them, such a crop could truly be transformative. Her eyes lit up with hope, and Yvonne, noticing the spark in Sophie’s gaze, allowed a faint, affectionate smile to surface—a look that seemed to say, *You always think first of others, don’t you?*

Then, in a sudden motion, her brow quirked upward. “That cultivar,” she began, “is called ‘Yvonne.’ My husband spent years developing it, and, in the end, he gave it my name.”

“How quaint! Truly, a bear through and through!” Sophie exclaimed.

A potato. He had named a potato after her. Not a constellation blazing in the night sky, nor a flower of rare beauty—no, a potato. And yet, he’d chosen it because he saw its value—its resilience and usefulness. Out of love, he had given this unassuming, remarkable potato her name.

“But here’s the best part.” Yvonne’s eyes gleamed with a sly light. “Every Yvonne potato grows with a single, large dark spot on its skin.”

“You’re joking!” Sophie clapped her hand to her palm in delight. It was a fitting name, so charmingly apt that she almost believed Yvonne’s husband’s devotion had somehow seeped into the very soil, transforming his affection into the potato he’d cultivated with such care.

Yvonne gave an elegant, refined chuckle.

Sophie returned it in kind. “Then we can’t remove that mole, can we?” she said gently.

“No, we cannot,” Yvonne replied. “Unless, of course, my husband might like the excuse to rename his potato.”

They lifted their teacups in unison, savoring a brief pause as they sipped the now-cooled tea, allowing them a moment to collect themselves.

“It seems I’ve taken up more of your time than I intended,” Yvonne said.

“Not at all. I’ve enjoyed every moment,” Sophie replied.

“Had my sons not been spoken for, I’d have pulled you right into our family.”

“And be cursed with a wicked mother-in-law? I think not.”

They shared another gentle laugh, reaching for their plates and savoring the treats; Yvonne’s face crinkled with delight. Outside, a gentle breeze stirred, rustling the quiet, unassuming blooms beyond the window.

Scrumptious, the Cook

"THIS time," Sophie murmured under her breath, fingers working the tablecloth beneath her hand. *Third time's the charm*, she told herself.

Though Annie and Yvonne had both left satisfied, Sophie had yet to "cure" anyone with her magic. And that was the entire reason she was here, wasn't it? To cure someone, truly.

This time, she repeated, giving the tablecloth one final, decisive smoothing.

The letter had been brief, scribbled hastily on thin, flimsy paper—the sort used by the common folk. It read simply: *Scrumptious, cook, twenty years old. Burn scars.*

If this "Mr. Scrumptious" was indeed a cook, he'd likely had many mishaps with fire. And a young man's pride—well, minor burns were often worn like medals. But this scar must have been something else. An incident one couldn't merely shrug away.

This time, for sure… The silent vow trembled through her fingers, yet only the fabric beneath her hand bore witness.



"A young *man?!*" Johann had thundered, his voice reverberating through the room. "Is he married?!"

Sophie said nothing, only watching as her father's brow knotted into deep, dark furrows. He paced, muttering darkly under his breath, moving in tight, agitated circles like some caged creature. Then, without warning, he disappeared through the door, only to return moments later, pressing a rough, oddly colored stone into her palm.

"What's this?" Sophie asked.

"A spellstone for self-defense," Johann replied tersely. "Throw this at anyone you suspect means you harm, and it'll blow them to hell and back."

Sophie's gaze snapped up. "You're giving me a bomb?!"

"Either you take it, or I exercise my discretion as your guardian and refuse the request."

They locked eyes. There was a weight in her father's stare, something unyielding and immutable.

"This is different, Sophie," he said. "Not like the respectable women you've treated so far. This is where I draw my line."

Sophie didn't like it, but she sensed any protest would be futile. "All right, then." She took the spellstone, slipping it beneath the table. "Are we truly so different?" she muttered so her father wouldn't hear.

She lamented the stark social divides in their world—a world where she could barely meet those in need without a hidden bomb close at hand. And she lamented her powerlessness to change it.



DING, *ding, ding!*

With two practice rounds under her belt, Claire's bell rang sharp and clear. Sophie stood up to greet the guest.

A tall figure shuffled into the room, shoulders stooped beneath a hat pulled low over his brow, giving him a vaguely roguish air at first glance. But as he hesitated in the doorway, his thin frame, the tentative hunch of his shoulders, and the flickering glances he cast around the room betrayed him—a timid, almost mouse-like young man.

Sophie bowed and said brightly, "Mr. Scrumptious, I presume? I'm Sophie Olzon. Thank you for coming. Please, have a seat."

She gestured to the chair traditionally reserved for important guests, and he shuffled forward in small, uncertain steps, looking as though the place might somehow slip out from under him.

Wanting to ease his nerves, Sophie softened her tone. "Please, sit. We have both hot tea and cold—which would you like?"

It was early summer, and Sophie guessed that a spry young man like Mr. Scrumptious would prefer something cool and refreshing. Sure enough, he did. She poured him a glass of chilled tea infused with ginger, honey, and slices of lemon, serving it with a warm smile.

"Sweet and refreshing—just the thing for the season," she remarked softly. "And please, help yourself." She gestured to the tray of tea snacks. "These biscuits are made with citrus peel and toasted nuts. I asked our cook to keep the sweetness understated."

Mindful that a young man wouldn't care for too many flourishes, Sophie had kept today's spread simple. The biscuits, thin and fragile, crumbled at the first bite, releasing their rich aroma. Flecks of fruit peel and nuts appeared sparingly, each a subtle surprise, crafted not to overwhelm but to intrigue, the size and number of which Raymond had carefully adjusted.

Gingerly, the man reached for the tea and biscuits. *Crunch, crunch.* Two hesitant bites, then he polished off the whole biscuit at once, washing it down with a gulp of tea. A small sound escaped him as if he didn't want to speak but couldn't help himself. "They're scrumptious," he murmured.

"Aren't they?" Sophie replied with a smile.

But as her smile lingered, he seemed to falter, his fingers shifting uncertainly. "Um…"

"Yes?"

"Would it…be possible for me to perhaps…take these home with me?"

At once, Sophie's smile dimmed. Three varieties of biscuits were on the tray, each similar yet distinct, still piled high. He had only sampled one—and now wanted to take them home? So he could discard them in private? Had he just pretended to enjoy them?

"No, no, you've misunderstood," the man stammered. He scratched his head nervously from over his hat, his gaze fixed on the floor. "It's for my parents. They haven't had anything sweet in…quite some time."

His voice was so shy and delicate, like the words might dissolve before they reached her. At this, Sophie's face brightened. "Our cook will be delighted to hear that! Truly, he takes the greatest pleasure in seeing others enjoy his creations. Sadly, we don't nearly have the same appetite as a crew of hungry sailors, so he often longs for a more appreciative audience. Please help yourself to as many as you like. We can always bake more for you to take home."

The man blinked, his eyes widening in surprise before a visible relief washed over him. For a moment, he had seemed to brace himself against judgment or shame for being poor, but instead, he had found only joy in Sophie's reaction.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're very welcome," Sophie answered. She bounced out the door to ask Claire to relay a message to Raymond, then returned to her seat. "Now, Mr. Scrumptious, to the matter at hand—you're here about a burn scar, I believe?"

"Yes," he answered softly, then fell silent. He reached up to remove his hat, but his hand paused midway.

Sophie let out a brief, defiant snort—an unbecoming sound for a young lady—before lifting the veil from her face and unraveling the layers of bandages that encased her skin. The man, bewildered and anxious, watched the scene unfold, unable to grasp its meaning until the final strip fell away.

Rough, brown, bark-like skin. Jagged flakes curled at the edges, oozing thin trails of blood, pus, or some dreadful amalgam of the two. He froze, caught in its grotesque gravity, unable to look away.

"Now that I've shown you, it's only fair that you do the same," Sophie said, her voice steady, almost daring. "Off with the hat!"

"I'm sorry," the man said in a voice that had neither shock nor revulsion but a quiet, profound sympathy. "I'll show you. So you can wrap yourself back up."

"Wrap back up?" Sophie murmured, a hint of wryness curving her lips. "And hide this beautiful face?"

At this, a laugh escaped the man. "I didn't expect such fortitude." As that laugh faded into a smile, he took off his hat.

Beneath, a dark scar traced across half his face, stretching down past the neckline of his shirt.

"Goodness…" Sophie's hand reached out with a mind of its own to touch the scar. The breadth of it told a story far more severe than a careless splash of hot oil or a blast of hot muffin steam from an oven door.

"When I was fifteen," the man said, "my house burned down."



SCRUMPTIOUS was born as the only son of a modest yet cherished eatery. The establishment, nestled by the banks of a pond just beyond the port town's edge, was renowned for its fried offerings, each featuring a batter uniquely tailored to enhance the ingredients. There, bellies were filled with ale and hearty, unfussy meals. Their popular midday fare was simple, nourishing, and, above all, affordable.

His father, the proprietor, was a stubborn, taciturn man with a deep sense of pride. His mother was a stout, resilient woman who embodied hard work. At six, Scrumptious started attending the local school, where he learned the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. By eight, he had begun helping out at the restaurant.

"This isn't school," his father had once declared. *"You'll learn by watching. With your eyes, steal everything I know."* And so, Scrumptious grew up that way, spending his days in the heart of the restaurant, observing his father and the rowdy, drunken sailors who crowded their tables.

"How many times do I have to tell ya to devein the damn shrimp?!" The reprimands were sharp. The lessons sometimes physical. Once, when he mentioned his desire to continue his education—fueled by the pride of his good grades—his father had scoffed, tearing up the brochure for the secondary institution with both hands. *"What's a cook need education for?"*

By twelve, he graduated from school, and his life became the eatery. He climbed the rungs of responsibility—first the endless, mundane prep work, then the small triumphs of assembling salads

and tending the grill. Yet, there was one station from which he was barred: the fryer.

"Look. And listen," his father would say, tending the fryer. Scrumptious would lean over, straining to hear the subtleties of the sizzle, trying to catch the perfect moment to lift the food from the roiling oil. He wasn't nearly as good at sensing it as his father was, but on the rare occasion he matched the timing, the kitchen would momentarily soften as father and son shared a hearty, fleeting laugh while the mother watched on with a kind smile.

"I didn't know it then, but those were the good days," Scrumptious said, his face bare, voice steeped in resignation. "There was a place for me. My future was set. I was going to learn from my father, take over the restaurant, and serve delicious meals for decades to come." But as he continued, a shadow crossed his face.

At fifteen, when the restaurant wasn't too busy, Scrumptious finally got the chance to touch the fryer. On one such night, just before the evening rush, a group of young patrons arrived. Filling in for his mother, who was resting due to her bad back, Scrumptious went to wait on them.

"Scrumptious, is that you?" the leading boy said with a grin, swaggering into the restaurant as if he owned the place. Scrumptious recognized him as an old classmate from school. He had always outperformed this boy in tests, often earning him dirty looks. If he recalled correctly, the boy was the son of a relatively influential general shop owner and should have been attending secondary school. The boy came with a few male friends and a couple of well-dressed young ladies. The ladies glanced around the restaurant's grimy interior, their disgust plain on their faces.

"What can I get you?" Scrumptious asked sullenly, only for the boy to reply with a burst of sharp, mocking laughter.

"'What can I get you?'" the boy parroted mockingly. "That's great, really. Now, let's see—we're feeling peckish, so bring us ten of your most expensive items. Though let's be real here, 'expensive' is a bit of a misnomer when it comes to this place."

Scrumptious forced a smile, nodded, and turned away though rage churned beneath. His teeth gritted. He felt he deserved a medal

for restraining himself and not lashing out and striking the boy who so richly deserved it.

In the kitchen, he moved almost mechanically, preparing the costliest dishes without thought, when a sudden, sharp pain descended on the back of his head. He turned, stunned, to find his father's eyes blazing with fury.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Get yer head outta your ass!" his father roared.

Only then did he realize his mistake—the shrimp in the fryer. He lifted the basket in a hurry, but it was already too late. The shrimp, which should have been plump and tender, were now limp and saturated with grease.

"You stupid…!" came the verdict, carried on the back of a broad, calloused hand. The strike sent him sprawling, the hard floor catching him with a thud. Blood trickled from his nose.

"Out," his father growled. "I was a fool to think you were ready. Clean up the grease when you've found your wits." Then, he called his wife for help.

Howling laughter reached Scrumptious's ears from the dining area—the cramped restaurant meant his former peers out front had heard everything. He remained sprawled on the floor, feeling the grease beneath his hands, the taste of iron on his tongue, the humiliation, the anger coursing through his limbs…

"I'd had enough," Scrumptious said to Sophie. "I wanted out."

This isn't my place any longer, Scrumptious had thought. *I can go back to school and find a different way to live.*

Fifteen years of being covered in grease, bussing tables, scrubbing plates, putting up with unruly patrons, and working until his legs gave out—all for what? Just to be told he wasn't good enough over a simple mistake?

The day's incident was merely the final straw. The memory of his father tearing the brochure, the way the paper shredded under unforgiving fingers, had smoldered in him until now. He glanced toward the cupboard where the month's earnings lay hidden. He could easily take half and vanish into the night.

"Half, eh?" Sophie muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"I know. I'm despicable," Scrumptious said.

"No," Sophie said softly, a thoughtful look in her eyes. "I was only considering how serious you are."

Even though it was his family's establishment, Scrumptious had still toiled away for seven years without a coin to show for it. Surely, he could have taken a little more than half, and nobody would've thought any less of him for it. But Sophie kept that thought to herself.

"That night," Scrumptious continued, a shadow crossing his face, "I thought long and hard about how to strike out on my own. I was so wrapped up in plans—getting hired at a restaurant, saving up to pay my way back to school, wondering if it was even possible with my old, dusty textbooks—that I failed to notice I'd committed a grave error."

"What did you do?" Sophie echoed.

"When I was cleaning the kitchen, I didn't dispose of the oil crumbs properly. I just left them as they were."

"That's… That's serious?"

"My father," Scrumptious said, eyes distant, "taught me little, but there was one lesson he pounded into my being: 'When dealing with the crumbs from the frying oil, always spread them out to cool before discarding them.' That night was the first I ever broke that commandment."

That night, Scrumptious had gathered the fryer crumbs into a deep pan and stowed it in a cupboard before storming off to his room. Sleep did not come easily; he thrashed and turned, rage and indignation keeping him awake. But eventually, exhaustion pulled him into an uneasy slumber.

A strange sound roused him from the darkness.

Crack. Crack. Pop.

At first, the noises seemed almost calming, coaxing him back to sleep. But the thick, dark smoke that billowed into the room immediately after, choking him, forced him awake.

"The crumbs, because I'd stored them together before they cooled, had caught fire," Scrumptious said solemnly. "The one thing I was told not to do…and I did it."

The inferno blazing from the deserted kitchen had already consumed the entire southern side of their shop and home. Scrumptious rushed down the stairs to the first floor, searching desperately for his parents.

"I found my mother hunched over on the floor, clutching her back and coughing as though her lungs might give out. I took her by the shoulder and guided her outside. I asked her where my father was, and she told me he'd gone back to the kitchen to save the special sauce—it's a family heirloom he'd used for decades, passed down to him from his father. Can you believe it? He abandoned his wife to rescue a jar of sauce. I remember the fury, the bitter disappointment. Part of me wanted that jar to burn, just to spite him."

Scrumptious soaked himself in the nearby pond before heading back to the blazing structure. The heat was far more intense than he had anticipated, but he pressed on to the kitchen, where he found his father collapsed on the floor, clutching the large jar of sauce.

"The jar was heavy. I tried to pry his arms off so I wouldn't have to drag it along with him, but even unconscious, he wouldn't let go. It was as if the jar were fused to him."

Moving behind his father, he wrapped his arms around him and dragged him, jar and all. How he found the strength, he couldn't say.

They were nearly at the front door—safety within reach—when the burning door, glowing red-hot, crashed down across Scrumptious's body. *Tssss*. The last thought that passed through his mind before losing consciousness was that humans, too, had a strangely enticing aroma when roasted.

"When I awoke, I was like this," Scrumptious said, gesturing towards his burns. "By some stroke of luck, my parents were unharmed."

Scrumptious confessed his mistake to his parents, bowing low to the ground with his forehead pressed into the dirt. He had braced himself for a verbal drubbing, perhaps even a beating worse than any he had known, but all his father said was a calm, "I see." His mother embraced him, tears streaming down her face.

When the dust had finally settled, nothing was left of their home. Scrumptious had expected his father to sell the land, but instead, he chose to keep it, transform it into a field, and use it to grow produce that he would fry and sell from a food cart. Scrumptious found work at another local restaurant, starting as a lowly grunt. This year marked his fifth year there. He still lived with his parents, sharing a cramped, old rental house.

"It was only when I started my new job that I understood what my father meant by watching him to steal his knowledge," Scrumptious continued. "A restaurant kitchen isn't just busy—it's chaotic. There's no one to show you the ropes. It's every man for himself, a battlefield where your survival depends on how well you glean knowledge. Fortunately, I had that skill. My father had beaten it into me. I could do everything—prep meat and veg, scrub plates and bowls until they shone."

Scrumptious put in long hours, worked his way up, and saved diligently—there was a station he wanted to rise to one day. But as he reached this part of the story, he gently traced the scar on his cheek. "One day, the fry chef was promoted, and his position opened up. They gathered all of us to announce who would take his place."

Among the younger cooks, Scrumptious's skill with fried foods had been a cut above the rest. His cheeks were flushed with anticipation; he was confident his name would be called…but it wasn't. Instead, the promotion went to another junior member of staff who was a year younger than him.

During a break, Scrumptious overheard a conversation between colleagues talking when they thought he wasn't around.

"Didja see his face?"

"Aye, but the customers never will, that's certain! That freak seriously thought he'd land that job looking like that? Serves him right, thinking he's something special just 'cause he can fry a little shrimp. If you ask me, that reckoning's been long overdue."

His colleagues, the people he'd considered comrades-in-arms on this battlefield, had been mocking him behind his back. He didn't

have the courage to confront them. He just stood behind the doorway, silent. Still.

"The fry chef is a customer-facing role," Scrumptious explained. "If a guest calls on them, they need to greet them and walk them through the menu at the table. So, of course, I…" he touched his scar, "wasn't fit for it," he whispered, choking back tears.

Scrumptious wholeheartedly believed that he deserved that mark on his face. It was a searing, inescapable reminder of his failure. He had accepted it, made peace with it… But the anger, the resentment—they always found a way to bubble back up.

"If there's one thing this scar has taught me," he continued, "it's that there are lines drawn everywhere. As long as you stay behind them, people are kind—even gracious with their pity and sympathy. But stray too near, cross that unseen threshold, and that sympathy evaporates. Their eyes fill with fear. They shoo you away like a pest, make it clear that you are different. You are not welcome."

Working hard as a kitchen hand is commendable.

Polishing plates until they gleam is a good thing.

Being the first to arrive, last to leave speaks of an ambitious spirit.

But don't you dare step from the shadows and into the light where we can see you, freak.

"I wouldn't expect a well-to-do lady like you to understa—" he started to say, only to falter, looking up apologetically at Sophie. He took a moment to steady himself before going on. "The day after, I still went to work. But it wasn't the same anymore. The drive was gone. I had no purpose left, no goal to chase. The work turned stifling, each day more unbearable than the last. I began to loathe it.

"And then, one morning, I saw my father. He was dragging his food cart out for another day's work. He'd once been a big man, full and round, but now he was little more than skin stretched over bone, pushing himself in the biting cold to make ends meet. I had a day off every week from the restaurant. I told him I'd help with the cart on those days, and he said to me, 'Son, no one with an appetite still wants to see your face, so get back inside. Sleep.'"

A single tear traced its way down his cheek. “He didn’t so much as look me in the eye. My mother found the advertisement for your salon. She found it at one of the pubs where she washes dishes. She clung to me, sobbing, and begged me to go. She said I might be lied to and swindled, but at least I wouldn’t lose my life—so just go. And so I wrote to you, Ms. Sophie.”

Scrumptious lifted his eyes to meet Sophie’s, then bowed his head low. “I love cooking. I tried to push myself away, but I can’t. It’s all I know, all I want. I don’t want to give up. I want something to work towards. I want a future. I want to help my father at his cart. So please, Ms. Sophie,” he placed his hands on his knees, voice cracking under the strain of emotion, “fix this stupid, accursed face.”

As Scrumptious’s final words echoed in the room, a solemn silence settled. *What a serious, serious man,* Sophie thought. This was someone who, from childhood, never cut corners or slacked off, even when no one was watching. He was a man who took others’ words to heart, even if it meant getting hurt. He bottled up his pain and struggled to express his feelings. But today, he opened up because Sophie was a stranger. Because she was nobody in his life, he could finally release everything that had built up and festered inside him.

“Pardon my reach,” Sophie said, placing her hands over his face. “The scar covers a large area, so I may have to do this more than once. Would you mind removing your shirt? I ask because if the door collapsed on you, the scar must extend down your back.”

“Oh, um. Yes.” The idea of undressing in mixed company made him pause for a moment, but with determination, he quickly pulled off his shirt and put it across his chair back. The scar ran from his face, down his neck, and across his upper back.

Muffin steam blasting out a hot oven could cause a burn, but this…was a battle scar. Sophie pictured the scene: Scrumptious with his arms wrapped tightly around his father and the pot, dragging them backward. Then, the burning door crashing down on his back, shielding his father and his own hands from harm…

The fact that, despite all his suffering, he still held onto his dreams of cooking was, to Sophie, profoundly admirable. She

thought of his parents too—what agony must have twisted through them as their son knelt before them, nobly confessing his mistake, begging for their forgiveness?

Scrumptious hadn't been the only one to err. What about his parents, who, in their zealousness to mold their child into a worthy successor, had torn his dream apart in front of him? They'd snatched away the childhood he should have known—a time of play and rest—and replaced it with the kitchen. How many sleepless nights had they spent, their hearts heavy with regret, wishing they could trade places with their child? Wished they'd never been saved from that burning building? How often did they mourn the lasting scars—etched into his body, his face, and his very soul—that would accompany him for a lifetime?

Too often. The answer was always far too often. Sophie fixed her eyes on the scar. She would heal this. Scrumptious deserved it. His family deserved it.

"Pain, pain, go away."

May it all vanish. Disappear without a trace.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

The scars on Scrumptious's body and soul, the regret in his parents' heart.

Warmth radiated from Sophie's core, moving through her arms and into her palms, filling the room with a gentle, glowing light.



LOOKING at his back through a pair of hand mirrors, Scrumptious was speechless. With the scar erased, his youthful and lively face emerged fully.

"There's still a bit on your ear. Shall I try again?" Sophie asked, her hands reaching out. But just as she moved closer, Scrumptious spun and caught her wrists firmly.

"Ah." Sophie blinked in surprise.

"Oh! Sorry!" he said, eyes wide, as if he too were stunned by his reaction and quickly let go. Abruptly realizing that he was still naked from the waist up, he snatched the shirt draped over his chair

and pulled it over himself. “I apologize. I was just— I didn’t expect it. You just erased it so completely.” His fingers traced the uneven texture of the scar tissue on his earlobe as though confirming its presence.

“And thank you for offering,” he added. “But I want to keep this. As a reminder. To never repeat such a mistake.” His gaze dropped, softening. “I… I don’t want to forget it.”

Not the memory of that day when, driven by emotion, he broke one of his father’s most sacred teachings. Not his father’s reaction—marked not by blame, but by forgiveness—or the warmth of his mother’s embrace that followed. Not the days of being seen as an outsider, a monster, and the turmoil those days brought—the deep feelings they awakened, the paths they forced him to consider. Not the unending thoughts of who he might have been had that day never come, and the aspirations he held onto despite it.

“It’s all a part of me. I’ll carry it with me, always.”

Sophie’s smile softened. “Is that so?” she said, her voice warm with an unspoken acknowledgment. For a moment, she studied him—the serious, serious man sitting before her. “Mr. Scrumptious.”

“Yes?”

Sophie took a measured step back but held his gaze firmly. “Now that you’re normal, do you see the line that’s formed between us?”

The unspoken truth hung between them. Where once two outcasts had stood face to face, there was now only one. Sophie, yet disfigured, stood before an unblemished man who had regained what she never could.

“There is no line,” Scrumptious choked out. “Even though you healed me and you’re still—”

“Your scars may have been erased,” Sophie interrupted gently, shaking her head, “but those lines you talk about—they’ll continue to exist. We all have them, drawn by others and by ourselves.”

Because you’re a woman.

Because you’re old.

Because you’re uneducated.

Because you look different.

“There will always be lines,” Sophie continued, her eyes never leaving his. “The question is, do you let those lines hold you back, or, for the sake of your dreams, do you brave the pain of crossing them?”

For Scrumptious, the line that was his face had been so vivid, so obstructive, that he’d failed to notice the others drawn around him. The realization washed over him, leaving him speechless.

Sophie stepped forward, crossing the line that might have separated them under different circumstances. Her gaze, deep and resolute, met his with a quiet strength.

“I wish you nothing but success, Mr. Scrumptious. And one day, I hope to taste your cooking.” A playful light appeared in her eyes. “Perhaps on the banks of that pond, in a brand-new restaurant—run by father and son.”

Realization drew across Scrumptious’s faces. “My father. He didn’t sell the land because…”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Sophie said. “But I do know that, to your father, there were only three things he could pass on to you—the deed to his land, his cherished cooking techniques, and that jar of heirloom sauce. Though, how he expected you to understand all that when he couldn’t even tell you to rest on your only day off so you wouldn’t make another mistake of that magnitude again, I’ll never know.”

Scrumptious fell silent, the weight of her words settling over him.

“Your father is a terrible talker, but so are you,” Sophie continued. “Communication goes both ways. You’re an adult now. Invite your father out for a drink. Talk to him—about everything.”

“Thank you,” Scrumptious said softly. For a moment, they just stared at each other in comfortable silence.

“‘Scrumptious’ is a good name,” Sophie suddenly said, breaking the quiet with a soft laugh.

“My father probably thinks he’s funny, naming me that. It’s ridiculous, I know.”

“Oh no, that’s not how I see it at all,” Sophie said. She slipped into a warm smile. “I see a father who named his son after his

favorite word, the one that brought him the most joy out of everything in the world."

It was the only way an awkward, bumbling cook knew how to express his love to his son—by naming him after the word that encapsulated the whole reason why he loved to do what he did. It was his way of saying, *you are my successor.* Of his techniques, his restaurant—his everything.

A tear traced down Scrumptious's cheek; he hurried to wipe it.

"Thank you very much for coming today, Mr. Scrumptious," Sophie said.

"No, thank you, Ms. Sophie," Scrumptious replied. "For everything."

"Ah, let me check if our cook has finished with that extra order of biscuits. Just a moment."

Sophie trotted to the door and pulled it open—"Father?!"—to reveal Johann standing on the other side, his ear against a cup, against the previously closed door.

Annoyance crossed Sophie's face. "And what happened to that line you drew, I wonder?" she muttered, recalling her father's grand declaration, *"This is where I draw the line!"* Yet here he was, abandoning a mountain of duties as a company director just to spy on her.

Sophie fixed her father with the iciest glare she had given him yet, but even that didn't give him pause. Johann looked past her and straight to the man in the room.

"You! Scrumptious, or whatever!" he bellowed. "What happened between 'Ah,' and 'Oh, sorry!' earlier?! That sounded like funny business. There better not have been any funny business!"

Johann stomped into the room, boots thudding against the floor as Sophie frantically tried to block his path. "Father! Father, stop it this instant! You are being incredibly rude to my client. I am so sorry, Mr. Scrumptious. Please ignore him. Martha? Claire? Anyone?!"

"And what was that silence afterward? And I know I didn't just catch you speaking to my daughter like an equal! Care to explain yourself?!"

"Somebody—anybody, help!!!"

Fathers—is there a breed of men more united in their foolishness? Sophie thought, apologizing profusely to Scrumptious while calling for reinforcements.

Arasyll, the Baron's Daughter

ARASYLL *Norrby, eighteen-year-old female, plagued by a bad bout of acne.*

The letter written on old-fashioned paper had come from the estate of a nearby baron.

Ding, ding, ding!

The summer fruits had begun to come into season, so Raymond had baked fruit tarts—emphasis on fruit rather than tart. Colorful fruits were piled high on golden-brown pastry and shellacked in a sugary glaze. Each piece seemed more vibrant than the last, as if vying for attention and the privilege of being enjoyed first. Sophie had chosen large-petaled yellow and orange flowers to complement the treats, and she was happy with the showy spread she'd arranged for a young female client.

"Sophie Olzon, a pleasure," Sophie said as Arasyll walked into the room.

"Arasyll Norrby," Arasyll answered in a gloomy, listless voice.

This time, Sophie had convinced Martha to stop with the bandages so that her face was fully visible. Arasyll's dark, brooding eyes roved every corner of her body, from her head down to the tips of her toes. They rested on Sophie's face the longest, burning a hole through it before her lips twisted into a faint smirk, and a quiet chuckle escaped.

Sophie felt strongly that the bandages hindered rather than helped in her mission. They created a barrier that distanced her from her clients. By exposing her own disfigurement, she hoped to lighten the burden of those with milder afflictions. But most importantly, it felt dishonest to conceal her face when her clients had to bare their most painful vulnerabilities to her.

The veil was still there. To remove that and compel others to confront her appearance felt a little too forceful, but she left room for the truth. A slight breeze might shift the fabric, or a determined client might stare and discern the reality for themselves—and laugh, as this one had done.

Sophie studied Arasyll back. She had a slim face, but one that was covered with face powder. In sharp contrast to the white, improbably perfect circles of rouge sat on her cheeks, while her chapped lips bore a splotchy red color—what Sophie could only think was light pink lipstick, smeared on and applied unevenly. The choice of her eyeshadow boggled the mind—it was yellow-green, the exact hue of which was not unlike cabbage.

Her dark, nearly black hair held a tint of purple under the light. It was clearly uncombed, and a trim was long overdue. The strands were plaited into three thick braids, twisted together like mooring rope, and thrown over her back where it hung like a dead serpent.

But even then, the makeup, despite its thickness, couldn't conceal the telltale texture of acne on her skin. Inflamed pimples popped through while blackheads oozed, a discomforting, almost painful sight Sophie could look at no longer.

"Martha, I need hot water! Claire, fetch mother's olive oil, the soap, and her Potoma lotion—the full set!"

"At once, milady," the maids said in unison, and they were off.

They returned at roughly the same time. Arasyll still hadn't been offered a seat, just standing there in a daze.

Sophie's eyes narrowed fiercely. "First, we get that awful *otemoyan*-adjacent poison off your face. Then, we'll talk."

The three members of the Olzon household advanced menacingly towards Arasyll. She cried out in alarm as they slowly backed her into a corner.



"YES. Soft, circular motions just like that. Lather it up in your palms."

"L-Like this?"

"Not rich enough! The suds must be super fine and delicate!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Richer! Richer!!!"

"R-Richer!!!"

After removing the cosmetics from her face with the olive oil, a now much cleaner-looking Arasyll attempted to lather soap.

"Yes, yes, now you're getting the hang of it," Sophie remarked. "Now take your hands and just massage it gently— No! Don't rub it! It should feel like a gentle, loving massage."

"But how am I supposed to strip away the day's grime if I don't rub?"

"You'll strip away the grime *and* the skin underneath! Just how have you been washing your face until now?"

"Um, just with water, then I rub, rub, rub."

"Well, I never!"

Face-washing had never been such a loud or exciting ordeal. But eventually, Arasyll made it to the end, rinsing off the soap and toweling her face. She let out a faint huff of satisfaction, only for Sophie to seemingly take offense to that.

"Oh, no, my lady, we're not done yet. Not by a long shot! After washing comes the lotion—immediately. And I repeat, immediately. No! Will you stop with the rubbing already?! Put dabs all over your face. Then you want to work it in slowly, infusing it into your skin using the heat of your palms!"

"Oh, what does it matter how I put it on!"

"Don't you think for a second that it doesn't! When it comes to skin, you don't rub it. You care for it—every single day."

"*Care* for it…"

The word must've struck Arasyll a particular way as it was the one to silence her protests. Obediently, she dabbed the thick, cream-like lotion over her face, then gently pressed her hands—her rough, calloused hands—against it and massaged.

"It smells lovely," Arasyll mumbled, eyes closed, drawing a contented smile from Sophie.

"A wonderful product, supplied by the family of yours truly. Just this once, I'll knock thirty percent off the original price."

“I’ve been had!”

The loud and exciting times continued. When the last bit of oil was applied, sealing in all the other essences and creams, Arasyll and Sophie returned to the sofas.

“I feel so refreshed,” Arasyll said.

“I bet you do,” Sophie replied.

With all the gunk covering Arasyll’s face now removed, Sophie could truly judge her for what she was: a girl with refined features, slightly mature looking for her age, with a truly, visibly bad case of acne. Fresh pimples seemed to emerge in real time, joining the scars of old breakouts—the look of which suggested she may have been in the habit of popping them. They dotted her nearly ghostly complexion, and the clash of color and texture was strikingly unkind.

“Do you usually make yourself up like that?” Sophie asked.

“I usually don’t make myself up at all,” Arasyll replied. “I’ve never done it before. In fact, I don’t know how. I started by imitating others, but perhaps I didn’t know where to stop. It’s not like I had anyone to teach me.”

Her eyes fell to her teacup. They studied the rim as she told her story.

Arasyll had been born the only daughter of an impoverished aristocrat. Her father, a baron in name only, kept the family in a humble, cramped estate on the edge of decay.

Back when her mother was still well, life hadn’t been so bleak. They still had dealings with other nobles and, by way of her mother’s family, even dabbled in the trade of luxury goods. It was a decent source of income, and they were comfortable, if not well-off. But when her mother’s health declined, leaving her bedridden, everything changed. The money stopped coming in. The cost of maintaining even the illusion of nobility ate them out of house and home, and their estate withered away until even the average villager living under them lived better than they did.

Arasyll’s mother, bedbound and unable to eat or even relieve herself without help, needed care. But they couldn’t afford their servants. They all started to leave, beginning with the most

competent—even the ones that had been with them for decades—and the estate couldn't offer a wage that would hire anyone new to fill the vacancies. As the painful bedsores formed on her mother's back, Arasyll realized she had no choice but to take on her mother's care herself.

"I was only thirteen at the time, and I could carry her in my arms," Arasyll recounted. "Do you know how frail you must be for a thirteen-year-old girl to be able to carry you on her own?"

Arasyll attended school, but her marriage had already been arranged, so she decided that secondary education would suffice. Thus, at fifteen, upon graduating from the academy, she returned home to assume the full responsibilities of the estate—under the societal guise of merely "helping with chores." By then, not a single servant remained. Sweeping, laundry, cooking, and caretaking—Arasyll had to manage it all. She pushed herself from morning until late into the night, each task bleeding into the next in a relentless, exhausting rhythm.

"I never had time to care about my appearance," Arasyll said. "Not that I'd know what to do if I did. Every bit of my energy went into caring for my mother."

Then, it happened.

One morning, in Arasyll's seventeenth year, she went to rouse her mother as she always did, only to find that her mother wouldn't. She paused at the foot of her bed, scarcely able to comprehend the stillness.

"The first thing I thought was *it's over. It's finally over."* A tear slipped down Arasyll's cheek, landing in her teacup with a soft splash.

Gently, Sophie reached out a hand to steady her shaking back. The bones stood out prominently. Too prominently for a girl in her teens.

Sophie only nodded in sympathy. Naturally, Arasyll would feel that way—caring for someone else was draining work. Being bound to another's schedule was an exhausting way to live. Four years she did that. For four years, she had thrown her own life to the wayside, sacrificing the most exciting years of her youth to care for her

mother, wearing her hands down until they no longer looked like those of a noblewoman.

She had endured much. So much that, in the end, the death of her mother had brought her nothing but relief.

Sophie sniffled loudly. She brought her handkerchief to the corners of her eyes and dabbed her tears away. "I'm sorry for your loss. My heart breaks for the both of you."

"Thank you. That means very much. The day after my mother passed, my father came to me introducing two women: my new stepmother and stepsister."

"I'm sorry, the very next day?!" Sophie cried.

Arasyll's father had moved on quickly, bringing home two striking women. The stepmother, a jeweler's widow, possessed a beauty that showed no trace of the burdens of childbirth. Her plump, rosy lips were ever-drawn into an alluring smile that held her father's heart in a vice. The stepsister shone like the first light of spring, with alabaster skin, bright, expressive blue eyes, and pale, feathery blonde hair that seemed to shimmer under the light.

With her bushy hair, scrawny frame, and troubled skin, Arasyll couldn't have looked more different—like she was the commoner and the two before her the true nobility. She could feel it wasn't just her imagination; the stepmother's gaze held a subtle disdain as she introduced herself, and her new, elf-like sister's faintly curved lips hinted at ridicule.

"All my mother's belongings were removed from her room," Arasyll went on. "They gave that room to my stepsister and brought a new, luxury bed into the main bedroom. You know, my mother's room…was supposed to be mine when I married."

Arasyll's fiancé, Beorn, had told her, *"When the season of your grief has passed, let us speak of marriage."* And Arasyll had moved under that assumption for several months.

"Then suddenly, one day, my stepsister approaches me with Beorn in tow and tells me she's pregnant—with *his* child."

Sophie punched a cushion. "That motherless…!" She bit back the more forceful word.

"I'm sorry, sister, I'm sorry!" the stepsister had cried, her delicate shoulders shaking with each sob as she pressed her porcelain doll-like fingers to her face. Beside her, Beorn stood protectively, his hands on her shoulders, as if he'd found a twisted pleasure in playing a role in a tragedy he had perpetrated.

"I fell in love with her, even knowing she was your sister," Beorn had declaimed. *"The fault is mine alone. Do not blame her. If you must, direct it toward me. But understand this—I intend to marry her."*

"Father didn't say a word to Beorn or my stepsister about what they'd done," Arasyll continued. "Instead, he handed me three profiles and told me to pick a new fiancé. But even from those overly flattering matchmaking portraits, I could tell: one was fat, one was bald, and the third was easily twice my age—a rural noble who'd already been married once." Tears streaked down her cheek. "My stepmother's dowry made us wealthier than we'd ever been. The gloom that lingered when my mother was alive had lifted. The house was vibrant—servants bustled about again, life filled every corner. And yet, the only shadow left, the only reminder of our dark days… was me."

She no longer wanted to stay in that house. The thought of turning a corner and finding Beorn and her stepsister together, his hand on her growing belly, made her stomach turn. Irritability crept into her words and actions. Her gaze grew sharper each time she looked at her stepsister, and she noticed Beorn's expression harden in return. The stress led her to scratch at her face, rupturing her pimples. With each passing day and her neglect of self-care, her condition worsened noticeably.

"I was searching for options to manage my condition when I happened upon the advertisement for your salon." Suddenly, she bit her lip, and her eyes dimmed. "Yes, I came hoping you could heal me, but that's not the entirety of it. You see, I thought that if I came here…I might even meet someone more wretched than myself. Someone uglier, gloomier, more pitiful—a lonely girl who had to get the word out just to have someone to talk to. Yes, the real reason I came was to leave knowing someone out there had it worse, to

reassure myself that my life wasn't so terrible. That's why I put on all this makeup—to seem just a little bit better. But no—you're wealthy, bright, loved by your servants. And now, somehow, I feel like I might leave feeling more pathetic than when I arrived."

"Oh, but my face is much, much worse," Sophie quipped.

"And yet it doesn't seem to bother you in the slightest!"

But cheekiness was not what Arasyll seemed to want at the moment. Sophie studied her, noting how rage had contorted her once-refined features. Her shoulders heaved with each heavy breath, bloodshot eyes bulging, strands of hair clinging to her flushed face. With a fierce furrow of her brow, she yelled:

"Spare me your pity! I know that look in your eye! You think I'm twisted, ugly not just on the outside but inside as well! Well, sorry, but this is who I am: a bitter, spiteful, angry little bitch that everybody loves to hate!"

"You're not angry," Sophie said with a calmness that seemed to wash over Arasyll.

"What?" she blinked.

"You're not angry. Just sad, that's all." Arasyll looked confused, so Sophie continued, "You're so sad, my lady, you don't know what else to do with it. After four years, I'd feel the same."

Sophie took Arasyll's hand in hers. The skin was raw and cut in places, with blood seeping into the creases between her fingers.

"Do you see this hand of yours? It's proof of how much you've endured. You're sad because you've born so much without a word of acknowledgment. Sad because you lost your mother, and your father and your fiancé betrayed you. Now, if I may speak unkindly for a moment because that is the nature of the truth: your family—they're fools. And we do not crave recognition from fools."

Sophie reached out a hand and gently stroked Arasyll's head.

"You are incredibly strong, Lady Arasyll. You did far more than most would given the hand you were dealt. I'm certain your mother was grateful—and proud—from the moment she fell ill until her last breath to have been cared for by your kind, compassionate hand. The days never grew easier, the nights never more restful. But you took on the work—the unpleasant, dirty work—all without so much

as a word of complaint. I'm serious when I say this, my lady, that to do what you have done—you must have the patience of a saint."

"I…" Arasyll choked out, but the sobs that followed drowned out her voice.

I tried so hard.

It was so difficult, and it filled me with resentment.

But no one… No one even tried to understand my pain.

I'm sorry, Mother, for feeling relief when you died.

Arasyll buried her face in her hands, releasing a cry that seemed to have been held back for far too long. Perhaps she had never felt safe enough in her home to let herself cry.

"Pain, pain, go away."

Sophie gently cupped her hands before Arasyll as if cradling a fragile, magical bubble. Along with her healing, she sent up a prayer—that this strong, patient girl might soon find a place where she would be treated with the kindness she truly deserved.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

The incantation quieted, and the light subsided to reveal pale but clear, smooth skin. When Arasyll saw her reflection in the mirror, she brightened with joy, but only for an instant before it fell, gloomy and saddened once more.

"Is something wrong?" Sophie asked.

"No," Arasyll replied. "It's just that… Still, I'm not much of a looker, am I?"

"Do you think so?" Sophie narrowed her eyes, studying her face intently.

Indeed, it was accurate to say her face was a little too large for her features, but the way each one was arranged as if placed perfectly in their respective positions by a master doll-maker stood out to Sophie. And that straight, delicate nose—it reminded her so much of a Hina doll from a life once lived.

"If only I looked softer…more girlish," Arasyll muttered with a sigh. That was when it struck Sophie: Arasyll's ideal of beauty was that of her stepsister—that elvish, spring day or whatever she had mentioned, and that… That inspired Sophie.

"My lady, what do you suppose that skin lotion from earlier is made of?"

"It smells lovely, so…flowers?"

"It's moss, actually."

"Moss?!" Arasyll's hands flew to her now smooth face. "I put such a slimy and disgusting thing on my skin?"

"The Potoma moss grows in dark, damp places where sunlight never reaches—deep in dripping forests, clinging to stones and rocks. Despite its unassuming nature, it can hold many times its weight in water, creating a lush, moisture-rich environment where trees thrive. That lotion is made using the water stored in this moss, combined with flower dew."

"A moss that grows where the sun doesn't shine… How dark and depressing." As she spoke, Arasyll's brow pulled into a frown. "It's not like it chose to be moss. I'm sure it'd rather be flowers."

"When rain is scarce and fresh water hard to find, wildlife instinctively seek out the Potoma moss," Sophie went on. "They lick the rocks on which it grows, drawing out precious water and salt. In times of need, they know they can rely on the moss to survive."

Arasyll scoffed. "So they only seek it out when they need help—how self-serving."

"But the Potoma is clever. When an animal steps on it, it releases spores that cling to the animal's feet. Since it can't move on its own, it spreads by enticing other creatures to carry it to new, fertile ground. There, it thrives, creating another lush environment that helps more animals and trees, and the cycle continues. No one's taking advantage, no one's being taken advantage of—it works because it's beneficial to all."

Arasyll hugged her knees, lost in thought. Sophie gestured for the tea and tarts and said, "Don't you think it's time for you to move on, as well, Lady Arasyll? It is no longer beneficial for you to remain with your family."

"And to which 'fertile ground' do I go? The fat one, the bald one, or the old one?"

Arasyll looked accusingly at Sophie, her expression sulking, almost childlike—nothing like the defiant figure who had entered the

room.

"All men will eventually lose their hair, gain weight, and age," Sophie said. "That's the ultimate fate of our kind, to grow so fragile we might break a bone from a fall or so forgetful we can't recall if we've eaten."

"And 'ultimately' we'll all become food for the worms! I'm talking about right now!" Arasyll's eyes flared, drawing a chuckle from Sophie as she carried a tart to her mouth. She made a face that proclaimed its deliciousness and offered the tarts to Arasyll once more.

"Do you still love Beorn?" Sophie asked.

"I don't know," Arasyll replied after swallowing her bite. "In all honesty, I don't know if I ever loved him. He was presented to me as my fiancé. I accepted it as such, and the next thing I knew, my stepsister had stolen him out from under me."

"Is he nobility?"

"Third son of a baron."

"Is he tall? Handsome?"

"Not particularly handsome. And shorter than me, I reckon."

Arasyll was a very tall girl. Her long, slender legs were beautiful.

"I see," Sophie muttered. "Permit me a rude remark, if you would?"

"As if you've been holding back at all."

"Your stepmother must be beside herself with rage right now."

"What? Why do you say that?"

"Why would a wealthy widow marry a broke baron?"

"Love, perhaps? Maybe she loves my father."

Sophie snorted. A look entered her eye that made Arasyll shiver—the look of a tacky, middle-aged woman who'd wiled away her afternoons blindly enjoying daytime TV while snacking on rice crackers.

"Not quite," Sophie said. "I'd say your stepmother married him to lend legitimacy to her daughter—hoping she might marry up. But then she went and got herself pregnant by the third nobody of a baron from who-knows-where, and poof—there went that idea. All

that hard work, up in smoke. She's probably gnashing her teeth on a handkerchief as we speak."

"I… I don't…"

"And as for your stepsister, I'd wager that the giddy high of becoming a noble and stealing her stepsister's fiancé is starting to wear off. Soon enough, she'll see Beorn for what he truly is—not particularly tall, not especially handsome, and a third son with no inheritance to his name."

"You've got some nerve calling one's ex-fiancé a 'nobody' or 'from who-knows-where.' Beorn isn't so… Wait a minute." Arasyll squinted as if mentally rewinding the tape of her memory banks. Then her brow furrowed as if she'd found the right moment, pressed play, then closed her eyes. A moment later, they shot back open, and a rosy blush colored her cheeks.

"He *is* a nobody from who-knows-where!"

"Right?"

"Why in the ever-loving world was I defending him? He's a little too short, his voice a little too high, and his hair's curly and frizzy like a tangled ball of yarn! And sometimes, even a nose hair sticks out from under his nostril!"

"And, and! On top of that, he's enough of a fool to fall for his fiancée's stepsister's wiles! He's worth less than a crumpled wad of used tissue!" Sophie added.

"You can say that again!"

Their forks clattered onto their plates as they grasped each other's hands.

"Now that you've experienced the worst, it's time to look forward to the best," Sophie said. "You should make your choice now while your family's still sweet on the idea and bringing in suitors for you. It doesn't matter if they're fat, bald, or old—you at least have the choice, so choose! As long as they're still breathing, we call that a win!"

"You're right, Ms. Sophie. You're absolutely right!"

"That's the spirit, my lady! Oh, before you go…" Sophie rang the servant's bell; Claire appeared in the doorway. "Claire, sorry to

trouble you again. Would you bring me my makeup box from my room?"



ARASYLL sat frozen before the vanity mirror. "This is…me?"

"It is," Sophie said, smiling gently. "Beautiful, aren't you?"

Arasyll's ideal stared back at her: a hint of reddish-brown eyeshadow, a warm flush of hot orange on her cheeks, and lips touched with wine-red. Each color was applied like a whisper on her pale, bluish-white skin, creating a vision of elegance, sharpness, and femininity.

"Playful shades like pink don't suit you," Sophie explained. "The deeper, more mature colors bring out your beauty. These are my personal items, so I can't sell them to you, but all you must do is visit the fine purveyors of cosmetics in this town. Be honest with them. Tell them you haven't a clue when it comes to makeup, and I'm confident that if they are the professionals they presume themselves to be, they'll patiently guide you, showing you the colors that suit you, the techniques of application, and even the latest trends."

"Thank you. Are you in the habit of applying makeup?"

Sophie shook her head. "Whatever goes on me will eventually come off me as a nasty brown sludge, so I don't bother. This, my father bought me as a gift after some shrewd salesman convinced him it was what every girl dreams of having." Then she added: "Though I can't use it for myself, it seems to have found its purpose today."

"Well, I must say, you're very good at it."

"Let's just say I've previously had the chance to refine my skills." Sophie giggled.

Previously, of course, meant a previous life, but that was a detail Arasyll didn't need to know. In the care home where Sophie had worked, the older ladies had loved having their makeup done.

Arasyll's gaze fell to the once-untouched cosmetics that had been used just for her, and a twinge of guilt tugged at her heart.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly.

“Not at all,” Sophie replied as she gently loosened Arasyll’s stiff braids. “You know I can tell hair that’s been grown out intentionally versus hair that’s just been growing? It’s time to lop it all off—start fresh. Wash it, dry it, comb it, treat it. If you do that each day, I think you’ll find it makes a world of difference. Now, would I be right in guessing you’re the type to squirrel away your allowance for a rainy day?”

“I…have nowhere to spend it.”

“Well, now you do. Go get yourself some new clothes—from a tailor. Or, at the very least, buy something off the shelf and have it tailored. Choose something you like, of course, but it may be wise to listen to what the professionals say. If you don’t know something, you’ll have to learn from others. Be open, be honest, and try. If, after all that, you’re still not satisfied, then you can explore your own path. But don’t skip that crucial step of learning from those who know.”

“Yes.” Arasyll nodded obediently.

“Good.” Sophie smiled warmly.

Sophie’s brush glided swiftly through Arasyll’s tangled strands.



"Lady Arasyll."

"Yes?"

"It's true that the more 'flower-like' ladies tend to be popular with men your age, but what happens when that flower wilts? The spring of one's life is far shorter than you might imagine. The men in this world who are truly wise, truly worth being with, are those who realize that choosing a partner for life, is not about getting through the spring. It's about getting through the fall, the winter, and for that, there's no one better suited than the hardy moss, thriving quietly in the dark."

Marriage is a beginning. It marks the start of two people, formerly strangers, coming together to share in each other's lives. Beyond a young girl's daydream, beyond the romantic ideals, it is an everyday reality of two lives lived, loved, and experienced as one. Sophie's parents had held onto that spark long after their wedding, but she knew they were the exception, not the rule.

"I'm praying for you, Lady Arasyll. I pray that, out of your three suitors, there is one wise enough to want to love and be with a patient young woman who, for four years, set aside the most important years of her life to care for her mother. I pray that your hardships, your sadness, never turn into anger. And I pray that you leave the place that shows you only contempt. Know that you don't need everyone to adore you; just one person is enough, one man who treasures you for all that you are. With that, you will find happiness."

Gently, delicately, Sophie's brush continued to move through Arasyll's hair. In the mirror, Sophie could see Arasyll's brow knitting, her lower lip trembling.

"If you keep making that face, it'll stay that way."

Arasyll let out a noise halfway between a sob and a snort. "I'm holding back my tears so I won't ruin your makeup. You're the one with the face stuck that way."

"Now who's the rude one? Ah. Perhaps we should heal your hands before you leave, as well."

"No." Arasyll shook her head, rubbing her hands softly. "You said it yourself. I should choose the man who loves me for who I am

—and for all I've been through."

"Good. You were listening."

Arasyll's lips gave one final tremble before tears started to flow again.



HALF a year later, Sophie received a letter from Arasyll. After meeting with all three suitors, she had chosen the old one. She had met with him and found that beneath the rumors—of him being an uncivilized yokel trying to rob the cradle, of whispers among noble ladies about his supposed depraved proclivities—he was a reserved, well-built, ruggedly handsome, dandy of a gentleman.

When he was young, his wife and newborn child had passed away during childbirth, and he'd remained single since. He'd never planned to remarry, deciding to bequeath everything to a nephew—until a tragic accident claimed that young man's life. With the fate of his estate now uncertain, he had no choice but to seek new options.

His holdings lay far to the north, a land blanketed by snow each winter. The cold was harsh, and the only recreational activity to speak of was hunting—a lifestyle unlikely to appeal to the modern, urban young lady. Yet, this was his duty, so swallowing his embarrassment, he persevered, sending out invitations to all eligible women, regardless of age or marital history. Imagine his surprise when the only one to respond was a young, spry eighteen-year-old who had never been married.

He'd jumped on the chance. During their matchmaking meeting, Arasyll laid everything bare before her husband-to-be, and he—well, he stayed quiet and listened. Her rough, worn hands, her nearly nonexistent trousseau, a dowry made up of little more than her saved allowance, and her lack of formal education—he listened to it all and accepted her just as she was.

In that cozy, snow-covered estate, Arasyll learned the arts of etiquette, dancing, refined speech, and manners. She would often settle by the fireplace with a hefty book in hand, engrossed in reading. The smoked meats of the region were particularly delicious,

and Arasyll made a special note that she hoped to one day sell them as a regional specialty.

Evocative, fluid prose glided across the letter in beautiful, flowing script:

In this place, each day brings new revelations, and I delight in the profound satisfaction that only blooms from a job well done. In this land, where the sun graces us only in the precious months of summer, I am resolved to stand steadfast by my husband's side, as tirelessly as he labors for his people's joy, like the tender moss of which you spoke.

On that day, Ms. Sophie, you were like a radiant sunbeam, piercing through the haze of my grief and rage. Were it not for your light, I am certain I would still be wandering in darkness, aimless and lost. You saved me, and for that, my gratitude is boundless. Here, in this far land, my thoughts drift to you often, and I pray for your happiness with all the earnestness of a devoted friend.

Ever yours in affection and admiration,

Arasyll Northman

P.S. My hair has become silky smooth. Come visit if you have the chance.

Carefully, Sophie folded the letter, pressed it against her chest, and smiled.

Lily, the Classmate

THIS client just showed up out of the blue.

"Beg pardon, milady, but a visitor is asking for you at the door. She said she was a classmate of yours—a Ms. Lily Brandt." Claire's voice carried a hint of trepidation.

Sophie looked up from her thick history text, which she'd read many times over, and said, "Let her in. I'll meet her in the salon."

"Very well," Claire replied, but her gaze lingered apprehensively on Sophie, hoping she wasn't reading too much into Sophie's flat tone of voice and expression.

Sophie smiled as if to say, "It's all right."

Lily. That beautiful name belonged to the bright young lady who had once brought Sophie both kindness beyond words—and pain beyond measure.



"SHH. She's here. The monster's here."

The snide remark—quiet, but not quiet enough for Sophie to not overhear—set off a flurry of cruel laughter as she entered the classroom. Before her memories of a past life returned, such words had cut deep, and she could feel her shoulders tremble as she sat down in her seat. Though her skin had been less severe before her magic had awakened, even then, just being surrounded by flawless, unblemished faces had been enough to set her painfully apart.

She took her textbooks out of her bag and went to stuff them into her desk when she suddenly flinched. She stifled a scream, inhaled sharply instead, and out from the slot meant for her textbooks hopped a large, warty frog.

She stared at the creature in silence. Just where had they found the poor thing? It was barely alive, with not even the energy to croak much at all. At least she hadn't squished it. The frog didn't even have the energy to move as Sophie wrapped it up in a piece of paper, walked over to the window, and set it free.

"Did you see that? She didn't even scream."

"And with a piece of paper or not, she actually *touched* it!"

"Please, that's because they're related. Would you be afraid of your cousin?"

Sophie had always wondered how those girls had mastered the art of speaking just loudly enough for her to hear. In fact, Sophie wondered about their everything. Who did they think they were, sitting in their little group as if they were the center of the world—talking over everyone else, delivering barbed insults at just the right volume, and raising their voices in obvious displeasure whenever something wasn't to their liking?

This wasn't a school for noble children, but the tuition and fees were steep. Compared to those institutions that took in children with titles but not strictly wealth, this one attracted a far more affluent type of lot. Ostensibly, it was a place of learning, yet those girls treated it as their own slice of high society—a place to preen and gossip, pretending they belonged to a world they would never know otherwise. But, of course, they learned one skill very well: how to rid themselves of anything or anyone that disrupted their carefully crafted uniformity, like Sophie.

Back then, Sophie perhaps could've confided in her parents, and something might've come from it. After all, trading companies wielded considerable influence in port towns, not to mention several of those girls' families had direct business ties with the Olzons. But at the time, Sophie hadn't understood all that.

Those girls, at the time, probably hadn't understood all that, either.

This was her pain. She didn't want to burden her parents with it, so she didn't tell them a word. Not that the household couldn't figure it out for themselves. Whenever the topic of school came up, it was all smiles and laughter from Sophie—learning, books, what

fun! She'd tried desperately to cut the conversation short before the signs of hurt could surface, but she hadn't nearly been as successful as she'd thought.

After physical education, Sophie returned to her seat to find "monster" and "get lost" scribbled on her desk. She did her best to hold back the tears, trying to erase the hateful messages, when a wispy voice called out to her from behind:

"I've brought you some new rags—and wet them for you. Please, you're going to ruin your pretty handkerchief."

Standing there warily, like she wasn't supposed to be there, was one of the girls central to the earlier clique, holding out several rags. Lily was her name. She had fair skin and chestnut hair in a wavy bob that curled inwards at the tips. She was mature-looking—kind-looking even—so much so that Sophie couldn't help wondering what she was doing with the rest of them. She was thin—her voice was delicate—yet Sophie had never heard her join in that cruel chorus of laughter. Instead, Lily always looked at Sophie with pressed lips and furrowed brows as if in sympathy.

"You can't," Sophie said quietly. There had to have been a reason Lily was in that group. Before Lily could help her wipe down the desk, Sophie held out a hand and shook her head, rejecting Lily's goodwill. She couldn't let her help. She couldn't let her be seen helping, lest word get out and ruin another social life.

Tears formed in Lily's hazel eyes and slipped down her cheek one by one. "I'm sorry. I can't do anything for you."

Sophie found the way her tears glistened in the late afternoon sun strangely beautiful.

"It's all right," she said. "Thank you."

That day, Sophie found the words to tell Lily just how much she'd meant to her—how a single, sympathetic look had made all the difference. One strand of kindness had been the difference between staying moored and drifting helplessly on harsh, lonely waters.



DING, *ding, ding.*

Claire's bell rang without its usual crispness.

"Enter," Sophie called out, and a robed figure entered. "Miss… Lily?"

The young woman politely bowed. Though her hood shaded much of her face, a familiar shade of chestnut brown peeked out from beneath the folds.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Ms. Sophie. Yes, it's me, Lily Brandt. We were classmates at the academy."

There it was, that thin but steady voice.

"Yes, of course, Ms. Lily. It has been some time, hasn't it?" The hood piqued Sophie's curiosity, but she made no mention of it as she gestured for Lily to sit. "Forgive me, I've no refreshments prepared."

"No, please. I arrived unannounced. Again, I apologize."

Silence. Then, without a word, Lily's slender fingers moved up to her hood and drew it back, revealing a large burn that marred her once fair skin, slashing from her forehead all the way down to her cheek.

Sophie's breath caught. "What…happened?"

"There was a fire at our house."

Sophie recalled that Lily's family ran an inn for sailors passing through the port. Lily often joked about how, despite her humble origins, she had secured a place at that distinguished academy.

Lily went on to say that, luckily, it had only been a freestanding storage shed that'd caught fire, and it was a stroke of pure fortune that no guests had been hurt. She managed a weak smile, but both knew the serious repercussions facing a business that had let its property burn under its watch.

"Is your family all right?" Sophie asked.

"They're all uninjured, except for me. My brother, actually, was the one to pull me out from the burning shed."

"Was there a reason determined?"

"Nothing flammable was stored in that shed, so they suspect arson."

"I see," Sophie muttered.

Arson. Thank goodness it was arson. But Sophie couldn't say that. She just meant that would shift the blame for the fire from her family to some other external party.

"Did they catch the person responsible?"

Lily shook her head. "There's been a string of similar fires, so authorities suspect an arsonist. They're searching, but even if they were to catch them now…" Her fingers drifted errantly to her face.

Like the flower that was her namesake, Lily possessed a quiet, understated beauty. Unlike the showy rose that demanded attention, she moved subtly through life, her grace easily overlooked by peers. At twelve, the signs had already been there. Just a few more years, a crash course in makeup, and her beauty would've flourished for all to see. But that future was taken from her—stolen by the flames set by a stranger whose face she'd never even seen.

"Why were you in the shed?" Sophie asked.

"I was going through my things, deciding what to bring to my new home and what to leave behind. I was getting married, you see. My family laughed, saying there was no need to fuss since I'd be close enough to come back for anything. But I wanted a clean break, I suppose. So, I insisted on choosing each item myself."

Sophie let out a soft gasp. What a wonderful episode that must've been—a young woman, about to turn wife, picking through her belongings with equal parts excitement and unease mingling in her chest. *You'll come with me… Oh, but not you,* she'd murmur, sorting through the treasures that had been her companions since childhood, savoring each girlish memory one last time before starting anew.

That joy, those memories, those cherished possessions—all consumed by a heartless, merciless flame.

"After being bedbound for a while, I finally got better to the point where I could get up—and eventually, to go outside, like I am now," Lily continued. "At first, my family was concerned I'd tried to end my own life, so they had someone follow me around at all times. That couldn't last very long as they didn't have the staff to spare, so now, here I am, finally able to venture outside on my own."

"I see," Sophie muttered, falling into thought.

Today, Lily had visited as a client. She'd heard about Sophie's salon, what Sophie could do for individuals with damaged skin, and came to get her own fixed.

Plup. Something bubbled up from deep within Sophie, seething and scorching like magma.

Anger.



EVERY morning when Sophie woke, it was hard to breathe. Every step carrying her farther from the estate felt like wading through lead. *I don't want to go to school.* For the umpteenth time, she swallowed those words. If her parents knew what was said and done to her at school, they'd be devastated. She couldn't bear being the source of their sorrow. Nor could she bear the embarrassment—of confessing she was the sorry kind of person who let others treat her that way. *Why couldn't I have been born like everyone else?* She knew she might as well be stabbing a red-hot poker through her mother's eye asking that question, but it scared her that, at times, she even had to bite back the urge.

"Good morning," she said to the classroom as she walked in. Got that over with. Not that anyone would bother to respond. Nothing was graffitied on her desk today—she let out a small sigh of relief. She checked her chair—no needles? Then she sat. Finally, she checked her desk for any more errant frogs—no, so she slid her textbooks onto the shelf. Lively chatter filled the air, yet Sophie's lips stayed sealed. She just prayed none of the voices were lively at her expense, every second dragging on as she held her breath, waiting for the class to begin.

Sometimes, she'd shoot Lily a glance. Sometimes, Lily would even shoot one back. They couldn't risk being seen acting too friendly, so a slight squinting of eyes signaling a smile was the most ever exchanged. Though they could never laugh or have a conversation, Lily was still the only person Sophie could call a friend.

Lily was the only reason Sophie could swallow the words "*I don't want to go to school"* and bear everything to sit in this seat.

Lily!

Sophie!

How she dreamed of one day having exchanges like that. Of having conversations about books and others, but mainly books.

Sophie's last day at the academy was the day exam results were announced. Seeing "Olzon, Sophie" proudly displayed at the top of the list, her heart soared. She wanted to get home even a second faster, to tell Martha and her mother everything, so she sprinted out the gates, cheeks flushed with excitement when *plap,* something struck her cheek.

She glanced down. Mud dripped off her cheek and splattered to the ground.

Snickering reached her ears.

Another glob of mud struck her, this time from the opposite side. Panic surged as she hurriedly raised her bag to shield her face.

"Lower that bag, monster. We're doing you a favor, covering it up for you."

Laughter howled all around. Then the barrage began—mud flying at her from all sides.

She squeezed her eyes shut, bracing against the onslaught. She couldn't fathom what drove someone to go to such lengths to show their displeasure for another. If you despise something so much, why not just avoid it? Ignore it, for heaven's sake, and that would be a thousand times kinder.

But to actively engage with it, attack it, try to destroy it when it had done little to harm you—Sophie simply couldn't understand.

Thck.

A mudball struck her with a new, harsher sound—and a sharper, stinging pain. Her hand instinctively went to the spot, and when she pulled it away, her fingertips were streaked with blood.

She glanced down. From the mud sliding off her skin, a small rock emerged, its jagged edge glinting faintly.

A sharp intake of breath, almost a terrified gasp, came from the direction of the throw. Sophie slowly turned, her gaze finding Lily.

Lily stood frozen, her hands smeared with mud, eyes wide, and face drained of all color.

Plink.

Sophie swore she heard it then. The sound of that last strand snapping.



SOPHIE shook free from her memories to see Lily on the ground in front of her. She was on all fours, head so low that her forehead kissed the ground.

Sophie gasped, shot to her feet, and tried to place a hand on Lily's shoulder. "Ms. Lily?!"

"I am fully aware that I have no right to beg for your forgiveness," Lily began. "The pain I inflicted upon you is undeniable, and for years, I have carried on in silence, offering not so much as a word to mend what I have broken."

A storm of emotions raged within Sophie, but none swirled more violently than rage—the tempestuous urge to press her heel into that vulnerable back beneath her and grind it down.

Not you.

Never from you.

Anyone but you.

The twelve-year-old Sophie inside her wanted to scream, to sob until her voice gave out.

They all laughed at me—but not you.

I braced myself for hurt from everyone—but never from you.

You, with your kindness. I never dared hope for friendship with anyone—anyone but you*.*

Overcome by the weight of her emotions, Sophie collapsed to her knees. "Why…did you throw the rock?"

Lily flinched, raising her tear-stained face to meet Sophie's. "I can't even begin to excuse my actions."

"So you're not going to even try?" Sophie's voice shook.

Lily's face contorted all at once, like an infant about to burst into tears. "I didn't know a rock was hidden within," she eventually

said. “They handed me a ball of mud, told me to throw it, and if I did not, they’d shove me in there alongside you. They goaded me on saying, ‘Throw, throw, throw’…”

Faced with the choice of becoming a perpetrator or a victim, Lily chose the former.

“I acted to protect myself. In harming you, I secured my place within their good graces. I chose self-preservation over decency and, in doing so, proved myself a despicable creature.” Her head again dropped to the floor. “I am to take the veil soon, retiring from the temptations and distractions of the world. But before I withdrew, there was one thing I wanted to do, and that was to face you. I have made this journey many times, each ending in my cowardice at your door. Today, however, I finally found the courage to ring the bell. Thank you for granting me this audience.”

Her fingers suddenly tightened on the carpet fibers, turning her knuckles white.

“For throwing that rock at you, I… I…”

Her shoulders gave one final twitch.

“I apologize…!”

Sophie looked at that trembling, vulnerable back she so wanted to pummel. To crush until it was no more. Her hands shook, her arms wound taut with fury. Yet, when she finally moved, it was not to strike it but pull it into a tender embrace.

In shock, Lily lifted her head to see tears streaming down Sophie’s face. As if drawn by some invisible thread, her own began to fall. Like children, when one started wailing, the other sobbed in return. Together, they relived that day—the day they were twelve when no words had been exchanged, only pain.

Sophie realized then that Lily had been tormented just as she had. The memory of that act must have haunted Lily every single day. Each time Sophie’s name resurfaced in her mind, the pain must have flared anew, without relief, for all those years—until now.

She still felt the echoes of that betrayal. She might very well feel it to the end of her days. But on this day, it wasn’t about what Lily had done—it was about what she did now: Coming here, seeking her out, with one clear purpose: to apologize.

Sophie wished she could send a message back in time to that fragile twelve-year-old girl who clung desperately to hope: *The day will come. The day when your favorite person in the whole wide world becomes your friend.*



"REALLY now. Two young ladies from respectable families, carrying on as if they'd never outgrown the nursery," Martha disapprovingly said as she handed the girls each a cup of hot milk. Both reached for their cups, still red-nosed and sniffling.

Still too weary from their crying fit to sit up properly, they'd retired to the sofa, where they sat side by side as Martha handed them hot towels for their foreheads and tummies. Despite her tutting, Martha seemed to be in a good mood. When she'd finally left the room, Lily leaned over and said, "Sorry. I've overstayed my welcome. I didn't mean to trouble your household."

"Nonsense," Sophie replied. "I do have one question, though, if you don't mind me asking."

"What is it?"

"Your marriage… What happened to it?"

Lily's face stiffened, then softened as she placed her cup down.

In a quiet, unsteady voice, Lily spoke about her fiancé—a boy whose family owned a lodging establishment almost next door to hers. While Lily's family catered to sailors, offering large, communal hostel-style rooms focused on affordability, her fiancé's family ran a more refined inn, serving merchants on business and tourists seeking a touch of luxury.

At first, their parents got along like water and oil, their opposing business philosophies sparking constant friction. It took an old-fashioned bout of fisticuffs between the two full-grown men to finally settle their differences. Now, they were as thick as thieves, sharing drinks and swapping stories that only fellow innkeepers would understand. Proper drinking buddies, they spent countless evenings discussing their dreams for the port's future, their conversations stretching long into the night.

"Thomar—my fiancé—and I grew up together," Lily went on. "He's two years my senior, and with the ties between our families, my parents are well acquainted with him. My father likes to say Thomar 'lacks manliness,' but that couldn't be further from the truth. He's earnest, sincere, and ever so considerate. He always seems to know just the right thing to say to lift my spirits."

A blush crept across her cheeks as she spoke. Lily loved Thomar dearly—that much was plain. He was the earnest, sincere only son of an innkeeper, and she the mature, capable daughter of another. What reason could their families have to oppose the match? For Lily's side, inheritance? Hardly—Lily had an older brother to carry that burden. What about Thomar, perhaps her being a pampered, sheltered daughter? Impossible—Thomar's family had seen her work, grit, and natural command of innkeeping. Surely, they'd leap at the prospect of such a proprietress to aid their son.

So that had been it. The perfect union: two families, their inns just a stone's throw apart, serving different patrons and livelihoods that complemented rather than competed—a match destined to strengthen the port they called home. A perfect union that was to be no more.

"That's why I chose to reach beyond my means and enroll in the academy. So that I might learn the etiquette and manners of a more sophisticated person. Do you remember Sable from our class? Her family trades in furs and happens to be a valued client of Thomar's inn."

Sable. The very name sent a shiver down Sophie's spine. She'd been the leader of the pack of girls who'd tormented her, who Lily had always stood beside. So that was why Lily had always been so central to that clique despite it being so out of step with her demeanor—she couldn't risk offending a valued client of her fiancé's inn. Lily had set aside her feelings and comfort, all for the boy she loved and the future they dreamed of building together.

"After the fire, Thomar said it changed nothing. He still intended to marry me, even after seeing my face like this."

Sophie's jaw fell slightly ajar. She had for sure thought Lily's decision to join a convent stemmed from Thomar's family calling off

the engagement.

"My decision to join a convent is entirely my own. I've yet to tell even my own family."

"Why?" Sophie couldn't help but whisper. To be cast aside by the man you loved was one thing—but to cast yourself aside, despite his vow to stay, was…

Lily gave Sophie a sad smile. Gently touching her cheek, she said, "Thomar and his father share a dream—of raising their inn to greater heights. They dream of finer furnishings, more lavish decor, hiring skilled chefs and a full staff, improving the place piece by piece until one day, it's a grand hotel fit for kings and queens. It's only a dream, as I said, but even now, they're doing all they can to make it a reality."

That was a generation-spanning dream, measured not in months or years but in decades, perhaps even centuries. Thomar had grown up watching that spark in his father's eyes, witnessing the tireless effort poured into making it a reality. And Lily, in turn, had grown up watching Thomar watch his father.

"Thomar attended a different academy while helping the family business. He studied foreign languages, foreign culture, customs, and manners, working himself to the bone so that he and his father could achieve that generational dream in a single lifetime." A tear slid down Lily's cheek. "A proprietress is the face of the establishment, a symbol of its warmth and comfort. What would the guests think of one with such a grotesque face?"

Lily broke down crying, her words spilling out in ragged sobs. She said she didn't want Thomar to give up his dream. That she couldn't imagine marrying anyone else. She said that if Thomar married another, she didn't want to live to see it. She couldn't bear to lean on Thomar's kindness, his family's, or her family's. The only choice left, she insisted, was to hide herself away.

"It's all about what I want, what I imagine, what I can't bear," Lily said as the tears subsided and the conversation winded down. "I'm so hopelessly selfish, aren't I?"

"Indeed. Not just selfish, but greedy," Sophie replied with a soft laugh.

“Thank you for seeing me today,” Lily said as she politely folded the towels Martha had given her. “That’s one less regret to take with me.”

But before she could rise, Sophie’s arm shot out, grabbing her wrist.

“Huh?”

“I’m not letting you leave. Not yet.” Sophie smiled toothily. “A greedy person deserves it all, don’t you think?”



IN front of the mirror, Lily’s jaw fell open. With a trembling hand, she delicately brushed the reflection in the glass, then her own cheek. Tears spilled anew as she let out a choked, broken wail, her fingers tracing the tears’ path over flawless, unblemished skin.

“Why would you…” she whispered. “After all I…”

Did to you, she wanted to say, but the words faltered as Sophie raised a gentle hand to cover her mouth.

Lily’s wide eyes met Sophie’s calm, unwavering gaze. Sophie simply smiled. In her mind, she thought of that sunlit classroom. That beautiful memory of Lily’s tears catching the golden hues of the fading light.

“Because that day, you brought me rags and shed tears for my sake.”

“Just because of that?”

“Because all these years, you’ve kept me in your heart, and you’ve come to apologize.”

“Just because of that…?”

“And because one day, I’ll be recommending friends to stay at your hotel. Friends in high places, mind you—queens, noblewomen, you know the sort. And I’d be terribly disappointed if they had anything bad to say.”

Something about the sharpness in Sophie’s tone finally caught Lily, and she swallowed her words of protest, wiping the tears from her eyes. With one swipe, the tears were gone. With another, the fragility of a young girl vanished. And with a third, Lily lowered her

hand, lifted her chin, and stood tall like the woman she had always been.

Sophie clapped her hand firmly on Lily's shoulder. "Good luck, Miss Proprietress."

"Thank you."

Determination burned in Lily's hazel eyes. As she walked away from the estate that day into that golden-orange sunset, she had her shoulders squared, her thin frame swelling with pride. Each step seemed to carry her closer—not just to the horizon, but to a future that now stretched open before her once more.

Sherlotte Olzon

"THAT'S quite the tale."

"Isn't it, Mother?"

It was evening, right before bedtime. Fresh from her bath, Sophie sat beside her mother, their hands moving in practiced harmony as they threaded delicate patterns into fabric. Sherlotte was teaching her daughter. After all, no matter where Sophie might one day wed, embroidery was a skill every young woman of standing was expected to master.

Annie, Yvonne, Scrumptious, Arasyll, Lily. One by one, Sophie had recounted their stories as they stitched. But not before securing a firm promise from her mother that she wouldn't breathe a word to anyone. Sophie had spoken with such vividness and life that Sherlotte could almost see the scenes unfold before her eyes. The happiness, the heartbreak, the triumphs—all of it sprang from Sophie's words, filling Sherlotte's heart as though the stories belonged to her, too.

"I'm glad I was able to open this salon." Sophie flashed a smile that seemed to say, *and it's all thanks to you.* Yet Sherlotte couldn't help but notice there was a tinge of adult weariness to her daughter's expression.

"As am I." She paused her hands. "But, my darling, would you consider slowing down the pace of your consults? Don't let anyone tell you that listening to others isn't exhausting work. And on top of that, you're expending mana. It's no small thing."

She reached out to touch her daughter's face. Sophie's skin was better than when she'd "fallen out the window," but *better* was a relative term. The sight of it still made Sherlotte's heart ache—it looked painful even to behold.

"You've been sleeping with your arms tied," Sherlotte muttered. The memory of Martha's tear-streaked face, the last time she'd been tasked with binding Sophie, flashed vividly in her mind.

"I scratch at myself in my sleep otherwise," Sophie admitted sheepishly, pulling back slightly from her mother's touch.

When the Olzon family sailors were tasked with advertising Sophie's services far and wide, they also brought back, of their own volition, various local medicines used for curing skin problems. They avoided anything that needed to be ingested, erring on the side of caution, but assumed any side effects from topical treatments could be managed. Thus, Sophie had been applying those to discreet areas, such as the underside of her arm, but to no real effect so far.

It was Sherlotte's hope that, while nothing had worked yet, something eventually would. Because—why wouldn't it? In fact, why *shouldn't* there be something for her daughter? Would it not be just—deserved, even—for a girl who gave so much of herself to others to be rewarded in this singular way?

Sherlotte often wondered what went through Sophie's mind. What did she think every time she gazed upon her clients' skin, freed of its blemishes? What did it feel like every time she led others to that treasure she herself could never possess? For as long as Sophie ran this salon, she would have to bear the weight of calling herself a monster just to draw people in. She would have to reveal herself and watch as the individuals she healed delighted in their newfound radiance.

Whenever Sherlotte thought of it, the question twisted in her chest.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair that her daughter had to cry herself to sleep from the relentless itch and pain. It wasn't fair that mud and stones had been hurled at her, that she trudged home with blood streaking her face and despair clouding her eyes. It wasn't fair that the day she was promised the love of her life, she had trembled with grief rather than joy.

There were days when Sherlotte wanted to rage at the heavens, to hurl curses at the gods who had stolen so much from her daughter. How much more would they demand before they were satisfied? At times, the fury turned inward, a dark impulse to claw at her own belly. To destroy it—a womb that had failed to give Sophie a body unmarred by suffering.

But whether it was railing against the gods or succumbing to the anger that begged her to tear at her own flesh, Sherlotte held herself back. Such thoughts clawed at her mind, dark and unrelenting, yet she silenced them all.

Instead, needle in hand, Sherlotte quietly and gently guided Sophie through the delicate motions of their work.

I am Sherlotte Olzon. Wife to Johann. Mother to a brilliant, kind, and resilient daughter. Today, I don the mask once more—the mask of the beautiful, understanding woman they believe me to be—and I stand by Sophie's side, supporting her salon.

If this is what she wishes, then so be it. I will eliminate every obstacle in her path, no matter how great or small. I will stand firm, offering her my gentle, encouraging smile until the day I no longer can. Or until someone else comes along—someone who can protect her, care for her, and love her just as deeply, if not more, than I do.

Kurt Ozhorn, the Healer

THIS client came in without a letter or even permission to do so.

"If you want to pass through this door, you'll have to do so over my lifeless corpse!"

Martha's muffled but shrill voice could be heard through the salon door. Sophie, currently with a client, quickly bowed her head in apology before hopping off her seat to investigate.

"Martha, is everything all right?"

"Milady," Martha said, spinning to face her with a stern expression. Behind her stood a rather tall man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, dressed sharply in a navy blue uniform of some kind.

His dark brown hair was cut short in a most practical manner, framing a well-proportioned forehead. Beneath it, his features—eyes, nose, and mouth—were so impeccably placed that he looked almost like a factory default, an ideal template of sorts. Yet, the severity of his expression robbed him of any true sense of perfection, at least in Sophie's eyes.

Seeing Sophie emerge, the man took one step forward. "Are you the operator of this 'salon'?"

"I am," Sophie replied evenly. "Sophie Olzon."

The man had a flyer in his hand that looked like an advertisement for Sophie's salon, crumpled up, then uncrumpled. "Kurt Ozhorn, rank three healer of the Royal Fifth Healers. By His Majesty's authority, I am here to inspect this so-called 'salon' for any irregularities or unlawful practices." He indicated the metal badge pinned to his cloak as proof of his identity, then moved to open the door.

"Wait!" Sophie moved quickly, stepping into the doorway and swinging her arm over it, barring entry. They now stood face to face,

mere inches apart.

"What are you trying to hide?" the man asked, his voice steady and probing. He was close. Close enough that Sophie felt like his dark, obsidian-like pupils might swallow her whole. Yet, he, on the other hand, showed no sign of unease.

"I am in the middle of a consult," Sophie stated. "There is a woman inside in a state of undress. A single woman, Mr. Ozhorn. How will the royal court compensate her once you've barged in, stripping her of her dignity and her chance to marry? I wonder, will you take her hand, hm?"

She tried to speak calmly but firmly. He was a royal healer, third rank at that. To have ascended the ranks from ten to three at his age was no small feat. This was a man she could not afford to cross.

Thankfully, the man—Kurt's—attitude seemed to soften at her words. "Very well."

Suddenly, the door clicked and swung open from the inside, and an elderly woman stepped out. "Sophie, dear, thank you for your time, but I need to get home and start on dinner," she said warmly. Her gaze shifted to Kurt, sweeping him up and down with an appraising look before she chuckled playfully. "My, my, aren't you a treat for the eyes. Fifty years ago, I would've eaten you up for breakfast."

Ho, ho, ho. Her high-pitched, playful laugh echoed down the corridor as she walked away, one hand raised in a slow, casual wave.

That had been Sophie's client for the day. The woman had recently recovered from a stubborn cold that had left her bedridden for the better part of a year. During that time, she'd developed persistent bedsores that refused to heal. Until Sophie had worked her magic, that is.

"A single woman?" Kurt said.

"A widow," Sophie replied. She peeked inside the room, gave it one final look over, then gestured toward Kurt. "Please, come in, Mr. Ozhorn. Martha, new tea, if you would. Oh, and leave the door open."



"I see," Kurt murmured, his long, slender fingers smoothing out the "rejection" letter Sophie had received from the royal court.

"And this," Sophie continued, placing another document before him, "is a copy of the letter we submitted to the royal court when opening the salon. Since we received no response, we understood that to mean tacit approval."

In addition, there had also been the response they sent to the postscript from the original letter, but that had been sent in a separate, *more personally addressed* correspondence, so she felt no need to bring it up.

In this world, magic wasn't so much rare as it was *powerful* magic that was rare. While only those registered with the royal court were recognized as official "mages," magic itself existed on a broad spectrum, from the most powerful spellcaster conjuring roaring flames and swirling gales to the cook who lit his hearth with a small magical spark or the barber who swept his floors with a gentle gust of wind. In fact, the vast majority of magic users fell into this gray zone, where the authorities turned a blind eye as long as their magic wasn't used to cause harm.

"Your situation is duly noted," Kurt said. "Recently, authorities uncovered a criminal operation operating under the guise of a 'salon,' employing similar methods to attract individuals and sell items, such as vases, at exorbitant prices. It was my duty to ensure this establishment was not of a similar nature."

"Your diligence is most appreciated," Sophie replied with a dip of her head.

Kurt stared at her. "By the way."

"Yes?"

"Where is this 'monster' advertised on your flyer?" He looked around the room curiously.

"Right in front of you, Mr. Ozhorn."

Kurt tilted his head in confusion.

This annoyed Sophie—clearly, this man was teasing her. She took a step closer, jutting her face forward into his, thinking he'd recoil. "It's me. I'm the 'Monstrous Miss,' Sophie."

"Hardly. You're just a girl with a little inflammation of the skin."



Kurt stood his ground, returning Sophie's stare, studying her afflicted face.

He's too close, Sophie thought, a little panicked. But stepping back seemed like admitting defeat, so she held her ground, meeting his stare head-on.

The standoff continued. Then:

"Why go to such lengths to promote your services for treating skin conditions?" Kurt asked. "Afflictions of the skin are not life-threatening."

The abject seriousness in his expression grated on Sophie, and her annoyance seeped into her voice. "Life-threatening is subjective. This is a matter of dignity. Someone might rather die than live with what they have—might lock themselves away rather than face being different."

From her close vantage, Sophie could examine him in detail—the flawless smoothness of his skin, the striking symmetry of his face. No doubt, this was someone who had never once had insecurities about his appearance. What did this guy—talented, young, beautiful—know about the struggles people like her faced?

The more she looked at him, the more annoyed she got. Her fingers itched with the urge to touch that infuriatingly perfect skin—and twist, pull, smack, slap.

"Ms. Sophie, I must remind you to maintain an appropriate distance. I am certain your fiancé would find such proximity objectionable."

Now this guy was really taking the piss. "I appreciate your concern, but as luck would have it, I'm no longer engaged," she blurted out in one unbroken stream. She still wanted to keep things civil but couldn't stop her tone from creeping ever harder.

This couldn't continue. So, expelling a breath, she narrowed her eyes at him, then pulled away. "Likewise, I wouldn't want your lovely wife to come after me. Shall we put an end to this?"

"Wife? I'm a bachelor. Probably for life."

"*And* you're modest. You must be swimming in it."

Single—by choice? Maybe he didn't have enough time between girls throwing themselves at him to choose, she thought.

“Swimming in…what, precisely?” Kurt asked, his brow furrowing. “If you mean admiration or attraction, I don’t see the point. Men and women are just tubes of flesh and bone wrapped in skin. I repair those tubes when needed, that’s all.”

Sophie’s jaw hinged open.

“And as for ‘beauty,’ I’ve never understood the fuss. Everyone has the same basic set of features—eyes, nose, mouth. What’s the significance of one being slightly closer or farther apart? They function all the same. Does it offer some kind of advantage I’m unaware of?”

“Mr. Ozhorn. Has anyone ever told you that you’re an eccentric?”

“Yes, almost everyone. Usually within two to three days of meeting me.”

“Is that right?” Sophie smiled.

Just like that, the anger she’d been holding onto melted away, giving way to pity. The gods had given this man extraordinary talent and power, yet in return, seemed to have taken something undeniably human from him.

Just then, Martha returned to the room, carrying tea and scones. Sophie gestured for Kurt to sit.

“And just what is a royal healer doing wandering the streets of our humble town?” Sophie asked.

“I’ve been stationed here on assignment for one year,” Kurt stated plainly. “This town has a sizable infirmary, owing to the volume of ship traffic. It was deemed appropriate for me to gain practical experience here. To learn ‘how to be a person,’ whatever that entails.”

“Is that right?” Sophie smiled again.

Again, this man was a third rank healer. His proficiency in the healing arts must have been extraordinary to have climbed so high so quickly. But to reach rank two and beyond, someone above him had decided he needed to become more…well-rounded. She could only imagine the grief a man like him could cause in a professional setting.

"By the way…" Kurt said, his gaze flicking past Sophie to a curtained-off section of the room.

"Yes?"

"May I browse your bookshelf?"

"Be my guest."

"Much obliged."

He walked over to the far end of the room, stopping before the towering bookshelf. No one had ever shown interest in that corner before, and Sophie felt an unexpected thrill at his curiosity.

"The newest volume of *On the Architecture of the Human Body in Eight Books*?" he remarked, a hint of genuine emotion slipping into his voice.

"You've certainly got an eye for quality reads," Sophie replied with a giggle, barely able to contain her delight. The book was the latest release on medicine from a country across the sea renowned for its advanced healthcare. She had saved her allowance to commission one of her family's sailors to procure it for her. It was brand new; she'd only read it six times.

Through the book and others, she'd realized that the standard of care in this world was, by and large, inferior to what she remembered from her past life. Though, that wasn't to say the existence of herbs with remarkable healing properties and, of course, magic didn't present some novelty.

She returned her attention to Kurt. As he held the volume in his hands, his chest rose faintly, his posture leaned forward, and his fingers twitched ever so slightly as they brushed the cover. The signs were unmistakable—a fellow bookworm had just made himself known. The way he gazed at the book, like a thirsty traveler discovering water after days beneath the desert sun, was so relatable that before she knew it—before she could stop herself—she'd just let it slip:

"Shall I lend it to you?"

"Would you?" Kurt's face shot up to look at her.

Ah, so this man wasn't completely expressionless, Sophie thought, bemused. "Of course, but only if you'll read this one as well." With a practiced motion, she reached for a specific spot on the

shelf and pulled out another book. She placed it with a firm thud on top of *Core Principles* in his hands. Unlike the hefty scholarly volume on medicine, this one was loosely bound with cheap-looking paper.

"What's this?" Kurt asked.

Sophie flicked her gaze up. "*The Crickpick Chronicles* by Charles Dequens. It's a whimsical and satirical account of a group of eccentric travelers and their absurd misadventures. It brilliantly captures the quirks and follies of modern life. Consider it a primer on what it means to be human," she added with a sly smile.

To her surprise, Kurt returned her smile with a faint one of his own. "How considerate of you, Ms. Sophie. While I promise to return both books, I believe it's proper to leave collateral."

He removed the silver brooch he'd earlier flashed for identification and placed it into Sophie's palm. It was pure silver, unadorned by gems or embellishments, yet its intricate craftsmanship marked it as undeniably valuable.

"Oh, your word is plenty good with me," Sophie said.

"Even if I'm no longer alive?" Kurt replied, his expression dead serious. "I might perish before I have the chance."

Sophie took a moment to process his words. "A healer's job is that dangerous?"

"Not in an assignment to a town like this. But there's always the possibility of an urgent summons—perhaps to a battlefield or a dungeon. It's not as perilous as being an adventurer, but the risk is ever-present."

"I see." Sophie's voice softened, and she gazed down at the brooch. "In that case, I'm honored to accept this. But these books are very dear to me, so I'd appreciate their safe return all the same."

"I'll do what I can."

Sophie looked up, only to find him staring at her intently. Did he not realize how rude it was to stare? "No, you *will* return them. Unfortunately, I can't read a brooch."

"I'll do what I can," he repeated in the same flat tone. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

With that, Kurt Ozhorn departed, the door clicking shut behind him. *And he didn't even touch the tea and scones…*

Sophie remained rooted in place, her gaze falling to the silver brooch nestled in her palm.

Yaora, the Greengrocer

SUMMER had arrived. Along with it, more letters to Sophie's salon.

"Yet another one asking for wrinkle removal," Sophie muttered absentmindedly, setting aside yet another plea from a woman seeking to reclaim her youth. The task of penning polite rejections for all these requests had become a job unto itself as of late.

Johann came to quickly check up on his daughter before he left the house, picked up the bundle of letters, and weighed them in his hands. "For your next flyer, we might have no choice but to print *'Cannot reverse the ravages of time'* in bold at the top."

The power to sway kingdoms and topple empires…

Sophie jolted. *Who said that?! Mother?!* But she glanced around, and Sherlotte was nowhere to be seen. *Just my imagination, then…* She quieted herself, then prayed quietly for her father's continued health.

"When's your next client?" Johann asked, blissfully unaware of the danger he'd just put himself in.

"Tomorrow. An eighty-year-old woman."

"Eighty, you say?"

The letter had come in on basic writing paper, though the language was formal and polite: *I would like some old facial scars removed,* wrote Yaora, age eighty.

"You don't say," Johann said, passing his eyes over the page. "I suppose a woman's desire to be beautiful doesn't diminish with age."

"No, it really doesn't seem to," Sophie agreed.

As Johann left the room, a warm summer breeze swept in, carrying a distinctive, heady scent. *Is it that time of year already?* she wondered, a faint smile touching her lips.

The people of this region observed a tradition reminiscent of Japan's Obon Festival, a time for inviting the spirits of the departed

to return home to their families. To welcome and guide those ancestral spirits, households would arrange stones into the shape of a hearth near their gate. Within the hearth, they burned a specific type of wood known for its distinctive fragrance, believed to light the way for the spirits.

To ensure the flames neither extinguished prematurely nor spread uncontrollably, a chosen family member maintains a constant vigil by the hearth. This role carried deep significance; parents often told their children that being entrusted with the task was a mark of maturity. As a result, it was a common and heartwarming sight to see young children standing proudly by their gates, buckets of water and wooden sticks at the ready, radiating a sense of responsibility. Under their watchful care, not a speck of errant ash escaped into the wind.

However, this, unfortunately, was never a responsibility that came Sophie's way. The Olzons, as they were now, had no deceased ancestors to honor—or at least none Sophie had ever heard of. Johann had no known relatives, and Sherlotte had eloped to marry him. So, while she had grandparents on her mother's side, Sherlotte always steered clear of the subject, and Sophie had always respected that. But now…perhaps it was time to have that conversation. There wasn't any specific reason for the change. Perhaps Sophie simply felt more comfortable—enough to let her attention wander beyond herself and her affliction.

A welcome change, she mused, closing her eyes as she stretched her limbs in a slow, satisfying arc. When she opened them again, something occupied the chair across from her.

Or was it some*one?* At first glance, Sophie thought it might've been a dog—something about the posture. But dogs weren't usually this large nor polite enough to sit so still in a chair. No, this was a person—an elderly woman. What had made Sophie hesitate was her posture: her legs tucked neatly beneath her as if perched on top as an animal might.

"Ms. Sophie. How do you do you?" the woman said. Her voice was slow and soothing, and it almost had a bit of a vibrato quality.

She dipped her head slightly in greeting. "I'm Yaora—I wrote to you. I just wanted to say thank you so much for agreeing to see me."

"Oh." Sophie sat up straight, panic ripping through her. But Yaora was tomorrow's appointment, no? Had she mistaken the time? No, that couldn't be. She'd checked and rechecked and rechecked.

Her gaze fell on Yaora—her slightly trembling hand, the faintly glazed look in her eyes that seemed to drift past you, unfocused. And in that moment, it all clicked. Yaora, like so many elderly people Sophie had seen in her past life, had begun to lose some of her mental sharpness.

But only a little, Sophie could tell—not to the extent that required constant supervision. The evidence was there: her neatly combed hair, her impeccably tidy dress—a lovely light blue number adorned with white embroidered flowers. It was the kind of occasional forgetfulness that came with age, the innocent confusion of mistaking one day for another. Natural signs of growing older. Nothing to fault or pity her for. In fact, she was sharp enough to have made it here, guided solely by the address printed on the flyer, all by herself.

But…wait. How *had* she made it here all by herself? Who had let her into the estate? More pressing still, Sophie realized, was the need to offer her tea and refreshments. Yet could she leave this frail woman alone to search for Martha and Claire, who could be anywhere in the house? And if she couldn't even justify stepping away for a minute, how could she possibly send this fragile old woman back out—someone who had likely risked life and limb just to make it here—telling her to return tomorrow at her appointed time? That would be unthinkably heartless.

It was a good thing she had no conflicts in scheduling.

"Ms. Yaora, it's a pleasure to meet you," Sophie said warmly. "I'm Sophie Olzon. I apologize for the wait, but please…have these." She offered the snacks she'd intended to eat herself, along with her own tea poured into a new cup. "Now, if you don't mind, would you tell me the story behind them?"

Like the work of a sharp talon, three distinct scars carved a diagonal path down Yaora's face, from the top of her forehead down

to the tip of her chin.



SUMMER that year had been unbearably hot.

The weeds, left to their own devices, stretched endlessly toward the sky while the untended fields grew wild and unruly. The village was empty of men—every last one gone.

"They'd all been conscripted by the army. I was thirteen that year," Yaora said, her voice steady.

Thirteen, Sophie did the math. *Eighty minus thirteen makes sixty-seven.* She turned the pages of her mental history book to the chapter marked sixty-seven years ago. At the top, in bold, glaring letters, was a single word: *war*.

A total war swept up even the most remote farmers, leaving no able-bodied man behind. The brutal conflict, now fading from public memory, had introduced horrific new methods of violence—scars etched into the annals of war history, impossible to forget.

"The Third Palmian War?" Sophie ventured.

"Yes," Yaora nodded slowly. "I believe that was the name. But as I was saying, that summer, as I remember it, was unbearably hot."

Only the elderly, women, and children remained in the village. They were subsistence farmers; if they couldn't work the land—and many families couldn't—they couldn't eat. Children scoured the ground for tubers, riddling the dirt with little holes and craters.

Yaora's father and brother had been conscripted, leaving her and her still-able mother behind. Together, they tended their field—one of the largest in the village. Whether it was skill, luck, or the diligent care their father had always poured into tending the fields and laying the groundwork, their harvest had been bountiful that year. Their land was heavy with produce and vegetables, and while some went missing now and then, her mother never made it a point to catch the thieves responsible.

One day, when the bright-red tomatoes Yaora had been eagerly waiting to ripen vanished from their vines, she cried bitterly at the

unfairness of it all. Her mother pulled her close, holding her gently, saying, *"Sweetheart, remember this: when we see someone in need, we do what we can to help. If we have enough, it's good to share with those who don't. We don't boast or flaunt how much we have. All we truly need is what keeps us alive and well."*

The words were kind but did nothing to ease Yaora's anger over the stolen tomatoes.

"I vowed to catch those responsible," she said. "I began staking out our fields."

She perched a bamboo colander over her head and hid in a patch of dense growth, waiting and waiting…

Suddenly, bright red boots stepped into her view. *Aha!* She rustled out of her hiding spot, raised her dirt-smeared face, and prepared to confront the thief—only to freeze.

What she saw wasn't a thief. "It was an angel," Yaora said, her voice tinged with wonder.

Golden hair cascaded in waves, its edges kissed by the crimson glow of the setting sun. Skin like porcelain, blue eyes glittering like jewels—the heavens had sent an angel to stand before Yaora.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Yaora, covered in dirt, a colander askew on her head, crouched on all fours. The angel-like girl stood above her, gazing down with disdain as if looking at a stray dog.

"She was an evacuee from the city," Yaora explained. "A distant relative on my mother's side. I could hardly believe she was my age—we couldn't have been more different."

She was mature, sophisticated, and the picture of a proper lady. "Even her name was beautiful: *Angelina Bergameli,*" Yaora said, her voice soft with nostalgia. "It was like her entire being was wrapped in light." Her eyes drifted, gazing off into the distance, lost in the memory.

After her mother left to work the fields, Yaora led Angelina to her home, where she clutched her large bag nervously as though reluctant to even let it touch the floor. *"Is this a house for people or a barn for livestock?"* she'd said, unhappy lines furrowing her

beautiful brow. *"And what is that you're wearing? Do people here make a habit of dressing in dust cloths?"*

Her words had been nothing but sneering and scornful, but Yaora heard none of it, entranced as she was by the gleaming pink lips that articulated to shape such cruelty.

I've never seen anyone so beautiful I've never heard a voice so pretty.

Angelina caught the dumbstruck expression on Yaora's face and sighed, exasperated. *"Even their minds are primitive. What a pitiful people."* She shook her head, sending golden strands of hair swaying back and forth. Yaora was hypnotized.

"Angie said all those mean things," Yaora said. "But really, they were just a defense mechanism."

The ramshackle house had only two bedrooms, forcing the two girls to share. That night, in the quiet darkness, Yaora could hear the soft sound of Angelina sobbing into her pillow. It felt intrusive, like witnessing something she wasn't meant to see, so Yaora plugged her ears and pretended not to notice. There was no way she could ask why she was sad.

Angelina balked at the suggestion of working in the fields, and no one pressed her. So, during the day, she sat in the shade, a parasol elegantly poised over her head, a book perched in her hand —yet another expression of her effortless beauty.

Suddenly, she screamed. Yaora came running, only for Angelina to leap into her arms despite the dirt all over Yaora's body. Her hand trembled as she slowly pointed toward the source of her terror. *"A snake!"*

Yaora followed her gaze and spotted a gray, venom-less snake —a common sight in these parts. *"That's a snake, all right."*

"All right?! Nothing about a snake is all right! Get rid of it!"

"All right, if you want."

Yaora raised her leg, aimed, and delivered a powerful kick. The snake went soaring, its slender body twisting and writhing as it arced higher and higher into the blue summer sky—until it vanished from sight.

"That was the first time Angie's haughty composure ever broke," Yaora recounted with a smile. "Her jaw fell open like 'aah' as she watched the snake sail into the distance. I found it so amusing I couldn't help but laugh."

Angelina's cheeks flushed red with embarrassment, but soon enough, a chuckle escaped her lips. *"It just went so far."*

Her laughter set off another round of giggles from Yaora, which triggered more from Angelina, and before long, the two doubled over, laughing until tears streamed down their faces.

"H-How did you even do that? You just kicked it, and it went 'whoosh' into the sky. Snakes can't fly—they're not supposed to fly!"

That afternoon, under the bright sun, with a smudge of mud on her face and that carefree smile, Yaora thought Angelina looked more beautiful than ever.

With that, the thick wall of ice around Angelina's heart had been thoroughly shattered. Yaora had always liked her, so now, with the final barrier gone, nothing stood in the way of their friendship.

They spread out a simple picnic on a large boulder in the nearby forest. Angelina wore a wide-brimmed hat, munching on a delicious sandwich Yaora's mother had prepared. Somewhere, a war raged on. But here, in this quiet town, under the vast blue sky, it certainly felt as if the whole world was at peace.



"I really, really like this," Angelina exclaimed, taking another big bite of her sandwich.

"Really?" Yaora said. *"A sandwich isn't too simple for you, milady?"*

"I'm not a lady," Angelina replied firmly. *"Not a real one, anyway. I'm illegitimate."* The wind caught strands of her golden hair, tossing them gently. *"I live with my mother. My father brings us expensive gifts now and then, but he doesn't live with us."*

Yaora frowned, trying to make sense of it. Could someone who didn't live with his family really be called a father?

"Lately, my father has started paying more attention to me, and my mother couldn't stand it. That's why she sent me here, really, to keep me away from him. She said I needed to stay far, far away from men before I entice them with my youth." Her profile as she spoke, Yaora thought, looked far too mature for her age.

Unsure of how to respond, she let the silence linger between them. Then, without warning, Angelina stood up and began to sing:

"Let us embrace the summer camellia,
And weave them into swaying hair.
The color of the camellia blossoms,
The fragrance of the camellia blossoms,
Let us sing to a summer that will never come again.
The color of the camellia blossoms, gone in a single night,
The fragrance of the camellia blossoms, vanished overnight.
I hold them to my heart, weave them into my hair, and sing.
Let us sing to a summer that will never come again."

"It was the most beautiful song I'd ever heard," Yaora continued with a smile. "So clear, so radiant—like a voice from the heavens."

Her smile deepened, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears as if the melody lingered in her ear even now. Sophie watched her, curious. Was Yaora truly here in this room, or had she been brought back to that forest—to that cool, mossy boulder, basking in the summer air?

"It's a very beautiful, touching song," Sophie said softly.

"What?" Yaora blinked, Sophie's interjection seemingly snapping her out of a spell. Yet not all of her seemed to come back to reality—her eyes gradually lost their focus, and she worked her jaw like she was chewing, but she wasn't.

"Um." Her gaze dropped to her teacup. "Where was I again?"

"You were telling me about the picnic," Sophie said carefully, mindful not to sound patronizing. "When Ms. Angelina sang that lovely song about the summer camellias."

"Ah, yes, that's right." Yaora's face brightened all at once, then she closed her eyes, humming the melody once more.

When her eyes opened again, her voice carried the sharpness and energy of that thirteen-year-old girl—just as it had before the interruption.

"Angie told me she wanted to become an actor on the stage. I told her it would be easy for her. 'Do you even know what a stage actor is?' she asked, teasing me. Of course, I didn't. But I didn't need to. I was certain that whatever Angie wanted to be, she could achieve without question. After all, she was so beautiful. I thought, surely the gods wouldn't go to such lengths to create someone so perfect, so special, only to deny her anything she ever desired."

And it was during that summer of deepening friendships, when the unbearable heat reached its most unbearableness, that the incident that scarred Yaora's face occurred.

"That day, it was my turn to clean the black temple—a small shrine in our village. Angie and I climbed the endless steps to polish the gleaming black stone."

Perched atop a tall hill overlooking the town, the black temple was dedicated to a local deity and carved from a single, colossal slab of jet-black stone. According to legend, or at least the village chief, the stone was so unyielding that when a drunken lumberjack once struck it with his axe, the blade shattered into a thousand pieces. The chief had always been so proud of that tale, and even now, Yaora could picture the pompous gleam in his eye as he declared the rock a heavenly gift, one fallen straight from the sky. When a cheeky boy had dared to ask, "*If it's so hard, how did they carve it?"* he'd

been promptly met with a sharp rap on the head for his insolence. But Yaora had secretly admired the boy's question. It was, after all, a fair one.

No one could say how long the temple had truly been there, but its walls remained dark and unblemished throughout the ages, the black structure rising imposingly amongst the nature around it. The entrance was a pair of double doors that split in the middle. And for a temple encasing a shrine, it was quite small, only big enough to fit three or four adults. Upkeep of the temple was a duty shared by the village families on a rotating basis. But with so few able-bodied residents left in the village, Yaora's mother often stepped in to volunteer.

The endless stairs that led to it were called *endless* for good reason. By the time Yaora and Angelina reached the top of the hill, they were drenched in sweat. But one glance back the way they had come—where the entire town and miles beyond seemed to stretch out like a painting—prompted a joyful shout from Angelina, and that was enough to sweep away all of Yaora's exhaustion.

They got straight to work. When she'd been polishing for a while, Yaora sat down on the top step to take a breather, her gaze drifting to the view beyond the hill. That's when she saw it.

At first, she thought it was…a cloud? Like a storm cloud, a black mass on the horizon. But as she squinted, she realized that couldn't be possible. The dark, roiling clouds churned unnaturally, their edges alive as if writhing with intent. The mass wasn't creeping—it was surging forward, devouring the horizon in its path like a tidal wave of shadow, sweeping towards the hill with impossible speed.

What was it? She had no idea. But she knew this wasn't natural. This wasn't right. The goosebumps all over her arms told her so. Immediately, she screamed out, *"Angie!"* Where was she? Where was that girl? Her eyes frantically darted until she spotted her friend at the well, struggling with a heavy washtub. Yaora bolted towards her, grabbing her forearm forcefully.

"What?" Angie asked, confused.

"No time to explain. Run. Just run! Get inside the temple!"

Angie hesitated, her eyes wide, searching Yaora's face for answers. But the sheer force of Yaora's panic, the raw fear in her voice, drove her forward. She dropped the washtub with a loud clatter, and together, they ran—feet pounding on the dirt, the looming shadow growing closer with every heartbeat.

Then there was a cry. Yaora felt the absence before she turned, the emptiness in her hand where there once had been something. Whipping around, she saw her friend sprawled on the dirt, her hand reaching toward her in silent desperation. Behind her, the black cloud had reached the top of the hill now, and the remaining gap between them was shrinking with terrifying speed.

Yaora was just a stone's throw away from the temple doors. She could make it if she just ran. The temple doors. Angelina. She could feel the surge, like fire coursing through her veins, driving her as she tore herself away from safety and raced back toward the storm. Grabbing Angelina under her arms, she hauled her up and dashed toward the temple. She shoved Angelina inside and dove in after her, desperately trying to close the heavy doors just as the cloud slammed into them.

Pain in her face. Then she lost consciousness.

"I came to in the darkness of the temple, my head on Angie's lap. She was crying, desperately trying to stop the bleeding," Yaora recounted.

Angelina steadied her, slung one of Yaora's arms over her shoulder as they shoved the heavy doors apart, and stepped into… nothingness.

"There was nothing left," Yaora said bleakly. "No trees, no fields, no rivers, no houses, no people… Nothing."

Yaora's brow furrowed, her hand trembling as she reached this part of her story. Sophie didn't need her to continue—she already understood. She'd suspected it from the start.

Weapons of mass destruction had been used in the Third Palmian War. That brutal conflict, which had begun as a quarrel over mineral rights between neighboring nations, had spanned centuries, starting and ending, starting and ending, in a seemingly endless cycle of violence.

What had once been fought with sticks and stones, swords and shields, eventually evolved into magical warfare. Impatient to bring an end to the conflict, the western kingdom devised a horrifying innovation: spellstones weaponized for a level of destruction that would make even demons blush. These devices were created by channeling the raw power of mages into spellstones and encasing them in layers of intricate magical barriers. The result was a swirling maelstrom of concentrated mana trapped within, primed for catastrophic release.

Four such weapons were crafted, each infused with a different elemental force: fire, wind, water, and earth. But the true heinousness of these terrible weapons lay in the fact that they were not used on the battlefields but unleashed upon the civilian population.

Fire came first. It consumed countless towns and villages, vaporizing an untold number of lives in the blink of an eye. The western kingdom followed this devastation with an ultimatum: surrender unconditionally or face the same fate three more times. The eastern king did not respond at first. The hatred he had inherited for the western people kept his lips firmly sealed. As a result, Wind was unleashed on his people.

Like Fire, Wind unleashed devastation of unimaginable scale. Witnessing this second wave of annihilation, the eastern king could no longer resist. Weeping tears of sorrow and anguish, he finally declared his unconditional surrender and abdicated the throne.

The peace that followed had been short-lived. For a time, the two kingdoms merged, but the injustices and abuses the western rulers inflicted upon the occupied eastern lands made rebellion inevitable. The unified kingdom fractured into four, and so it remains today—a land locked in endless conflict.

What Yaora had witnessed must have been Wind. When unleashed, the barely contained vortex of magic became the most destructive windstorm in recorded history, tearing through trees, buildings, and people alike, leaving nothing but emptiness in its wake. The devastation must have been unimaginable; even the faint traces of its power that seeped through the gaps of the temple door

had been enough to shred Yaora's face so brutally. Though treaties now banned the use of such weapons for their inhumanity and cruelty, the fear lingered. Who would be the first to break that fragile promise?

Magic and spellstones—creations meant to uplift and better lives—had, with a mere shift in purpose, stolen countless of them instead. What terrifying tools they were.

"We didn't know where our village was anymore. We didn't know where home was anymore," Yaora recounted. "Angie and I just kept walking and walking. Bit by bit, others began to join us—survivors of the attack. Yet not a single one of them was uninjured." The weight of the memory must've pressed on her still as she closed her eyes, and tears began to slip down her cheeks.

For a while, they sat in silence, Sophie gently stroking Yaora's back, offering quiet comfort.

Suddenly, Yaora's eyes flew open. "Where…was I?"

"You were just at the part where you and Ms. Angelina found help," Sophie said gently. She offered a small white lie to nudge the story forward, sparing the old woman the pain of reliving the most difficult parts of their journey.

Yaora nodded with a quiet "Ahh," unsuspecting, and picked up the thread of the story, skipping ahead to another summer day. "We were taken in by an orphanage at one of their aid shelters. Since Angie was uninjured and I was…one of the luckier ones, all things considered, we helped out by doing laundry or cooking. There, Angie wrote a letter to her family to let them know she was safe. We stayed there for days, maybe weeks, until one day, a carriage came to fetch Angie. I still remember her leaning out the window as it pulled away, waving to me like this." She mimed the motion, her hand trembling slightly, the memory vivid despite the years.

"We're going to meet again."

"I promise we'll meet again."

Through tears, they made that vow before parting ways.

"But we never did," Yaora said quietly, placing a trembling hand over her heart before shaking her head. "I sought her out once," she admitted, her voice steadying as she continued the story.

Her house was gone, her village destroyed, and her father, brother, and mother all lost to the war. Left with nothing, Yaora had no choice but to seek a way to get by. Eventually, her path led her to the large town where Angelina once lived—a place she had told her about some time ago.

Yaora made her way to the grand estate. The man who recognized the girl with the scars on her face was Angelina's father. He led her around to the back, granted her entry through the service entrance, sat her down in a nondescript room, and pressed a pouch of coins into her hands.

"I heard what you did for my daughter," he said. *"I am eternally grateful. But I must ask that you never return to this house again."*

Yaora stared at him, stunned, unable to find her voice.

"Angie just lost her mother," he continued. *"We've only just brought her home, and she's not ready to see you—not after all she's been through. You, with your face like that… I'm afraid it would only deepen her burden. You may think me cruel, and perhaps I am, but we can't take you in. I hope you can understand."*

Barely a moment later, she found herself standing outside the estate again, though now with a pouch of coin clutched in her hands.

"I didn't want him to take me in," Yaora said to Sophie. "I just wanted to see Angie, even for a moment." Her fingers brushed lightly against her scarred face. "Just for a moment…"

After that encounter, Yaora never returned to the estate. Instead, she used the funds Angelina's father had given her to start a small vegetable-selling business. Rising before dawn each day, she traveled long distances to farming villages outside the town, purchasing produce to sell at the market.

She sold "damaged" produce—vegetables and fruits the finer establishments wouldn't accept due to their appearance. Offering them at a discount, she quickly gained popularity among the townsfolk and local eateries, who valued her affordability and resourcefulness.

"I figured a damaged girl hawking damaged produce would be a sort of selling point," Yaora added with a faint smile.

Word quickly spread about the girl selling produce that, while blemished, was just as flavorful as the perfect-looking kind—but at a fraction of the price. So quickly, in fact, Yaora had wondered why no one had thought to do it before. Perhaps, though, something unique about her made it possible: her sturdy legs carrying her to and from the distant farming villages, her sharp eye for quality produce—all gifts from her hometown.

A hometown that no longer existed.

Perhaps this was her way of honoring its memory: keeping its lessons alive, carrying its spirit with her each morning as she hauled vegetables to market.

"My husband was also a survivor of a destroyed village. We married out of necessity, really—it was easier for two to survive than one. When our first child was born, war broke out again, and we fled the country. That was more than sixty years ago."

They left with only a small pouch of coins and the clothes on their backs, crossing into another land where they resumed selling produce. Yaora was relieved to find that her sharp eye for quality hadn't failed her—good produce was good produce, no matter which side of the border it came from.

Starting from nothing again, they rebuilt their lives, gradually earning the trust of new customers until they could make a steady living. Eventually, they saved enough to purchase a little storefront. That shop became the heart of their family business, and even now, decades later, her grandchildren ran it with the same care and dedication.

Her husband passed away twenty years ago. Since then, Yaora had lived a quiet retirement. Too quiet, perhaps. But her discerning eye for freshness never faded, and even now, she was occasionally called upon to make the final judgment on the quality of vegetables—a skill as sharp as ever.

As Yaora's story came to an end, her lips pressed together in a quiet finality. It'd been a tale of unimaginable despair, yet also of even greater tenacity that had risen from that despair, and Sophie was moved to tears.

She struggled not to think that this shriveled old woman in front of her, this survivor of lifetimes' worth of hardship, wasn't a patron saint or a god of some kind. An entity protected by that mysterious temple, who had endured war, solitude, and trial after trial, living on for decades just to share this untold history with her, a living memory not told in history books.

"Now, Ms. Yaora," Sophie said slowly and deliberately, enunciating each word to honor the woman before her. "Would I be correct in assuming you came here to have those scars removed?"

Yaora seemed lost in thought for a moment before her focus returned. Slowly, she nodded, then her face lit up with a radiant smile, the happy creases overlapping with the other ones on her face. "Actually, I'll be reuniting with Angie soon."

Sophie gasped in wonderment. How lovely was that? But as quickly as the light had come, a shadow passed over Yaora's expression, dimming her smile.

"Angie's father, despite the harshness of his words, I think was right, after all," Yaora said softly. "If our places had been reversed, if Angie had been the one with these scars… I think I would feel the weight of guilt every time I looked at her. That's why, when I finally see her again, I don't want her to see this scar anymore."

Her fingers traced the claw-like blemish across her face.

"My grandson found your flyer in a bar. I hadn't needed to dress up in years, so his wife bought me this dress just for the occasion. My great-grandson read the flyer out loud to me over and over again. And now, my whole family is here. All of them. They're so excited for me."

Emotion swelled in Sophie's chest. The girl who had once been wounded by war, driven from her homeland, and left to fend for herself was now surrounded by a loving family, living a life of joy and purpose. The thought filled her with quiet, profound happiness.

"Then, if you'll pardon my reach." Sophie held out her hands. *"Pain, pain, go away."*

May the girl who, in protecting her dearest friend, overcame her paralyzing fear and chose to face the storm…

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

May the girl whose pain never turned into hate, who shouldered her burdens with grace and kept walking forward, her feet firmly on the earth…

May she finally be reunited with her dearest friend, their meeting filled with nothing but smiles.

Sophie felt a pull, like something of herself was being sucked away. It was the familiar sensation of mana being expended, but this time, she felt it more keenly than before. Was it because of the age of Yaora's wounds? Or perhaps their magical origin? She wondered if she might not even be strong enough to heal them, but soon enough, the sensation faded.

Her shoulders heaved from the effort, her breath unsteady. Across from her, Yaora gently raised a trembling hand to her face—where the scars had once been—and found nothing but wrinkles.

"Thank you." She clasped Sophie's hands, holding them as though in prayer. "Thank you so very much." A single tear traced down her cheek.

Still catching her breath, Sophie managed a strained smile. She glanced out the window, where the sun was already dipping below the horizon, bidding its final farewell to the day. Yaora had been speaking for hours. Thinking she'd ask for her address and summon a carriage for her, Sophie excused herself and stepped into the hallway, peering down its length in search of Martha or Claire. But the corridor was empty.

She hesitated, still reluctant to leave the old woman alone, but realizing she had no other choice, turned back to explain her absence to Yaora.

"Huh?"

The chair was empty. No frail old lady.

Afraid she'd fallen, Sophie looked under the table. But the space was empty.

Then, faintly at first, came the sound of singing drifting through the hallway:

Let us embrace the summer camellia,

And weave them into swaying hair.

The voice was soft yet strong, carrying a melody that seemed to belong to another time.

The color of the camellia blossoms,

The fragrance of the camellia blossoms,

The song retreated down the corridor, quick and light—like a child skipping down the hallway.

Let us sing to a summer that will never come again.

The color of the camellia blossoms, gone in a single night,

The fragrance of the camellia blossoms, vanished overnight.

I hold them to my heart, weave them into my hair, and sing.

Let us sing to a summer that will never come again.

Sophie bolted after the voice, her steps echoing through the empty halls. She ran as fast as she could, chasing the fading melody, but it always seemed just out of reach. She ran and ran until, eventually, she made it all the way to the front door of the estate.

Silence.

The singing was gone. A nervous sweat broke out across Sophie's back. Could she really have lost a game of chase to an eighty-year-old grandmother? Yaora was hardy, yes—but so small, so frail, her back hunched with age. How could she have moved so fast?

"Milady? What are you doing here?"

Sophie turned to see Raymond approaching, a bowl in his hands.

"Raymond! Did you see a woman come down the hallway just now? She was singing—you must have heard it!"

"Ahhh." Raymond nodded. "La-la-laaa. That song, right?" he said, humming a few off-pitch notes.

Sophie exhaled a breath of relief. His rendition, imperfect as it was, was unmistakably the camellia song. It seemed Yaora had been far more capable than Sophie had given her credit for.

"But 'woman' is a bit harsh, don't you think?" Raymond continued with a chuckle. "She's what? Twelve, thirteen? A tan little thing, sure, but hardly old. I was just on my way to find you, wondering why you didn't ask me to bake some treats for your young client when—"

He cut himself off abruptly, dropping the bowl to steady Sophie as her legs gave out beneath her.

The last thing Sophie registered was Raymond's voice as it bellowed: "Martha?! Claire?! I need help!" and another gust of that distinctive, heady, summer scent.



THE next day, three people showed up at the estate.

There was a balding man in his sixties, another younger but also balding man in his forties, and a woman who appeared to be the forty-year-old baldie's wife.

Though Yaora had missed her appointment by a day, Sophie had kept the salon ready for guests, just in case. She had been reading a dense book on war history when Claire brought the trio into the room.

"Oh, hello. You must be…" Sophie began, rising to greet them.

"Hello," the eldest man said. "I'm here on behalf of my mother —Yaora. She was supposed to visit yesterday. I'm her son."

"I'm her grandson," the forty-year-old man said.

"I'm her granddaughter-in-law," the woman said.

Dip, dip, dip—they each bowed their heads in turn. Their eyes drifted to the carefully set table, the undrunk tea, the uneaten refreshments, and an apologetic look passed between them.

"I apologize, Ms. Sophie," the son began. "I wanted to notify you, but it all happened so quickly. My mother, she—"

"Oh, not at all," Sophie interjected, her tone light and reassuring. "Yes, she came by herself yesterday. I was quite surprised, honestly, but she must have just gotten the day wrong. No harm done. I've treated her, so please, don't be too harsh on your dear mother."

The man's eyes widened in shock. He glanced at the others, and an uneasy silence fell over the group. Finally, he exhaled a deep, heavy sigh as though his worst fear had been confirmed. "No, my mother. She died this morning."

"She…*died*?" Sophie echoed in disbelief.

"This morning, when she didn't wake up, we went to check on her," the man said. "She'd passed away in her bed, a smile on her face. You said she came here alone? That's impossible. My mother couldn't even cross the living room without help."

He went on to explain that the family had planned to bring her to Sophie's salon themselves. His mother had rarely asked for anything, so when she expressed a strong desire to make the trip, the entire family worked together to make it happen. They'd rejiggered one of their vegetable carts, attaching sturdy handles and reinforcing it so family members could carry her safely. They planned to flank her on all sides—son and grandson in front and behind, granddaughter-in-law and great-grandchild on either side—to ensure she wouldn't fall.

His mother always woke at the crack of dawn, so when she hadn't, they'd figured she'd been sleeping off a late night brought on by excitement. But when the granddaughter-in-law went to wake her and gently tease her about sleeping in for once, she'd found her cold under her covers.

"Yesterday, at lunch, Grandmother said she wanted to go to sleep early so she wouldn't need dinner," the forty-year-old grandson said. "We still had the shop to run, so that was the last time any of us saw her."

She'd still had her scars by then—scars that, by the next morning, had vanished, leaving her looking so peaceful in her bed.

"The morning was complete chaos," the grandson continued. "We called for a doctor. Right now, our son—that is, grandmother's great-grandchild—is still by her side. We were all there when, suddenly, we remembered she had this appointment. So, the three of us rushed over…dragging along an empty cart."

As he spoke, the son's face shifted with realization. It was as if he'd just understood they had brought the cart without the person it was meant for. The situation that morning must have truly been chaotic, just as the grandson had described, if they had carried the cart all the way here, still clinging to the plans they'd made for her journey.

Next, the granddaughter-in-law leaned in to look at Sophie expectantly. “You… You said she came here. What was she like?”

Sophie hesitated, her voice soft. “She wore a light blue dress with embroidered white flowers. She said her grandson’s wife bought it for her, just for the occasion.”

The woman’s hand flew to her mouth, stifling a choked sob as tears welled in her eyes. “Yes… I did buy that for her. She always loved white flowers.”

“Summer camellias, right?” Sophie said softly.

“Could it really be?” the son muttered, slapping a hand to the shiny dome of his head in disbelief.

“W-Wait, Ms. Sophie,” the grandson interjected. “When grandmother came to you, did she, um…”

“She told me all about Ms. Angelina,” Sophie said.

“Huah?!” the man cried out in alarm. His hand shot to the same spot on his head as his father’s, though the sound was less sharp—he still had a bit of hair left.

“She said she would be reuniting with Ms. Angelina soon, so before that, she wanted her scars healed.”

As the final words left her lips, they quivered, and she pressed them tightly shut.

How happy Yaora had been. How excited. The prospect of a reunion years—no, decades in the making—had filled her with such joy that it seemed her very spirit had leapt out of her body to ensure her wish was fulfilled, just in case she couldn’t make it herself. And perhaps that spirit had made the right decision because the truth was…

“She didn’t make it.” A tear traced down Sophie’s cheek.

Her lips trembled harder as she brought a handkerchief to her eyes, dabbing at the corners to catch the tears. Before she could say more, the room erupted with motion, the three visitors all clamoring to console her.

The grandson waved his hands frantically. “No! You’ve got it all wrong, Ms. Sophie! Ms. Angelina passed over sixty years ago!”

“What?” Sophie looked up incredulously.

"Grandmother didn't not make it!" the grandson exclaimed, his voice breaking into a sob. "She made it—she made it, all right! She made it in time to be reunited with her dear friend in heaven, no scars on her face. And it's all thanks to you, Ms. Sophie!"

At that moment, a gentle gust blew through the open window, carrying the warm, heady aroma of burning wood.



THE three visitors politely said their farewells and left the salon, leaving Sophie alone in the wake of a realization that sent her world spinning. She sat in silence, staring at the desk in front of her, where the thick book on war history lay. Her fingers brushed the cover absently, her thoughts far away.

Angelina had died young, at the age of twenty, succumbing to a sickness of the lungs. After her passing, a letter was sent to the aid shelter that had once taken in Angelina and Yaora, addressed to Yaora.

Before leaving the country to escape the outbreak of war, Yaora felt compelled to return to that very shelter to offer her final thanks. It was then, in a moment of fate, that she was handed the letter—Angelina's final words to her.

She couldn't become a stage actor. A business partner of her father's fell in love with her at first sight and married her. They had no children, and now, she was rather ill.

She wrote of longing for those summer days—the days spent picking vegetables together and eating under the open sky. She wrote of wanting to see her again. To watch her send a snake flying into the air with a single kick, just as she had back then. She longed to meet her once more. If not in this life, then in the next, where she would pray for her happiness, no matter where she was.

In a hastily appended postscript, written in the margins in a different hand, a maid from Angelina's household had added a final note. The maid explained that Angelina had passed away. She described how, on sunny days, the young miss would open her window wide, basking in the warmth without a care for the tan it

gave her skin, singing the song about the camellias. She wrote that if Angelina had known about her visit that day, she would have dropped anything, no matter what had occupied her, just to see her one last time.

Even in her final days, as the disease ravaged her lungs and each breath came out as a raspy whistle, the young miss continued to sing the song of the camellias, her face distant and filled with longing.

"The color of the camellia blossoms, gone in a single night. The fragrance of the camellia blossoms, vanished overnight…" Sophie sang quietly.

In her mind's eye, she pictured that idyllic scene. The quaint, peaceful village. The golden-haired, pale-skinned girl with her tanned, energetic companion, hand-in-hand, frolicking under the sun as they sang that summer song.

The summer cruelly laid to waste by man's horrific creation.

A single tear slipped down Sophie's cheek, landing on the cover of the history book before her, leaving a dark, indelible stain.

Amaryllis, the Daughter of the Sea

THIS client came in with her mother.

"This is my daughter, Amaryllis. She's sixteen. She's a daughter of the sea," the mother said. Between sentences, she prodded the girl gently, urging her to speak. But Amaryllis remained silent, her gaze fixed on Sophie, though it was unfocused, as if she were looking straight through her.

Amaryllis's appearance was unsettling. Dark circles hung beneath her eyes as if she hadn't slept in days, and strange, dark seams crisscrossed her face, giving her the eerie look of someone stitched together like a patchwork doll.

As Amaryllis sat motionless, her mother began removing pieces of her clothing to reveal more. Bit by bit, Sophie saw that the seams weren't limited to her face. They ran across her body—along her shoulders, where her arms joined her torso, over her stomach, across her back—a web of stitching that seemed to hold her form together.

"What happened?" Sophie asked.

"There was a gunpowder explosion at sea," the mother explained.

Amaryllis was a daughter of the sea—a diving fisherwoman of sorts who braved the shallows daily in search of shellfish, crabs, prawns, and other treasures that thrived near the shore.

One day, as she dove through the water, a large, crown-operated ship passed through the area.

"I heard it myself," she went on. "An explosion so loud it seemed to shake the very air."

A blast of scorching air, then the sea claimed her. When Amaryllis woke, she found herself with her current appearance.

"The crown was at fault for the blast. Dozens were injured—a few even died. My daughter nearly had her limbs ripped off. They were hanging on by literal shreds. Fortunately, the infirmary had a very competent healer dispatched from the capital. He reattached her limbs, and functionally, she's perfectly fine…"

Sophie had an inkling in her mind as to the identity of this "very competent healer."

"But things haven't been the same since," the mother continued, her voice cracking. "She's losing sleep. She wakes in the middle of the night screaming. Loud noises leave her rattled for hours. She was seeing a young man before all this, but her behavior must have frightened him off. We haven't heard from him in weeks. She can't even look at herself in the mirror anymore. Every time she does, it seems to bring her back to that moment. She's stopped grooming herself completely. I count myself very blessed—so blessed—to still have her with me. But she's young, Ms. Sophie. Too young to let this be the rest of her life. She's not yet married. She still has so much ahead of her. Please, give my daughter her life back, Ms. Sophie."

The mother broke down, sobbing into her handkerchief. As she dabbed at her swollen eyes, Sophie nodded quietly, her expression solemn. "I'll try my best." She raised her hands above Amaryllis's face.

"Pain, pain, go away."

Amaryllis's eyes drifted lazily upward, focusing faintly on Sophie's hands.

She had been just a young woman doing her job when her life was violently upended through no fault of her own. The explosion had left her on the brink of death, her body shattered and her future stolen. Sophie's heart ached for her, for the immense trauma she had endured. Yet as her thoughts turned to Amaryllis, they also wandered to another figure—the eccentric young healer who had been thrust into the chaos of that day, tasked with stitching together lives torn apart.

Amaryllis had surely not been the only casualty rushed to the infirmary after the blast. What a horrific scene it must have been—

blood spurting, entrails spilling, the air ringing with cries of agony. And there he was, covered in the blood of others, desperately trying to save those lives, reattaching bone to bone, sinew to sinew, creating miracles where none should have been possible. On this day, how many lives owed their continued existence to his tireless efforts?

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

As the last syllable of her incantation faded into silence, Sophie felt the familiar sensation—like a tap opening to draw from the reservoir of her power—and a soft sound flowed into her mind. It always reminded her of opening the lid of a delicate, transparent music box.

But this time, the magic demanded more. It pulled at her, draining her with an intensity she wasn't used to. Her brow furrowed under the strain, and as the healing light faded, her knees buckled beneath her.

The mother looked at Sophie in concern when suddenly, "Kind light," Amaryllis murmured. The mother whipped around to look at her daughter and saw that the uneven patches and seams were about half gone from her face.

Sophie's breath came in heavy gasps as she stared at her trembling palms. Whatever had just transpired was more than the usual drain on her mana—she could feel it deep in her core. She couldn't quantify it, but it was unmistakable, like running a familiar distance only to find herself inexplicably more winded than usual.

Her shoulders rose and fell with each labored breath, much as they had after healing Yaora. The theory seemed to hold: undoing damage caused by magical means demanded far more of her than ordinary wounds. And yet, she wasn't overwhelmed. She had done it—well, half of it, but still.

"Sorry," she panted, glancing at the mother. "I might need a little more time with this one."

"Are you sure?" the mother said, worried.

"I'm sure." Sophie wiped the cold sweat beading off her brow and turned back to Amaryllis. *"Pain, pain, go away."*

One more time.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

Help this tanned, lively girl reclaim her energy. Help this wide-eyed, beautiful girl regain her confidence.

Just making it here, crossing the bustling port town to reach this salon, must have been a monumental effort for her. If loud noises terrified her, every shout, clang, and crash along the way would have made her flinch, catch her breath, and want to curl up and hide. It couldn't have been any easier for the mother, forced to watch her daughter struggle with every step. Yet, despite the pain and fear, the two had pressed forward, hand in hand, supporting each other, determined to make it here.

Be happy. Please, let them be happy.

The mother who had steeled her heart, dragging her daughter here despite the anguish it caused. The daughter who endured so much just to arrive.

Make their effort count. Don't let their sacrifices go in vain. They deserve happiness. They need *happiness. Don't make them remake this painful journey. Their suffering ends today!*

Sophie repeated the incantation again and again.

But each time she spoke the words, something unexpected echoed back—a voice, louder and louder with every repetition.

Live, it cried out. *Don't die. Stay with me!*

It wasn't her voice; it was another's, their plea raw and desperate.

Again and again, Sophie's light touched Amaryllis's wounds. And the more those scars faded away, the clearer that voice became until Sophie realized the identity of the one calling out so desperately.



"THANK you so very much…" The mother collapsed onto her knees, her sobs wracking her small frame as she crumbled into an inconsolable ball of tears. "Thank you so very much!"

Meanwhile, Amaryllis stared at her now flawless skin in wonder, as though in disbelief at what had just transpired.

Sophie watched them both with a soft, satisfied gaze. Her innerwear clung to her, soaked in sweat, and no matter how hard she tried, her lungs couldn't pull in enough air to steady her racing heart. But she kept these signs of strain hidden as she addressed the mother.

"Now, remember this: it's not just her body that was wounded, but her spirit as well. She's been through very much. Please, don't push her to forget what happened, don't rush her to move on, and don't pretend everything is normal just because she looks it. Your daughter may have much she wants to say to you, and when that time comes, I ask only this—don't interrupt. Listen to her. Truly listen to everything she has to say."

The mother nodded repeatedly, eyes still overflowing with tears.

Then, Sophie turned her attention to the daughter.

"Ms. Amaryllis, know that it is not your fault that your mind conjures specters to haunt you, nor is it your fault that your heart refuses to quiet. Your spirit is tired—you have faced death and come back from it. You are not weak for feeling this way, and don't let anyone make you believe otherwise. Find it within you to forgive yourself—your inability to sleep, your apparent skittishness. These are not failures; they are signs that you are still healing. If you can do that and allow your spirit the respite it needs, time will do the rest. Never push yourself too hard. And when things feel overwhelming, remember this: it's perfectly fine to stop. It's perfectly fine to rest."

Slowly, Amaryllis nodded. Her presence was more anchored in reality than when she had first entered the room. Then, a single tear traced a path down her cheek, falling softly to the floor. "Your light. It's very kind," she said softly. "It's very warm. Thank you for healing me."

"You're very welcome."

Summoning what little strength remained in her body, Sophie somehow managed to rise and, with Claire's help, saw the pair out of the room. But the moment the door clicked shut, her legs gave out, and she crumpled to the floor.

*This… This felt like when Mariko collapsed in the foyer. This felt like…*death.

Her consciousness drifted. Memories from this life, from the previous life, flashed before her as the cold raced to consume her.

"Ms. Sophie? Can you hear me?"

Who is that? What is that grating, irritating voice?

"Sorry, I have no choice but to do this."

Glug, glug, glug.

Is someone drinking? Who's drinking?

Glug, glug… "Ba-haaah!" Sophie's upper body shot up from the floor, her eyes snapping wide open. Something wet dripped down from the corner of her mouth, and her chest was soaked.

"You're awake," the grating, irritating voice said. "And might I add, that 'ba-hah' was very rousing?"

Sophie squinted up, her vision settling on a smooth and handsome face. "Mr. Ozhorn…"

For a second, she couldn't place where she was. Then her surroundings came into focus—it was her salon. She was lying on the very couch she and Annie had shared. Like a child reluctantly woken from a nap, she looked around groggily before her gaze settled back on Kurt.

"What happened—" she began, but before she could finish, a loud, muffled thud sounded right next to her ear. She turned to see one of Kurt's large hands braced against the back of the sofa, just inches from her face. She turned back to Kurt, his face much closer than before, peering intensely into hers. "I'm being sofa-don'd?!"

"Sofa-what?" Kurt shot back, unamused. "Enough jokes. You used so much mana that you induced mana exhaustion—what were you thinking?"

Sophie blinked, stunned into silence. Kurt was angry. Actually angry. Not that his tone or expression changed at all, but his aura definitely did.

Sophie frowned. Mana, like one's stamina or endurance, varied per person. And just like stamina, it could be trained to increase one's capacity. But using up every last bit of it led to mana

exhaustion—a dangerous state that caused unconsciousness, as she had just experienced.

She thought she could handle it, so she pushed herself.

She didn't want the mother and daughter to leave disappointed, so she'd ignored the warning signs.

That had been a mistake.

A costly one.

The liquid dribbling from the corner of her mouth was undoubtedly a mana recovery potion—an expensive elixir designed precisely for what its name suggested. Because Kurt had found her unconscious, she had forced him to use one of his precious supplies on her.

"A healer must never fall incapacitated themselves."

The words of Ms. Florence, her mentor, surfaced in her mind:

"Do you know what enables our warriors to charge into battle? Is it bravery? No. It's trust—the unwavering belief that, no matter what happens to them out there, someone will be there to help them when the worst comes to pass. But for that trust to hold, a healer must know their limits. They must never push beyond them. A healer must be healthy, present, and above all, remain calm, no matter the circumstance."

It had been one of her most important teachings. And Sophie had just flouted it.

"I pushed myself too hard without respecting my limits and paid the price."

Shame, regret, and embarrassment coursed through her.

"I became complacent. I became proud. I thought I could handle it—just a bit more, and I could do it. But I was foolish."

Sophie started to cry. Kurt simply stared at her. Then…

"Mana exhaustion is relieved with rest," he said. "By tomorrow, you'll be fine. But there have been cases of healers losing consciousness, hitting their heads when they fall, and dying from internal bleeding. Just something to think about."

He stood up gently. Sophie, still slightly dizzy, forced herself to sit upright on the sofa. Kurt walked to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

"I know those two," he said after a moment.

Sophie looked up, waiting for him to continue.

"I healed the girl myself. I might not be able to tell a beautiful face from an ugly one, but I recognize my own work."

"Right," Sophie said softly.

Though she really shouldn't be discussing client specifics with anyone, Kurt was a fellow healer. And if he had treated the girl himself, perhaps this was the only person in the world with whom this conversation was justified.

"They asked me to treat the injuries," she paused, carefully choosing her words. "What remained of the injuries on the surface. They were very grateful to you for saving her life."

"But they weren't satisfied. That is why they sought you out," Kurt interjected sharply. His tone was harder than usual. It had almost a pouting edge, like a child disgruntled with an outcome they found unfair. "The skin is secondary. No, tertiary. It's only natural that a body torn apart like hers couldn't be reconstructed without leaving superficial marks. It was a race against time. A second slower, and she would've been dead. I couldn't spare the effort for aesthetics."

"I know, Mr. Ozhorn," Sophie said quietly.

Silence.

Kurt stood. "I've come to return *On the Architecture of the Human Body.* It was an enlightening read." He retrieved the thick medical volume from his possession and moved to return it to its place on the shelf.

"What about *Crickpick*?" Sophie asked, watching him.

"I'm finding it rather abstruse," he admitted flatly, "so I'm not progressing as quickly as I'd like. I'll bring it back another time."

Sophie raised an eyebrow. He'd found *The Crickpick Chronicles* abstruse? *Crickpick*—the novel was barely a fraction of the thickness of the medical tome he had just returned. Even the average townsfolk could devour it on a weekday afternoon—that *Crickpick?*

Sophie couldn't suppress a giggle. She imagined Kurt, a furrow in his brow as he flicked a page back and forth, baffled by what he was reading.

"You know," she said. "When I was healing her…I heard your voice."

Kurt looked at her in confusion.

"It was a desperate, fervent voice. 'Don't die, live,' it cried out. But it was undoubtedly yours. Mr. Ozhorn, I must admit I've misjudged you. I thought you were a callous individual, bordering on indifferent. But that's not true. Not true at all. You treat your patients with fervent devotion as if their lives were your own. That much is clear to me now."

Gently, Sophie cupped her hands. The voice echoed again in her mind.

Live. Don't die. Stay with me!

It wasn't just a cry—it was a fierce resolve. The voice of someone soaked in the blood of others, fighting with every ounce of willpower to pull them back from the brink.

Kurt might've been eccentric, but he was far from uncaring.

"I greatly respect you, Mr. Ozhorn," Sophie went on. "All I can heal is the skin and nothing more. What I can achieve is nothing compared to the…miracles you are capable of weaving. If a dear family member were to lie before me, their limbs torn apart as they writhed in agony, bleeding out before my very eyes, my hand would be powerless to help."

She looked down at her palms.

"My tutor once told me, 'Overconfidence will only lead to disappointment.' And now, I can't help but think how right she was. In the time it takes me to heal a single person's skin, you have already saved the lives of several. And you don't even collapse from mana exhaustion in the process."

She could feel she was crying now.

"I am so foolish. And so, so weak."

It hadn't been her intention to break down, let her tears betray her composure, or complain about the hand she'd been dealt. But her heart, already weakened by the sting of failure, refused to hold back. Still, she resolved not to cry too hard. She bit down firmly on her lip, willing herself to stop as she watched Kurt approach her.

“Normally, healers never allow themselves to reach mana exhaustion,” he said matter-of-factly. “The body gives off warning signals when mana runs low. It’s an instinctual response, a kind of built-in safeguard to stop the outflow of mana before it’s too late.”

“Is… Is that so?” Sophie sniffled, her voice wavering.

“You must’ve felt those signals today,” Kurt continued, his tone steady and direct. “But you ignored them. You pushed through that primal safeguard. No doubt because, at that moment, you had nothing on your mind but the overwhelming urge to help those two.”

Sophie gave up trying to hold back her tears; it wasn’t working anyway.

“You aren’t foolish. Nor are you weak,” Kurt said firmly. “A person’s actions—and their bookshelf—reveal much about their character. From those, I can see that you are hungry for knowledge, delicate yet resilient, and remarkably tenacious. These are excellent qualities for a healer.” He extended a handkerchief toward her, his expression calm but sincere.

Sophie took it, unable to stifle a small chuckle. “Is that your best attempt at a compliment?” she asked, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. A mixture of tears and pus came off it.

“They were laughing, you know?”

“What?” Sophie blinked.

“As they left the estate, the mother and her daughter were smiling and laughing as they walked. They looked like completely different people from the ones who walked out of the infirmary. I owe you an apology for my harshness earlier. I think… I must’ve felt jealous of you. Because you did something I couldn’t.”

“Jealous?” she repeated, her voice filled with surprise.



Kurt met Sophie's gaze firmly, his dark eyes reflecting an image of her own. "Yes. But what you said just now clarified things for me. Both of us have been caught in a pointless competition, each wanting what the other has. I can heal the body, but I can't heal the heart. And you are the exact opposite. Ms. Sophie, you once said that what's life-threatening is subjective, that the skin is a matter of dignity. If that's true, then by healing the skin, you restore a person's dignity—you make them whole again. You already try to help others with everything you've been given. I don't think you need to tear yourself down by comparing yourself to others."

Sophie was at a loss for words. She hadn't thought Kurt could speak so long—or so eloquently. But as she realized he was trying, in his way, to console her, a smile broke through her tears. Who would've guessed that the blunt, exacting words of a man too socially awkward to function could feel like chicken soup for the soul?

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ozhorn," Sophie said with a resigned chuckle. "I don't know what came over me. Yes, you're completely right."

The happy faces of her clients, the warmth in their smiles as they left her salon, flooded her memory. Her chest filled with that familiar sense of satisfaction as echoes of their gratitude and thanks rang in her ears once more. The waterworks began again. But this time, they were tears of warmth and fulfillment.

"Really, what came over me?" she repeated. "One failure and I let it make me forget everything that mattered."

She wiped her eyes off with the handkerchief again. A mixture of tears and pus covered it.

"I'll buy you a replacement," she said. "So, can I keep this one?"

"It's yours," Kurt replied immediately. "My superior told me to keep a handkerchief on my person in case of this exact situation. So, I'm glad it's served its purpose."

"I'll use it as a practice piece for embroidery."

"I'm honored."

"As for the price of that mana recovery potion…?"

"No need. I was taught never to let a lady pay in matters of food or drink."

"And this counts as a matter of food or drink?"

"You drank it, didn't you? So yes. By the way, I was thinking of borrowing *An Examination of Northern and Southern Materia Medica* next."

"Please, by all means. Though it's been read many times, so don't be surprised if you find the occasional torn page."

"I don't mind."

Kurt's face lit up as he moved eagerly to the bookshelf. Sophie couldn't help but think that if he looked at people with the same enthusiasm he reserved for books, his life might be a lot easier.

"By the way, Ms. Sophie."

"Yes?"

"Have you found a new fiancé yet?"

"No, why do you ask? Come to offer yourself up as tribute?"

"Uh, no."

Sophie swore she felt that vein pop in her forehead.

"All right, then, Ms. Sophie," Kurt said, ignoring her irritation. "Eat up, sleep well. You're young, so you should feel much better by morning."

His tone was clinical, reminiscent of a healer addressing a patient. But his gaze lingered a moment too long. Curious, Sophie stared back just as intently.

"Try not to let it happen again," he eventually said. "I know you care deeply for your patients, so this might not be enough to dissuade you. But finding you on the floor like that was… alarming."

"No, I swear on my heart it won't happen again," Sophie said earnestly. "I'm indebted to you today. If you hadn't found me, who knows what could've happened." She hesitated before adding, "But I am curious—how did you get into the estate?"

"I rang the bell, showed a young maid my identification, and she allowed me entry. Is there a problem with that?"

A little. Visitors meant for Sophie should always be cleared by Martha or Claire before being let inside. There must have been some sort of mix-up today. This time, it had worked in her favor, but she

shouldn’t risk it happening again. She’d bring it up with Martha later—along with a gentle reminder to not be too hard on whoever had done it.

“No problem,” Sophie replied with a smile. “Um, Mr. Ozhorn?”

“Yes?” He turned to face her, his gaze as direct and unwavering as always.

“Thank you for helping me today. I’m very grateful.”

“I’m glad I could be of assistance,” he replied. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

With that, Kurt Ozhorn departed, the door clicking shut behind him.

Sophie remained rooted in place, her gaze falling on the slimy, sticky handkerchief in her hand.

Kristoffer, the Student

KRISTOFFER, *student, twelve. Scalded by near-boiling water.*

A young boy was about to step into her salon for the first time, so Sophie prepared something more substantial than simple refreshments. The spread on the table resembled a light meal, packed with the one thing a growing boy needed most: meat. Grilled meat.

There were delicately toasted ham, richly browned smoked cuts, and charred savory sausages stacked high with vibrant vegetables and creamy cheeses, all nestled in a crusty loaf of bread. This wasn't just a sandwich—it was *the* sandwich. The type of creation you'd plan a picnic around, and not the other way around. To balance the savory flavors, Sophie had also prepared a plate of sweet treats, imagining they'd make the perfect interlude between bites of the hearty meal. Sweet and savory, paired together in a way that made each irresistible. Once you got started, there'd be no stopping.

Ring, ring, ri-ring!

The door swung open, and in stepped the young man. He was taller than Sophie had expected for a twelve-year-old, but that might've been the only feature of his to overshoot expectations.

His frame was still that of a child. He was slender and lanky. Weightless, almost as if the gentlest breeze or the slightest touch might send him high up into the sky. His mousy demeanor didn't do much to counter that impression, his wide eyes darting nervously around the room, unsure of where to settle.

His hair was curly and poofy, and he had on thick-rimmed eyeglasses. There was no doubt in Sophie's mind this young man

had a nickname amongst his peers, and no doubt it was something along the lines of "professor."

Sophie greeted him and offered him a seat; she took note of the heavy-looking luggage in his possession.

"Are those books?" she asked.

"Textbooks and practice problems," Kristoffer replied stiffly. "It's entrance exam season."

"Ah." Sophie nodded, her expression softening with understanding.

The mention of exams brought back memories. Not great memories, exactly. Just the endless days and sleepless nights of relentless studying when she was his age. Savoring the bittersweet memories, she let a soft smile bloom on her lips.

The young Kristoffer was, to her surprise and delight, impeccably polite and well-mannered. He didn't so much as flinch upon seeing her and even returned her greeting with perfect composure.

Though, there was one thing: the whole time, Sophie couldn't help but think his gaze never quite settled on her. Instead, it seemed fixed somewhere behind her. When she realized he'd been staring at the table and its lavish spread, she giggled.

"Please. When our cook heard you were coming, he jumped at the chance to show off his skills. Eat to your heart's content. If not for your sake, then for his."

"Really?" Kristoffer looked at her uncertainly.

"Of course. Meat is a growing boy's best friend."

"I-If you say so! Then I won't hold back!"



He broke into a smile then. The ice had thoroughly been broken. The sight made him look even more innocent and childlike, and Sophie's heart melted fondly.

For a while, she said nothing, letting Kristoffer focus on his meal. She took the opportunity to quietly observe and learn more about him.

His clothes were well-kept, but clear signs of patches and alterations were here and there. His glasses, upon closer inspection, were much too large for his face—likely a hand-me-down. Whenever they slid down his nose, he would push them back up with a practiced motion. He was a very clean eater, letting not a single crumb fall onto the table. From these details, Sophie surmised that he didn't come from a wealthy family but rather one that was resourceful and disciplined.

Eventually, Kristoffer let out a satisfied exhale and put down his fork.

"More tea?" Sophie offered. "To refresh your palate."

"Oh, thank you," Kristoffer replied. "I'll pour it myself."

"Nonsense, you're the guest here today. Sit back, relax."

At her insistence, Kristoffer gave a shy, awkward smile, and a faint blush even crept up his cheeks. *Oh, what a sweet thing!* Sophie cooed internally. He even seemed to realize he was blushing and tilted his head downward as if to hide his face.

"Sorry," he eventually said. "I guess when I worked up the courage to come to this salon, I'd expected someone a bit more… you know…*ba-boom*?"

"Oh?" Sophie replied, her tone playful. "But I'll have you know I take great pride in my ba-boom-itiveness, thank you very much."

Kristoffer gulped down a mouthful of tea, let out a small puff of satisfaction, and shifted his gaze back to Sophie. "Um. In your flyer, I know you said I need to tell you how I got the injury."

"Yes."

"Well…the thing is, I don't remember. I got it when I was a baby."

"Oh?"

"I can tell you what someone else told me happened. Is that all right?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't promise anything. This would be a first for me."

"Yes, that's perfectly all right! I'd just like to see if it can be fixed, that's all."

Slowly, hesitantly, Kristoffer spoke as if the story were difficult to share. He explained that when he was ten, he discovered the man and woman who had raised him his entire life weren't his real parents.

His adoptive parents were skilled craftspeople—his father, a carpenter, and his mother, a weaver. They both left early each morning for work. Though they weren't wealthy, Kristoffer never remembered a time when he went hungry.

"About three years ago, Grandpa—the old man who lives next door to us—he started to…um… He, um…"

Kristoffer trailed off, stumbling over his words. His hand went to his head, a clear sign of discomfort. This part of the story seemed too delicate for him to articulate properly, so Sophie gently stepped in.

"He grew older, and his wits started to go?" she supplied.

"Yes," Kristoffer nodded. "He was really sharp before, so I wonder what happened…"

"It's a natural thing with age. It happens to everyone eventually. I'm sure it's hardest on the person themselves when it does."

"Right," Kristoffer nodded again. Though this time, he smiled—a small, relieved expression for an old neighbor dearly beloved. "One day, when I got home from school, I found him leaning against the wall, breathing heavily. I ran up to help him, and he said, 'Hans, how's your boy doing?' Hans is my father's name, so I thought he mistook me for him. I just said, 'He's doing well.'"

Sophie smiled warmly. This boy wasn't just polite—he was kind and considerate, too.

"Then he said, 'You raised a mighty fine kid, despite having no obligation to do so on account of you not being blood-related and

all.’”

Sophie held her smile. And her silence. *Oh no, Grandpa.*

“When I got home, I told my father what happened,” Kristoffer said, his voice trembling as tears welled in his eyes. “I thought it’d be funny, so I told it like a joke. I thought it was just the old man next door being the old man next door.”

“Right.”

“But my father turned beet red. He dropped the pitcher of water he was holding and made a big mess. That’s when I found out my father…can’t lie.”

Oh no, Father.

Kristoffer’s fingers curled tightly into the patchwork fabric of his too-short pants, his knuckles jutting through his pale skin. “I’d always kind of thought I didn’t look like my parents. My father’s a man’s man, and my mother’s a sturdy gal. But I’m pale and spindly, and I’ve got this curly hair to boot. It turned out I’m the child of a relative on my mother’s side. My birth mother… She died in an accident and left behind a newborn baby—me. My parents had been trying for a child for a long time but couldn’t have one, so they adopted me instead.”

The tears were in freefall now, and Kristoffer wiped at his eyes, apologizing. “Sorry. I’m a man. I shouldn’t cry. Where was I? Great, now I’m all mixed up!”

“It’s all right,” Sophie said gently. “Take your time. Start from wherever you feel comfortable. We’re in no rush.”

Kristoffer took a shaky breath and nodded. “Thank you. Ah, right. My injury. When they took me in, I was still so small, I couldn’t even…um, do the thing. You know, the thing babies do when they start to roll?”

“Yes, they begin to roll over. It’s a big milestone.”

“Yeah, that! Anyways, I couldn’t even do that when they took me in.”

“You were a little bun, hot and fresh from the oven.”

“Yeah, I was a little bun. Then I got a bit bigger and started crawling all over the house.”

“I bet you did.”

The crawling baby, no longer content with life on the floor, one day discovered how to stand. Curious little creatures, babies are—and it hadn't been his fault. He was simply following his instincts.

It was just unlucky for everyone involved that, on that particular day, a pot of hot soup was nearby. And for just one second, everyone had taken their eyes off him. The concept of "hot" was utterly foreign to baby Kristoffer. He reached for the pot, his tiny hand making contact. His weight shifted forward, and before anyone could stop it, the pot tipped over.

"Apparently, my mother screamed so loud it shook the entire house. I can't imagine her screaming. She's always so strong and composed otherwise. She'd only left the pot there for a moment, just to close a door that had blown open in the breeze."

That is how accidents happen. All it ever takes is a fraction of a second, the tiniest lapse in judgment.

"She screamed, 'What do I do? What do I do? Oh, this only happened because I'm not his real mother. If I were Kris's real mother, I'd never have made such a terrible mistake—never!'"

Sophie listened on in quiet consternation.

"It was like she went mad," Kristoffer continued. "She started pouring water on me, over and over. She poured so much water on me that I nearly drowned. My father had to shout at her to stop. He yelled that she was going to kill me if she didn't, and that finally got through to her. Though he broke three floorboards in the process—the only three in our house that look visibly newer than the rest to this day."

Kristoffer gave a sad smile, rubbing his shoulder as if to comfort himself.

"Sometimes, even now, Mother'll look at that spot on the floor and mutter to herself. She'll say, 'If only I hadn't made soup that day. If only I hadn't put it there, none of this would've happened.' But I'm a man. So what if I have a little scar? She's overreacting."

"May I see it?" Sophie asked gently.

His eyes darted to her, and he shifted uncomfortably. "It's a little embarrassing."

But despite his embarrassment, he went on to take off his shirt and turned to show her his back. On a patch of otherwise smooth, pale skin was a faint red mark.

"It's nothing, right?" Kristoffer said, glancing over his shoulder at her.

The scar was indeed faint, the color muted and not particularly noticeable. It was small, too—about the size of a palm.

"I can give it a try," Sophie said after a moment. "Would you like me to, Kristoffer?"

"Please. I'm sick of my mother apologizing to me."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I'm not even her real son." A hint of bitterness crept into his voice. "She shouldn't be beating herself up over someone like me." He turned to face the window, offering his thin, pale shoulders to Sophie. "She must wish she had a better kid—someone stronger, smarter, worth her time. Not me. I'm weak, slow… I can't even handle a little stomachache without complaining. I get picked on, and I don't fight back. I'm nothing but a disappointment. Maybe the only thing I can do to make her happy is get the scar fixed. That way, she won't get reminded of her mistake anymore."

Sophie said nothing, so he continued:

"Say… there isn't magic that can make me handsome, is there? Or faster, or stronger? That'd probably make her happy, don't you think?" Sophie didn't reply, so he pressed on: "What about smarter? A better talker? Someone everyone likes. I'm sure that's the kind of son she and Father would be proud of. Ah. But then I wouldn't really be me anymore, would I?"

His shoulders trembled as he sobbed, his hands wiping desperately at his face. Finally, Sophie asked, "Did something happen?"

Kristoffer's breath hitched. After a moment, he said: "My practice exam scores dropped again. It was on a problem I've solved so many times before, over and over on my own. When I saw it on the test, I thought—I was so sure—it was going to be a shoo-in. But then I got nervous. My head spun, and I messed up on addition. Addition, of all things. I was so mad at myself. At home, I'd never

make a mistake like that. So why? Why do I fall apart when it matters most? I'm always like this. When something important is coming, I get nervous—I can't sleep. When it finally starts, my stomach aches, my hands shake. I can't stand it. I'm so sick of being weak, of always screwing up. I hate it. I'm pathetic."

Past a quivering lip, a trail of tears slid, then fell.

"Studying… It's all I have. The only thing I'm good at. I've worked so hard, studied my butt off, just to get into that school—to make them proud. I wanted to get in, get a good job, repay them for everything they've done for me. They raised me like I was their own; gave me everything. But I can't. No matter how hard I try, I can't. I'm just a failure. That's all I'll ever be."

Kristoffer's voice trailed off into choked sobs. Sophie observed him silently—his pale, thin back trembling with each breath, the faint red mark etched into his skin. He brushed away his tears with a quick, angry swipe; Sophie followed the motion with her eyes. The nails on his fingers were abnormally short and jagged, as if he'd been in the habit of chewing on them.

At that moment, a peculiar truth settled over Sophie: parents care deeply for their children, and children care deeply for their parents. So how, despite this loop of care and concern, could there be such blatant misunderstanding?

She wanted to get angry at this child for not understanding the nature of things—for not seeing the love that was so plainly there. But then, a memory surfaced:

"You should've never been born."

She had no right to be angry at Kristoffer. Not when, instead of erasing his existence as she'd once wished to erase hers, he was fighting so desperately to prove the value of his.

Sophie picked up Kristoffer's shirt and delicately traced a finger over one of the patched areas. "This is a very well-done stitch," she said quietly.

Kristoffer's eyes blinked open, the tears stopping as he sniffled, looking quietly at his shirt. "I'm really careful with it, but the elbows wear out no matter what I do. I guess it's the rubbing."

"Yes," Sophie replied. "I'm just saying that your mother must've stitched this, wishing she could buy you a new one instead."

Sophie placed herself in that woman's shoes, imagining what Kristoffer's mother must have felt as she placed stitch after careful stitch into the fabric.

She must have held that shirt in her hands, marveling at its size. Once, the little boy who had chased after her, crying, "Mother, Mother!" had been so small. Now, he had grown so large, so fast. And with that realization would come the dread of how quickly he was becoming a man, of the day when he might even stand taller than she did. Yet still, she sewed. Stitch after stitch after stitch.

Her thoughts would drift to her son, working tirelessly to get into a good school. She would wonder if there was anything she could do for him, anything to ease his burden. But no answers would come, and her hands might still, her eyes falling in disappointment to the garment in her lap.

But then she would resume. If nothing else, she could pray. She could pray that her son's dreams would come true and his hard work would be rewarded, each stitch imbued with her silent hopes and fervent wishes.

As she neared the final stitches, she might count them, one by one, as if counting the last few precious years her boy would still depend on her. Each stitch, a moment to savor. Each stitch, a memory yet to make.

"But it makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Sophie said, half-muttering to herself. "Why the grandpa next door mistook you for your father."

"Well, I assume that's because…" Kristoffer frowned, his expression tinged with sadness. Yet even in his sadness, there was a quiet kindness, a thoughtfulness toward others.

"I wonder why," Sophie continued, her tone more deliberate now, "instead of mistaking you for someone else, he specifically mistook you for your father."

Kristoffer didn't say anything.

"*I* think," Sophie said gently, "it was because, in that moment, something about you reminded him of your father. The way you

moved or spoke—the concern you showed for him, the kindness with which you supported him. It must have been exactly how your father would've done it."

Kristoffer still didn't say anything—he *couldn't* say anything.

"Isn't family such a strange thing? You share the same space, eat the same food, drink the same water, and without noticing, you begin to reflect one another. You argue, you laugh, you cry—but through it all, you care. When someone falters, you want to steady them. When they're striving for something, you want to cheer them on. And when they're happy, it makes you happy too." Her fingers brushed gently against the stitches on his shirt. "Becoming extraordinary, being the best, repaying some imagined debt—is that really what family is all about? Or is it just about being there for one another—about the joy of shared moments, the comfort of knowing someone cares, and the simple hope of seeing each other thrive?"

"Even for an adopted child?" Kristoffer finally said.

"Adopted?" Sophie enunciated with playful shock. "Kristoffer, you're your father and mother's child. Always have been."

Kristoffer said nothing again.

"They've been with you," Sophie said, "raising you since you were a tiny baby. Your mother screamed her lungs out when you were hurt, and your father broke floorboards trying to save you—and yet you still dare to say they don't think of you as their own?"

Kristoffer remained silent a moment longer. Then a blink. A soft rub of his shoulder.

"Ms. Sophie," he began.

"Yes?" she prompted gently.

"I think…secretly, the scar has always made me a little happy. It's like proof that I've been here since I was a baby. Every time my mother looks at it, she fusses over me, and it makes me…feel loved."

Sophie nodded in gentle understanding, and Kristoffer bit his lip before continuing.

"I like that. What I don't like is the way it makes her feel. The way she freezes, frowns, and looks so sad—like she's reliving that day all over again. I don't blame her for it. It was just a mistake. We all make mistakes."

Sophie nodded again, and this time, Kristoffer lifted his eyes to hers. Something new was in his expression: a steadiness, or perhaps resolve—a spark of maturity that hadn't been there when he walked into the room.

"Ms. Sophie—please get rid of it. I don't need it anymore. I'm not a little child who needs coddling. I'm becoming a man; I'm pretty much one already."

"Oh?" Sophie replied, her lips curving into a faint smile. "And what makes you say that?"

"Because I saw the flyer myself, wrote the letter myself, and came here myself," he declared, his chest puffed with pride. "Impressive, right?"

"Very. And your handwriting is neat too. Not to mention your impeccable etiquette."

That drew a big smile from Kristoffer. "I was really scared, you know. The flyer said I'd be meeting a monster. Then I saw this huge mansion and thought I'd meet some super tall lady who'd reach the ceiling—or maybe one as big as this whole room, going ba-boom! But I pushed through my fear and still came. That's also impressive, right?"

"Indeed," Sophie replied, her voice rich with warmth. "And once again, I humbly apologize for falling so woefully short of your expectations for ba-boom-itiveness."

"No, it's fine. This is much better. And delicious," he said, eyeing what was left of the refreshments. "I guess what I'm trying to say is…I'll be all right. It's just that this scar is like a bad report card for my mother. A permanent reminder of her failure. And it's not fair because it was just one moment. One mistake. We've had so many good times since then, but it's like all of that disappears whenever she's reminded of what happened. She used to tell me, whenever I got a bad grade, that it was just one test, and I shouldn't let it weigh me down. That it didn't define me. That's what I want to say to her for a change. To tell her it was just one bad moment. That it doesn't define her either."

He took a shaky breath and straightened his shoulders. "So please, Ms. Sophie. Will you help me? So I can finally tell her that?"

Sophie's expression softened, blooming into a warm, reassuring smile.

"Of course."

She raised her hands into position, hovering over Kristoffer's pale, downy back, and stared down the faint red mark. She imagined the mother's reaction when seeing the mark gone for the first time. Would she cry? Would she laugh? Perhaps she'd do both as she apologized one final time for leaving the soup there on that fateful day.

"Pain, pain, go away."

The anguish of the mother, weeping as she tenderly stroked the scars left irrevocably on her baby's once-perfect skin.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

The grief of the kind son, burdened by his mother's pain, longing to ease it but unable to.

Let it all be gone, Sophie willed silently. *Let all that remains of that day be the memory. The screams shared, the care given, the love that day signified.*



KRISTOFFER craned his neck around to stare at the spot where the mark once had been; a tender, childlike smile spread across his face. "Thank you, Ms. Sophie."

"You're very welcome," she replied.

He put his shirt on, stood up, and slung that heavy bookbag over his shoulder again.

"Are you going to continue your studies?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Kristoffer answered. "I don't know why, but I just remembered something. When I was researching schools, I came across this really interesting class I wanted to attend. There's this professor who researches the heavens—all manners of celestial bodies, and the way he does it is really, *really,* fascinating." His face lit up, a broad, toothy grin breaking through. "I wonder why I ever forgot. But now, imagining myself in that classroom… I want it more than ever. I'm going to study harder than I ever have before. I think

I had it wrong before. I was studying for the test like it was the end goal. But it's not about the test—it's about what it leads to. Where it can take me. That's the real reason for studying."

"Indeed," Sophie affirmed with a nod.

"And I've made another decision. When I go home today, I'm going to talk to my mother. I'm going to tell her I know—about my adoption. I'm sure she's agonized over how to tell me, probably a hundred times, but never found the courage to say it."

"I see," Sophie replied. "And you're sure your father never told her what happened with Grandpa?"

"Pretty sure. We made a promise between men that day; he wouldn't say a word. Uh, well, unless my mother specifically asked, of course…"

"We can only hope your mother never sniffed out that something was being kept from her, can we?"

"Yeah. If only he could lie."

They exchanged a laugh.

"Oh," Kristoffer said.

"What is it? Sophie asked.

"You saw me with my shirt off. Please forget what you saw. Otherwise, I'd feel bad for my future wife."

He seemed rather serious about that, so Sophie nodded seriously in kind. "Of course. I'll forget all about that supple, white, peach-fuzzed skin. In fact, what were we even talking about? It's completely slipped my mind."

"Ms. Sophie, you pervert."

"Pervert? Me? Why, I never…"

They exchanged a set of knowing looks, another hearty laugh, then their farewells.



A few days later, a letter arrived on plain-looking paper, from Kristoffer's mother.

In a single heartfelt page, she described the moment Kristoffer revealed his healed back to the family. They had all cried—father,

mother, and son—before sitting down for an emotional heart-to-heart. And after that, they cried again.

When winter was just about over, another letter came. This one carried joyful news: Kristoffer had safely passed the entrance exam for the school he had long dreamed of attending.

Boys grow up so quickly. Sophie imagined that Kristoffer might no longer resemble the timid, mousy boy who had visited her salon that day. She could almost picture him now, dressed in his new uniform, smiling with pride as he stepped into a whole new world.

Even so, Sophie often thought of that boy from that day—the pure, selfless tears he shed for another, the trembling, downy shoulders of his youthful back. She would gently trace the smudged words on the letters, blurred by the tears his mother couldn’t hold back, and feel her own heart swell with those tender memories.

Scarlett, the Actor

SCARLETT, *thirty, actor. Please fix the scars on my face.*

For a fine young woman with such a striking name, Sophie had prepared an elegant spread centered around a theme of deep, rich red. The tea? Scarlet. The berries scattered atop the cake? Scarlet. The roses in the centerpiece? Also scarlet.

Ding, di-di-ding!

The soft tinkling of bells announced the salon door opening. In stepped a figure that was so unreal, so ephemeral, Sophie instinctively rubbed her eyes, wondering if her vision was playing tricks on her.

It was in the way she moved. Fluid, soundless, as though the very air parted to make room for her.

It was in her lustrous, braided silver hair, shimmering softly in the light.

"I'm Scarlett. A pleasure."

It was even in her voice. The way her lips moved at a distance, but then the words seemed to sound right next to Sophie's ear—rich, velvety, and impossibly clear.

Every inch of her being, from head to toe, was perfection incarnate, meticulously crafted. And yet…her presence felt hauntingly impermanent, ethereal. How was that?

"Sophie Olzon," Sophie said, her voice coming a beat too late, entranced as she was. "Thank you for coming all this way."

Scarlett bowed, the errant strands of her braid swaying softly with the motion. Perfect form. Without so much as a rustling from her clothes. This woman was like ice. Cool, flawless, and untouchable.

A heavy veil obscured her face, revealing only the faint color of her lips beneath. The veil's mystique only heightened her allure, stoking Sophie's curiosity further. She felt a pull as though her entire being was irresistibly captivated by the presence of this enigmatic ice queen. Sophie let out a soft puff of air in wonder, absently brushing her fingers against her cheek.

"I've been staring, haven't I?" she said abruptly, realizing herself. "My apologies. Please forgive my rudeness."

"Nonsense. I'm glad," Scarlett replied, her lips curving into a smile. "But thank you for being considerate."

Sophie offered her a seat, then the tea and the refreshments.

She couldn't tear her eyes off Scarlett as she ate and drank. The way her fingers delicately manipulated her fork, the effortless precision with which her hand carried it to her lips—every motion was mesmerizing.

Noticing her host's rapt nature, Scarlett giggled knowingly and asked: "I wonder, Ms. Sophie, if you've ever heard of me?"

"I apologize," Sophie replied almost automatically. "I don't get out to the theater very often."

"Not at all," Scarlett replied easily, her tone unbothered. "I'm hardly famous, even among theater buffs. And even less so among the younger generation such as yourself."

Then, with a deliberate motion that seemed like a choreographed scene of a play, Scarlett removed her veil.

The faint glimpse of her lips had not betrayed expectations. The rest of her face was as exquisite as they suggested—eyes, nose, and mouth perfectly arranged, like a masterwork doll brought to life, the kind every young girl might dream of. Her eyes, especially, were mesmerizing—deep purple like amethyst, with a hypnotic quality that could draw you in, strip you bare, then leave you discarded and burned out on a desolate street.

Her skin was also flawless, smooth, and white as ivory—except where it had been torn and gouged.

The scars shocked Sophie.

The sheer number of jagged lines and the chaotic, indiscriminate pattern that marred Scarlett's face suggested malice—

an attack that seemed determined to end the story of this captivating thespian.

"Hear me out, would you?" Scarlett said softly. "This is my story. Bare and unapologetic."

Sophie swore she heard the rustle of scarlet stage curtains then, as her humble salon turned into a grand stage, transforming for the heartbreaking tale about to unfold.

Scarlett's mother had been a stage actor. Tucked away in one corner of the cramped single-room abode Scarlett grew up in had been a wooden storage chest. It had been a treasure chest of sorts, where her mother kept keepsakes and gifts from fans—remnants of her time on the stage.

Scarlett never questioned why it was always just the two of them in that small room. But she did find it lonely that every night, her mother had to leave. Many times, she asked her mother if she really had to go.

"I'm working," her mother would reply.

"Stage work?" young Scarlett would ask hopefully.

Her mother would nod. *"Yes. Stage work. Where I play the part of a passionate lover."*

Scarlett always thought her mother's eyes looked strangely distant when she said this. She didn't like something about that look. Something that unsettled her. So, gradually, Scarlett stopped asking the question and let her mother leave without a word.

Growing up, Scarlett's mother never read picture books to her—she performed them. She grew up immersed in a world where stories leapt to life before her very eyes, her heart sparkling with delight as she didn't just hear or read the tales but *lived* them.

She didn't merely live in a cramped, one-room home. No, Scarlett lived on the high seas, in towering castles, and in faraway desert kingdoms. Through her mother's performances, she felt the flutter of first love, the pulse-pounding thrill of adventure, and the chilling drop of heart-stopping fear. When the story began, and her mother raised those imaginary curtains, Scarlett was transported.

But then she turned eight, and her mother was killed. And when the whispers began—that she was "the pitiful child of a prostitute murdered in a lovers' quarrel"—Scarlett learned, for the first time, the truth of her life.

With the image of her mother shattered, Scarlett was set to move to an orphanage. Before that, however, she resolved to hide her mother's treasures—somewhere safe. Untouchable. So, for the first time in her life, she opened up that chest—only to find it empty. Completely empty. Save for a single portrait of her mother clinging to the bottom.

"Little by little, she must've sold it all off," Scarlett recounted quietly. "My mother, to me, was the most brilliant, most radiant woman in the world. But the truth of it, she was aging. She was a working woman well past her prime, toiling into the night once her child was put to bed. I can only imagine how little she earned for her lays."

Sophie couldn't say anything. The phrases discussing prostitution sounded jarring, almost alien, coming from Scarlett's perfectly enunciated voice.

Scarlett moved to the orphanage. That place, filled with rambunctious children and unsmiling grownups, was the furthest thing she'd call home. But it changed her life forever.

"They staged a play," she said, her voice soft but steady. "I'll never forget it. It was a production of *The Wizard of Lilith."*

"And you played the lead?" Sophie asked.

"I did," Scarlett replied with a smile. Her gaze shifted directly to Sophie's. And when those deep purple eyes hit Sophie, her heart fluttered.

"I didn't even need to memorize the lines," Scarlett continued, "I already knew them by heart. Before long, I was directing, too. It startled the adults, seeing this quiet girl suddenly step forward, giving orders with conviction. But they let me be, strangely enough. Stranger still, the other children obeyed me without hesitation—as though it was the most natural thing in the world."

It must have manifested then, Sophie thought. Or perhaps it'd always been there, that magnetism. Against such a presence, it

seemed that Sophie wasn't alone in lacking the will to resist.

"The production was a triumph," Scarlett said. "A standing ovation awaited me. I stood at centerstage, arms spread wide, basking in the applause as though it were my rightful due."

Sophie could almost see her—shoulders squared, arms outstretched—a younger Scarlett standing tall and proud, accepting the praise with a quiet smile far older than her years.

"One of the caretakers approached me afterward," Scarlett continued, her tone laced with quiet pride. "They said a theater troupe had taken notice and wished to bring me into their fold. Naturally, I accepted without hesitation. I wasn't surprised—how could I be? It seemed inevitable. As if the stage had always been waiting for me to find it. And so, I stepped onto that path, certain it was meant to be mine."

So that was it, Sophie thought. The essence of Scarlett's genius. It was in her impermanence—that silent, ethereal aura that dominated any space she occupied, drawing every eye without effort.

Just as the air seemed to part for her as she entered the room, so did people. They gave her everything, got out of her way, and watched with bated breath as though they already knew this girl would become something extraordinary.

"I debuted as a child actor, and very quickly, my name alone became enough to fill the seats. A single glance at the script was all I needed to commit the lines to memory. Every gesture, every movement to command the stage, came to me instinctively as though I had always known them. From the moment the curtains drew open to the second they fell, all eyes were locked on me; the entire theater danced in the palm of my hand. Still, I never questioned it. I thought this was what I was owed. This was what I deserved."

Her dressing room was private. In summer, they brought her ice to keep her cool. In winter, charcoal to keep her warm. She had her own makeup artist, her costumes always pristine—freshly laundered, tailored to order.

Scarlett sat upon her throne while directors threw themselves at her feet, begging her to play their heroine. And thus, the Queen of Ice was born: the immovable, immutable Queen Scarlett Dietrich.

Then gently, delicately, Scarlett's flawless white hand traced her cheek.

"Then, at twenty, everything changed."

A hush fell over the room. Sophie was dying to know more, but it felt rude—almost sacrilegious—to interrupt. So, she held her breath.

"Tell me if you've heard of a little thing called *The Witch of Rididora*?" Scarlett finally asked.

Sophie's eyes lit up, recognition immediate. "*The Witch of Rididora.* An epic penned by the elusive John F. Colten. It's a rich, vivid page-turner that draws you in with its prose and beats you senseless with its vision. The author was a complete unknown; nobody guessed that the man who spent years weaving this tale in quiet secrecy was a taciturn clockmaker in his sixties. Even after a century, it hasn't faded in the slightest. Truly a masterpiece among masterpieces."

"Indeed," Scarlett nodded. "To me, it is a work of genius birthed from the mind of a genius—a tragic yet beautiful tale of human love and hatred as seen through the eyes of a lonely, immortal witch. It's a personal favorite of mine. I always believed that one day, I would bring the heroine, Ohara, to life on the stage."

"Because it was what you were owed," Sophie said with a smile.

"Because it was what I deserved," Scarlett added, smiling back.

The two shared a moment, then Scarlett continued her tale.

"Ohara, the thousand-year-old witch. When I learned that a renowned playwright was searching for someone to play her in an adaptation of his swan song before retirement, I seized the chance. I wrote to him, he called me in, and I *became* Ohara for him. When I finished, I stood there, waiting for his judgment, though, in my mind, there could only ever have been one answer. A word, as inevitable as the role itself: 'yes.'"

Scarlett paused there, her gaze steady on Sophie, watching for her reaction. Sophie sat, entranced, waiting for her to continue.

Then, with a shake of her head, Scarlett mimicked the manner of a cantankerous old man, her lips curving in exaggerated, disappointed annoyance.

"'Shallow.'"

Sophie blinked, startled. For a moment, it was as if she could see the scene herself—the grumpy old playwright delivering his damning verdict with a scowl before shuffling out of the room, unimpressed.

Her focus snapped back to Scarlett, and she saw something new: color. That etherealness was gone. The ice queen had been brought back down to earth—and it had taken a fussy, exacting playwright to do so.

"After that, I lost myself," Scarlett admitted, her voice calm yet heavy with regret. "Like a soul possessed, I pursued every conceivable path to reconnect with him, used any means at my disposal to secure roles—witches, immortals, anything inhuman—just to refine my craft. I was at the height of my fame then. Whatever part I desired, it was mine without question. And I desired them all, no matter who I pushed out to make it happen. I truly believed it was for the best—for the audience, the company, and even the actor I replaced. Surely, I thought the role was safer, richer, in *my* hands. But in my obsession with unearthing the hearts of these fictional characters, I failed to see the hearts of the real people I trampled along the way."

That year, a fellow actor brutally attacked the famed actor, Scarlett Dietrich, in her dressing room. She survived, but her face would never be the same.

The attacker had her role taken by Scarlett. She had played the role for years, only to have it usurped in an instant by someone she believed had no genuine understanding of the character, no true empathy for her motivations. In her mind, Scarlett hadn't merely taken the role—she had *murdered* it.

"Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!" the woman had screamed, straddling Scarlett, her hands slick with blood. Tears streamed down

her face, mixing with strands of hair plastered to her sweat-soaked brow, her eyes wild with rage and grief.

To her, Scarlett had butchered a once beautiful character on stage. And in her anguish, she sought to butcher Scarlett in return.

A heavy silence fell in Sophie's salon.

Gently, Scarlett's fingers found her face once more. "Honestly, it was a miracle I even survived. I lost so much blood that the dressing room was a sea of crimson. Even now, that room remains locked away, unused. They say it's haunted, that the cries of a woman can still be heard echoing inside. Even though I'm still alive."

"Humans are rather superstitious creatures," Sophie remarked.

"Indeed. Or perhaps it isn't my cries they hear, but hers—the woman who attacked me. Before sentencing, she took poison to end her life. She was sick, you know. She dedicated what little remained of her short existence to playing that role, and I stole it from her—and for what? Sometimes, I wonder if she is destined to wander this earth as long as my face bears these scars. This is the evidence of our shared guilt—hers and mine. The mark of two foolish actors who poured everything into their beloved roles, forsaking their humanity in the process. It is the madness of two women, etched forever into this world."

Sophie listened on, spellbound.

"There is one thing I wish I could have said to her. I wish I could have told her I didn't murder her character. Perhaps I understood her differently, but I wished I could've talked to her, reconciled my vision with the one person who knew that character the best. But it's too late for that now."

Through it all, not a single tear dared escape the ice queen's gaze.

"When I woke up, my face was scarred. And with those scars, all the opulence, the privilege that had defined my life began to slip away. Once I was no longer useful to them, those who had once surrounded me turned away without hesitation. For a year, I kind of just drifted about. I had money. Just no sense of how to use it."

Scarlett spent most of her days in her room, the one she usually kept vacant as she performed. One day, the sun shone

abnormally bright, so she drew the curtains shut. Yet, stubbornly, a single beam of sunlight pierced through, illuminating the storage chest in the corner.

"I opened the chest, and within it lay treasures of a bygone life—jewels, costumes, the trappings of a star. Tucked away at the back, nearly forgotten, were stacks of scripts from the plays I had performed. But my hand sought out one in particular—the script I could never conquer: *The Witch of Rididora.*"

"The one that got away…" Sophie muttered.

"Indeed," Scarlett replied, her eyelids fluttering shut as if shielding herself from the memory. "The one that got away."

She exhaled softly, a bitter smile forming. "I thought, for a time, that I ought to abandon acting altogether. Surely, with a face like this, no role would ever come my way again. I knew it was folly to persist, but the stage had sunk its claws too deeply into me—I couldn't let it go. So, I pursued every connection I still had, hounded them for opportunities, and took whatever scraps they offered. Beggars, crones, monsters—I turned my nose up at nothing.

"The roles usually came without lines, let alone a mention of my name on the playbill. I had no dressing room to call my own; the costumes hung loose or pinched in the wrong places. And when I stepped onto the stage, not a single gaze turned my way. But for all that, I didn't hate it. On the contrary—I found it all very liberating, like discovering a world anew."

Sophie felt a subtle shift in Scarlett's voice. This was a tragic story about a twenty-year-old woman who, at the height of her beauty and fame, had lost everything. Yet, there was no plaintive quality in her tone. Instead, there was a sense of hope, of beginnings—as if this wasn't the end of her tale but the start of something new.

She extended her hand, fingers splayed wide as though trying to capture the elusive glimmer of light. "I found a new kind of joy in everything," she said softly. "Getting even a single line was enough to make my heart race for days. I'd hold onto it, read it again and again. No one paid any mind to directing a character so insignificant, but I poured myself into it nonetheless.

"I imagined countless ways to bring that line of mine to life. I considered the needs of the scene, the rhythm of the performances around me, and played it out a hundred different ways until I found the one. The limelight would never shine on me again, but that wasn't why I did it anymore. I did it because I wanted—no, *needed*—to stand on that stage. I did it because I am an actor. Because I love acting. I love it with all my heart."

And then, in that moment, she did it. She captured the light. It fell over her, enveloping her, and the Queen of Ice melted away. She became human. By losing that beauty she once thought intrinsic to her. By losing the applause she once thought owed to her. Through grit, passion, and mettle, she clung on to the stage.

"Before long, my performances garnered notice once more. 'What a fearsome monster,' they'd whisper. 'Who is that old crone?' they'd ask. Of course, when they'd learned it was me, they'd laugh. They'd laugh at poor old Scarlett, laughing at how far she's fallen. But it didn't matter to me. Not anymore. Because I knew, then, beyond all doubt, that I belonged there. The stage *was* my rightful due, the very reason I was born. Because I had earned it. Because I *deserved* it."

Scarlett had done it. The path that had been destroyed beneath her, she had rebuilt brick by painstaking brick.

"Ten years it's been," Scarlett said softly. "For ten years, I've played roles without names, earning enough just to get by. And I couldn't complain—because the stage is my life. It is the very air I breathe. Now and then, I'll reach into that old chest of mine, pull out a script, and act it out once more—just for myself. And every time, I discover something new. I realized that the way I understood a character back then, the way I believed, with absolute certainty, was *the* way—the best way—was merely one interpretation among hundreds, possibly thousands.

"Young me had been foolish. She was arrogant to believe she had mastered something so vast. But regrets are just that, aren't they? They linger, but they change nothing. You can't rewind time, and you can't relive a performance. Especially not in the theater.

"It is so frighteningly fleeting what happens up on that stage. No one performance is ever the same. The state of the performer, the mood of the audience, the brightness of the sun, even the temperature in the air—all of it weaves together to create something special—something unique to that moment. They are miracles, born and gone in an instant."

Sophie sat in silence, waiting with bated breath for the grand, reverberating climax Scarlett's storytelling seemed to be building up to. Scarlett took one look at her and broke into a soft, quiet giggle that felt undeniably human.

"That cantankerous old playwright; he really was stubborn," Scarlett finally went on. "After ten years, he was still chasing his ideal Ohara. It'd been so long that most people around him had given up on the play ever coming to fruition."

Scarlett rose from her seat. Sophie noticed, for seemingly the first time today, that her attire was a deep, shadow blue. Scarlett plucked a single rose from the vase on the table. Then she stepped to the door, spun around to face Sophie, and lingered there, her posture as rigid as a blade.

Then, what Sophie swore she saw was the color black seeping through Scarlett's ephemeral, translucent form.

Scarlett flicked her gaze, and Sophie could see it—the vast, hollow expanse surrounding them. Scarlett subtly knitted her brow, and Sophie caught it—the acrid tang of smoke in the air.

Scarlett began to walk, but her steps faltered as if she were struggling to walk over a ground littered with large, misshapen mounds. She wrenched a long-hafted object from the ground—it was cumbersome, unwieldy. She heaved it aside with great effort.

This was a dry, desolate place, a blackened place reeking of death. This was the site where a brutal, unyielding battle had taken place. And those mounds on the ground—they were corpses.

With the rose still clasped in her right hand, Sophie finally realized what this was—the infamous "black" scene from act three.

Anger at the folly of mortals and sorrow at what they do to each other time and time again rippled in the eyes of the witch before her. Since becoming a witch, Ohara had fallen in love but

once. The young man had no wealth to his name, no influence to wield, only himself to offer. And this was the scene where she had to scour the war-torn field for his lifeless corpse.

Their love had withered before it could bloom. Ohara had turned the young man away because she was an immortal witch. He, unaware of the truth, believed she had rejected him because he had nothing to offer her.

Ohara, the witch, disappeared without a trace that very night, and the young man fell into despair. Many years later, as the fire of his youthful longing dimmed, he married another woman and built a family. But when the drums of war thundered again, the smoldering ember of his yearning for glory flared to life. And even though he was a young man no longer, he answered the call to battle, only to become nothing more than a headless corpse.

Suddenly, Ohara stopped wandering; she must have found him. Slowly, she lowered herself and placed the rose upon that once-young man's chest.

"If you would return my love," he had once said to her, *"then pluck from these hundred roses the one most fair and place it over my heart."*

She pressed her cheek to his chest, then pulled away, leaving behind a red token of love before departing the battlefield.

The scene was bleak and black. Nothing moved. The only trace of color was the fragile, withered bloom, its scarlet petals swaying quietly in the stillness.

It was the one moment in the work where Ohara the witch revealed herself to love. A love given by mortals, only to be stolen away by their hands. There were no lines. Only the gentle weight of her touch, the unspoken anguish in her eyes, and the faint, unsteady quiver of her lips betrayed the raw ache of a woman who had hidden her heart so entirely from the world.

Tears even slipped from the immortal witch's eyes. Proof of how deeply she had loved.

Bound by different spans of time, she could not answer his love. She had stepped aside so that he may live the life he was

meant to. Ohara's resolution, her desolation, carved a hollow ache into Sophie's heart.

Taking out her handkerchief, Sophie buried her face into its soft folds and wept.

When she finally lifted her gaze, the battlefield was gone. She sat in a modest room. Before her, a cantankerous old man.

"I have found you—my Ohara," he said.

A wail tore from Sophie—she couldn't hold back the sound. But then she managed to, sobbing quietly into her handkerchief again.

The actor before her smiled gently, her expression warm with patience as she waited for her to find her composure.



"FORGIVE me. I don't know what came over me," Sophie said.

"Nonsense," Scarlett said gently, her ivory-white hand resting lightly on Sophie's shoulder. "In fact, I'm grateful. Thank you for listening to my story—to all of it. Thank you for seeing me, truly seeing me, without ever needing to avert your gaze.

"I got the part. Everyone around me insists it's simple: just put on makeup, and that will be enough. But they don't understand. Ohara is eternally young. Makeup thick enough to hide these scars would rob her of that essence.

"This next performance will be my magnum opus, the pinnacle of everything I've ever been. I swore I would leave no stone unturned in my pursuit of perfection. And that is why I've come to you. To ask you—can you erase these scars?"

"Of course," Sophie replied evenly, her composure fully restored. "I'll certainly try." She lifted her hands, poised above Scarlett's face.

There was, however, one truth Sophie knew beyond any doubt: Scarlett's acting brilliance could easily eclipse the incongruous feeling caused by makeup. Yet Sophie understood that Scarlett needed to feel unburdened, wholly free to channel her passion into this performance. If this was what she required to embody her vision, to bring forth the pinnacle of her art, then so be it.

"Pain, pain, go away."

May you fly once more, ephemeral girl.

Once, you soared effortlessly on the wings of genius. But the skies betrayed you, casting you down before you could claim the heavens. But now—now you ascend once more, not on borrowed splendor, but on feathers you have painstakingly grown from the soil of your labor.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

Bring life to stories untold, light the way to dreams unspoken. You are a quiet, beautiful girl. A being without shape, without time—without color. You are translucent, and because of this, you can be anything. Anyone.

So fly, ephemeral girl. Fly beyond the reach of what was thought possible. The skies await your colorless brilliance. Fly.



AS Scarlett looked at her reflection in the mirror, a single tear traced down her cheek, and she smiled.

"It won't be for a while yet, but I'll send you tickets for the premier," she said.

"That's kind of you," Sophie replied. "But I doubt I'll be able to go. Keep them."

"You might be all better by then."

Sophie said nothing, her gaze steady yet unreadable.

The two women looked at each other. Then Scarlett lifted a hand, brushing her fingertips over her flawless, unblemished face.

"Just as this miracle occurred for me, erasing my scars without a trace, I'm sure the same will happen to you."

Still, Sophie remained silent.

"Imagine me—a grown woman chasing fairy tales of an enchanted salon that could make my scars vanish. They called me a fool for coming here, and perhaps they were right. But look where my foolishness led me." She smiled, her eyes shimmering with gratitude. "Thank you."

Another tear fell, crystal clear, from Scarlett's amethyst eyes. Sophie watched it trace its path down her cheek, transfixed by its beauty.

Scarlett reached for the vase at the table's center, plucking another rose. She extended this one toward Sophie.

"Your own miracle awaits, Ms. Sophie."

And with that, the curtains closed. The salon was empty now, its performer gone—to bigger, brighter stages. No matter how loud or fervent an applause Sophie might give, there would be no curtain call. Scarlett had moved on.

Sophie sat quietly, stroking the soft petals of the rose in her hands. She thought of drying it, pressing it into a bookmark. She would put it, perhaps, in her copy of *The Witch of Rididora.*



"MILADY, Sir Kurt Ozhorn is here to see you. Shall I let him in?"

Sophie, diligently focused on her work, paused mid-motion and glanced up at Martha. "Yes, please. Oh, and about that incident the other day—what came of it?"

She was talking about when Kurt waltzed right into her salon without forewarning. Martha's expression tightened, her brow furrowing in distaste at the memory.

"A young maid confessed her error, milady," Martha replied. "Mr. Olzon had been expecting a tax official that day. Sir Kurt was, regrettably, mistaken for the gentleman in question and proceeded directly to your salon under that pretense. I extend my deepest apologies on behalf of the household for such an oversight."

"It's all right. With what happened afterward, that oversight likely saved my life. Would you prepare tea for us?"

"Of course. And the door?"

"Leave it open, please."



BEFORE long, that dry, irritating voice graced the halls of her salon. "Ms. Sophie, I hope I'm not intruding."

Without even looking his way, Sophie lifted the second rose she had dried laboriously, examining it as she said, "Not at all. Please, come in."

Finally, she turned to face him. There was the same impeccably composed man as always, so perfectly put together it was almost infuriating.

"I've come to return my books," he said.

"Sure. Just give me a moment," she replied as she carefully—very carefully—handled the fragile petal without ruining it.

"I think I feel a sneeze coming on," Kurt said.

"Please don't," Sophie said.

"That was a joke."

So he jokes… Sophie thought, but now was hardly the time to be distracted by such matters.

She gingerly lined up the petals, drew a thin sheet of paper on top, then laid down a weight. She'd wanted to complete the whole process in one go, but now she had a guest. Even if this one had showed up without an appointment, he was her life's savior.

"Sorry about that," Sophie said. "Some tea?"

"Yes, thanks," Kurt replied. He eyed the pressed-down flower. "Is that a gift from a man?"

"No, unfortunately. They're from a lovely wizard."

"I'm jealous."

"As you should be."

Sophie smiled, her thoughts drifting back to that vivid crimson memory—a striking display of love that had been hers alone to witness.

Kurt, meanwhile, went straight for the bookshelf, returning his borrowed book to its rightful place. That done, he came back and settled into the seat Sophie had offered him.

"Please, don't mind me. Continue with your work," he said.

"Can you promise not to sneeze?" Sophie asked.

"I don't see why not."

"Really. Is that so? In that case," Sophie said and returned to her task. That said, she was in the thinking phase, deliberating the best way to arrange the petals of the dried flower she had just finished. This was always her favorite part—brainstorming, letting her creativity wander, and coming up with playful ideas. A small smile tugged at her lips, catching Kurt's attention.

"Why do women like being given flowers?" he finally asked.

"Oh? And is that something you know from experience—giving a girl flowers and making her smile?"

"No, not me. But my father used to give them to my mother quite often. It delighted her every single time, without fail."

"They sound like wonderful people. Now, let me think… Why do we like flowers?"

Maybe it's in the fact that they're like little bursts of color that lift the spirit and soothe the heart. They are fleeting. Flowers don't last—they wither and fade—and maybe that's sad, but isn't there something satisfying in caring for them? Plucking away the wilting bits, watching a bud finally unfurl, catching the faint trace of its fragrance… All of that brings a kind of joy.

In that way, perhaps it's like raising a child. Nurturing something as it grows, finding happiness in every small triumph it makes. That's a feeling that could speak to the feminine heart. Or maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe it's just like playing with makeup or choosing one's outfit—arranging and rearranging colors and shapes because you can is just good fun, isn't it?

But then again, isn't what people do to flowers cruel? Cutting them away from their home outdoors, bringing them indoors to wither faster. *In that case, what cruel creatures we women are,* Sophie thought with a smile. Especially the women who, not content even to let them die properly, press them and preserve them as if to say, *even in death, you'll bring me joy.*

As her thoughts meandered, Sophie sat quietly, a faint smile lingering on her lips. Kurt, meanwhile, sat across from her, watching in silence.

"Any specific flowers you like?" he asked.

"Not in particular," Sophie replied. "I love them all—small ones, large ones, cute ones, showy ones. And you?"

"I like them all. Because they all look the same to me."

"Ah, right. Silly question."

She glanced at Kurt with a pang of pity. Of course, that had been the wrong question to ask someone who couldn't distinguish beauty from plainness—not in flowers and not even in people.

Finally, the tea and refreshments arrived. In a stunning coincidence, the baked goods were garnished with edible flower petals. Or perhaps that had been no coincidence at all—Sophie *had* been visibly enthusiastic about her roses in full view of the kitchen.

"Aren't these lovely?" Sophie said. "Shall we eat?"

"You love flowers, yet you've no scruples about devouring them," Kurt remarked.

"At this point, they're food. It wouldn't do to waste food now, would it?"

"Indeed? You're quite the pragmatist."

"Aren't I?"

Sophie watched as Kurt took a sip of his tea, then reached for a biscuit and bit into it. *So he eats…* she thought, a little rudely. Despite knowing he was a living, breathing man with a heart—something she had come to understand recently—she couldn't help but find his movements mechanical. The way he reached for his cup and cookies, clunky and deliberate, made her wonder if there weren't gears and clockwork mechanisms ticking away inside him. She half expected to find a hidden panel or latch somewhere, waiting to be popped open with a click.

"What is it?" Kurt asked, catching her staring.

"Nothing," Sophie replied quickly, shaking off her thoughts. From there, they drifted into a light conversation while they ate. Sophie was surprised to find out there had been a festival in town earlier, and Kurt had found the crowded streets difficult to navigate.

"I don't understand it," Kurt said. "Just what is so enjoyable about wandering into a crowd on a sweltering summer day that people willingly subject themselves to it?"

“Have you never been to one when you were younger?” Sophie asked.

“I have. My parents took me. That’s precisely when I began questioning the appeal.”

“Poor you,” Sophie muttered under her breath.

“Poor who?”

“Nothing.”

“Do you like festivals, Ms. Sophie?”

Sophie paused, caught off guard by the question. “I’ve never been to one,” she admitted. “But I imagine I’d enjoy it.”

She was reminded again of Kurt’s odd indifference. He didn’t see her face—or if he did, he gave no sign of noticing it, which might have been stranger still. Sophie didn’t know the festivals of this world, but if they were anything like the ones she remembered, she was certain she’d like them.

“Is that so?” Kurt said. “Had I known, I might have invited you to join me. Unfortunate.”

“Yes, woe is me,” Sophie replied dryly, “missing out on the summer heat and crowds with someone who finds no joy in summer heat or crowds.”

“Yes. Woe is you.”

“That’s right. Woe is me.”

They talked about books, drank tea, and Kurt chose a new volume to borrow. Then, with one final glance at Sophie, he was gone.

The salon was empty now. Sophie shifted in her seat and returned to arranging her flowers in silence.

The vibrant buzz of a crowd, the warmth of its energy—Sophie wondered if there would ever come a day when that vibrant world outside her window would be hers to experience once more.

Isadora, the Dancer

BA-GYAA! *Ba-gyaa!*

The Olzon estate, on this day, resounded with the cries of a delicate, adorable creature—one not heard within its walls for over seventeen years. The sound instantly stirred the maternal instincts of everyone present.

"That's a baby," Sherlotte said.

"That *is* a baby," Sophie agreed.



DING, *ding, di-di-ding!* Claire's bell rang with its usual crispness.

The letter this time around, if it could even be called that, had been scrawled on what looked like a torn corner of one of Sophie's flyers. It read—or rather, after much squinting and guesswork, appeared to read: *Get rid of my stretch marks – Isadora (nineteen, dancer).*

The handwriting was atrocious, and it took Sophie a good five minutes of flipping the paper scrap around, holding it at arm's length, then up to her nose to decipher the cryptic message. To make matters worse, it hadn't been properly posted, let alone put in an envelope—it was crammed into the estate mailbox, sticking out at a crooked angle. At first glance, it was almost tossed out as junk or a prank until someone pieced together the barely legible details.

"Did somebody drag dead worms across the page? Is this a letter or a eulogy to proper etiquette?" Martha had tutted sternly.

Sophie had smiled warmly at the old maid's dramatic lament, but she raised a good point: Posting a letter costs money, so perhaps it was time to rethink how appointments were made.

Isadora's letter lacked even a return address to confirm the meeting, so Sophie had no choice but to assume Isadora would show up as stated. She kept her schedule open that day, nervously twirling the tablecloth around her fingers as she waited and hoped. That earned another round of tutting from Martha, this time, focused on the nerve of people who treated others' time with such inconsideration.

This time, Sherlotte joined Sophie in her salon. Thinking it was unfair that only Johann got to intrude upon her daughter's domain, she stayed to lend a hand with the preparations.

As Sherlotte busied herself arranging flowers in the glass vase at the centerpiece, Sophie couldn't help but reflect on how formidable her mother was. A career woman in her own right. Sherlotte didn't simply rest on her husband's accomplishments. When tea or fine textiles needed purchasing, she often stepped in as acting director to personally oversee negotiations and forge new client relationships.

She was also a multilingual prodigy. Sherlotte was as admired for her keen intellect as her striking beauty and warm charm, which effortlessly won people over. Loyal clients often claimed that anything Sherlotte brought to the table was trustworthy beyond question.

But today was a rare day of rest. And so, she found herself in her daughter's salon, adding her signature touch to the atmosphere.

"She's late," Sherlotte murmured.

"Maybe it really was a prank," Sophie added.

Just as they decided to salvage the situation with an impromptu afternoon tea, the wailing from the corridor sounded.

Sherlotte sat closer to the door so the woman who emerged from the doorway saw her first. She stood frozen, her eyes fixed on Sherlotte as though momentarily stunned by her bewitching presence. Then, from behind her back, a tiny hand shot forward and broke the spell.

"Ow!" the woman yelped. "That hurts! Stop pulling my hair—stop it!"

Gently disentangling the small, persistent fingers, she began to rock slightly, trying to soothe the wailing child somewhat clumsily.

Only when she raised her eyes again did she notice Sophie seated just beyond Sherlotte. She let out a stifled whimper, took a step back, and wrapped her arms behind her as if to protect her baby.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to startle you," Sophie said warmly. "I'm Sophie Olzon. My condition isn't contagious, so please don't worry. You must be Ms. Isadora?" She offered a slight bow as she spoke.

Isadora nodded. Though a bit too stiffly. "Ouch! Stop!" she cried again, her face twisting in pain as the baby tugged on her hair once more.

Sherlotte, watching the scene unfold, placed a hand on her cheek and smiled, a knowing glint in her eye. "Hello there, I'm Sherlotte, Sophie's mother. Ms. Isadora, if you'd like, I could take your sweet little one into another room and look after her for a bit. It must be difficult to carry on with all that commotion."

"Huh?" Isadora's eyes widened. Partly in fear but more so in disbelief, as if she couldn't believe someone would offer to do something so kind for her.

"It's the hardest stage for a mother, isn't it?" Sherlotte went on. "The sleepless nights, the endless worry—you must be exhausted. Even the most devoted mother needs a moment to rest, and she must take it whenever she can. Relax, have some tea. I'll take care of everything for you."

Tears welled in Isadora's eyes. Had anyone so poised, so radiant—someone who could easily be her own mother—ever shown her such compassion?

Without even waiting for an answer, Sherlotte walked over and scooped the baby into her arms. "What's her— Oh, I'm sorry, his name? When did you last nurse him? Oh, then he should be drifting off to sleep any moment now." Her words came in a soft flurry as she gazed lovingly at the tiny bundle. "Goodness, how many years has it been since I last held a little one like this?" she mused with a light giggle. "You're so soft, aren't you? And you smell wonderful—just like a sweet little dream."

She mentioned she'd be out on the covered terrace, just across the hall, then instructed Claire to bring fresh bedding. Humming a

lullaby, she disappeared from sight.

"That is…some mother you have," Isadora muttered blankly.

"Indeed. Every time she walks away, I see roses bloom in her wake," Sophie replied.

"What a coincidence. Me too."

The two exchanged a look, then burst into laughter.

The ice broken, Sophie gestured for Isadora to sit, and as she did, she let out a long, weary sigh as though she were a traveler finally reaching the end of a long and grueling journey.

She had fiery red hair and equally red eyes. Her pale skin had lost its luster, the bags under her eyes pronounced from lack of sleep. But besides that, it was clear that this was a woman of outstanding beauty.

Sophie poured the tea. A special blend, one Sherlotte specially prepared for a postpartum mother. "Tired?" she asked.

Isadora nodded. "Tired," she said softly before letting out another soul-deep sigh and wearily running her fingers through her hair. "Where… Where should I begin, I wonder?"

Isadora began her story from the very beginning. For as long as she could remember, it had always been just her and her mother. Her father existed, she supposed, but who he was or where he'd gone was a mystery she'd long stopped trying to solve. She grew up in a seedy, run-down rental where sunlight never seemed to reach, raised solely by her mother.

"She was a barmaid," Isadora went on. "Always reeked of cheap perfume and stale ale. If she wasn't ignoring me, she was beating me. I was always covered in welts and bruises."

She didn't even let her go to the local school; she just ate and slept.

"Basically, I was like a dog."

A distant look came into Isadora's eyes as she focused on the memory. She seemed to pity her past self. The time spent alone in that cramped, airless room, no companions, no play. Just scraps of food and nights curled up on the floor, trying to sleep through the dull ache of loneliness and pain.

"One day—I don't even know how old I was; I wasn't counting—she brought a man into the house. Good for her, I guess, not caring about appearances, but I would've been ashamed bringing anyone into that pigsty," she added with a snort. "While she was out, he tried to rape me. I didn't stick around to see how that ended. I bolted from the house barefoot that night."

It'd been a cold, cold, winter night. Isadora had rarely been outside before, so that had been the first time she saw the town at night.

"That was the first I ever found out"—her eyes glittered with the memory—"that the world actually had color."

The soft, flickering glow of streetlamps, the rowdy laughter of drunks spilling out of taverns—it had all been so vivid, so alive. For a moment, the young Isadora had forgotten the cold, the pain. She hadn't been afraid—just mesmerized.

She'd wandered, adrift in this strange, dazzling world before, like a moth drawn to flame, she found herself in front of the liveliest building she'd seen yet. The sweet strains of music floated out, beckoning her closer.

Inside, men crowded around tables, drinking and hollering, their eyes fixed on the stage at the far end of the room. There, under the shining lights, was a woman unlike any Isadora had ever seen. She moved with an otherworldly grace, her shimmering garments catching the light with every step of her dance. *Now* this *is a woman,* Isadora had thought, her breath catching. She couldn't have been more different from Isadora's mother—so much so that it'd been hard to believe they were the same species, let alone the same sex. This room, with its beautiful stage bathed in glittering colors, felt so different that Isadora found it impossible to believe it existed in the same world as that gloomy, suffocating house she'd left behind.

"I knew then that this was where I was meant to be."

Here. In this place filled with light, color, and life. It had been a certainty so fierce, so undeniable, that the young Isadora had never felt anything like it before.

Suddenly, Isadora paused her storytelling, her expression twisting as though she'd bitten into something impossibly bitter. "And you know what I did next?" she finally said. "I walked straight up to the stage—this barefoot and filthy kid—and climbed onto it."

"Oh my," Sophie gasped.

All of a sudden, on that dazzling, glittering stage was a grimy, unkempt girl, the soles of her feet black with dirt. She wobbled and stumbled, attempting a clumsy imitation of the dance she had just witnessed. Profanity was hurled; shoes had been thrown.

"I can't blame them," Isadora said. "Just when the dancer was about to reveal their beautiful breasts, a dirty little kid ruined everything."

"Oh, this was a naughty kind of club?" Sophie asked.

Isadora nearly spat out her tea. She quickly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then burst into laughter. "Yes, all the dancers at these kinds of clubs eventually bare it all. Top and bottom," she eventually said.

"I see. That explains why none of the gentlemen noticed you until you got onto the stage."

Isadora's laughter spilled over again, bright and unabashed, until tears formed in her eyes. "Oh, goodness," she eventually said, her smile tapering off into sadness. "How long has it been since I laughed like that?"

She resumed her story, recounting how she'd been hauled off the stage immediately after the chaos. The club's bouncers had surrounded her—towering men who loomed over her like giants. They were far larger than the man her mother had brought home, and she trembled at the center of their circle when suddenly—

"You!"

A sharp voice pierced through the tense silence, and the wall of bouncers parted to reveal the dancer from earlier. Up close, she was even more striking, her shimmering dress catching the light with every movement. Each step sent her long hair swaying.

"How dare you make a mess of my performance!" she'd snapped.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Little Isadora had pleaded, her voice trembling as she crouched low, making herself as small as possible. Her hands clutched at her head instinctively to shield herself from impending blows.

I'm sorry for being born.

I'm sorry for eating your food.

I'm sorry for making you angry.

I'm sorry for being an eyesore.

I'm sorry for existing.

Those words had been forced from her lips countless times, and "sorry" had become the centerpiece of Isadora's meager vocabulary. Her mother, drunk and seething, had always told her to apologize if she didn't want to be hit—then struck her anyway. Yet, Isadora learned to apologize all the same, knowing that the beatings would be far worse without it.

The dancer looked down at her now, her brow furrowed, her expression unreadable. But, for some reason, the intensity of her gaze didn't frighten her.

"I'm still not sure what compelled her to do what she did, but that dancer—Aria—she bathed me, then gave me soup," Isadora said quietly.

"Look at this water, it's jet-black!" Aria had said, half in disbelief. *"I've seen strays cleaner than you!"*

But despite the sharpness of her words, Aria's touch was gentle as she washed Isadora with care. And for the first time, Isadora allowed herself to be cared for, yielding to the soft, deliberate movements of Aria's hands.

Soup, as Isadora had believed until then, was little more than salted water. So when Aria placed a steaming bowl before her, filled with chunks of vegetables and meat, she froze. The warmth and delicious aroma felt almost forbidden. She hesitated, glancing up at Aria, who gave her a slight nod of encouragement. At once, Isadora scooped up a spoonful and eagerly took a bite—only to burn her mouth immediately.

"Do you want to go home?" Aria had asked Isadora midway through her meal.

Isadora had shaken her head as fast and hard as she could. After seeing all this color, all this light, there was no way she could return to that drab, lifeless room.

"But you know, it's hard work for a child to live without a parent," Aria had said.

"But is it hard work—" Isadora paused to think, then looked up at Aria, *"—to learn to dance like you?"*

Aria had laughed. *"Hard work? Work three times as hard as the next person, and then maybe—maybe—you'll have a chance."*

"Then… Then I'm going to work hard! I'm going to become a dancer!"

The image of Aria on stage, radiant and untouchable, had burned itself irrevocably into Isadora's young mind.

"Right after," Isadora went on, "Aria had a word with the old hag in charge of the club. I had no idea what was said, but she was a piece of work, so I think Aria slipped her some money because the next day, I started working at the club. As a tiny little girl, I wasn't very useful at first. But they did provide me with one square meal a day. I wasn't paid, but they gave me a small room to sleep in. It was cramped and filthy now that I think about it, but it was so much better than anything I'd known at the time. I washed dishes, swept floors, hauled things, whatever I could manage. And whenever I had a moment, I watched the stage. Every chance I had."

The club smelled of alcohol and reeked of tobacco smoke, but none of it bothered Isadora. Not the rowdy laughter of drunken men nor the nocturnal rhythm she had embraced—working through the night and sleeping through the day. All of it was worth it for the glittering stage and the beautiful women dancing upon it.

"The club had ten full-time dancers, but Aria wasn't one of them. She once quit to marry and start a new life, but when her husband turned out to be a deadbeat, she returned to the club, working on a night-to-night basis."

Even so, Aria had been, by far, the most beautiful of them all. The thought that she might have been born to someone like Aria made Isadora smile—but the reality that she hadn't quickly turned it into a frown.

"I learned from what I saw on stage and started to dance. At fourteen, I stepped onto the stage for the first time. I was no longer just live-in help—I had become a real dancer."

As many types of women as there were in the world, there were just as many ways to dance. One could dance with sadness, sensuality, or bright, gaudy exuberance.

"You might think, if I'm going to end up undressed, why not start that way? But that's missing the point entirely. The whole idea is to make them feel something along the way. For us dancers, it's always about finding the most beautiful, the most…right way to move."

Isadora's eyes sparkled as she spoke about dancing, and that was when Sophie realized with a smile that dancing was this woman's greatest love. The woman before her now was a far cry from the haggard, timid figure who had first stepped into the room. She was vibrant, almost giddy as if she longed to convey the beauty of dance but couldn't quite find the words.

"Oh, I know!" Isadora smacked her palm with her fist. "Can I dance?"

Sophie looked at her in surprise, then her expression softened. "Of course."

Isadora's vocabulary *was* limited; she had never learned the usual ways of expressing herself. She, after all, had never attended even primary school. Her access to reading and writing must have come solely from deciphering the words and phrases she encountered at the club. The handwriting Martha had so sharply described as "dead worms" was, in truth, the earnest effort of someone trying their hardest to do something they had never been taught—learning entirely on their own.

"I'm so silly," Isadora said. "I should've just done this from the start." She stood up and looked around the room excitedly.

She began picking up random items, first the skull of an unknown animal. "Could I use this?" Then, a large sheet. "And this?" Finally, a seashell. "And this?"

"Please, be my guest," Sophie replied.

"Perfect! Then I'll begin. Darn it, there's no music… but, oh well."

Isadora wrapped the sheet around herself, crouched down, and put the skull over her head, pressing it down in place with one hand; it almost looked like a pose for prayer.



The seashell in her other hand still held traces of sand, and as she gently shook it, a soft, percussive sound emerged.

Sha. Sha. Sha. Sha.

She set a steady rhythm with her makeshift shaker. Slowly, with deliberate timing, she raised the skull and lowered it over her face like a mask.

Sha. Sha. Sha. Sha.

From behind the skull mask, her eyes gleamed sharp and wild, sending a jolt through Sophie. This wasn't a person anymore—this was a predator. But what prey was it stalking? Here, in Sophie's salon, stood a creature of mystery and menace.

In sync with the rhythm, she rose while swaying her hips in a serpentine motion, mimicking the hypnotic dance of a cobra poised to strike.

Sha!

With a sudden, emphatic shake, she snapped upright, her cape flaring like wings as she whipped the skull from her face and placed it on top of her shroud with a dramatic thud.

The creature disappeared, and in its place was a person. Her eyes were fierce, full of bravery. This wasn't Isadora—the nineteen-year-old girl with a childlike cadence in her voice—but a fearless warrior woman, risen to vanquish a terrible beast. She stood tall—proud—as a warrior woman would.

Her opponent, the wicked beast, came alive once more, its form crafted from the skull and sheet yet moving with uncanny, serpentine fluidity. The sheet twisted and coiled, its gaping jaws snapping at her.

Sha, sha, sha!

The rhythm propelled the story forward, each shake of the seashell marking an attack from the beast. Its jaws lunged at her armor, tugging, snapping, clawing. Somehow—was it sleight of hand, magic, or sheer sorcery?—bits of her clothing tumbled away, piece by piece, falling to the ground with each assault.

Still, the warrior fought back. Her sword danced in mesmerizing arcs, repelling the beast with strength and precision. Blow after blow, she stood firm, but the price was her armor, stripped away in

fragments, leaving her increasingly exposed, before finally, her full figure was revealed in all its curvaceous, voluptuous glory.

The beast lunged forward one final time, its sharp teeth finding solid purchase in the warrior woman's flesh.

"Ah!" Sophie gasped, entirely swept up in the drama. The intensity of the performance sent her heart racing as the beast bore the warrior to the ground. She fell hard, a single arm slipping free from beneath the writhing sheet.

Sha-ra-ra-ra-ra!

The sound of the seashell rattled like a final gasp as it slipped from her grasp and spiraled across the floor.

Then, the defeated warrior looked up at Sophie with a smile. "This is the part where things get erotic. But I think I'll spare you the details. Unless you want to see how the beast has its way with the warrior after it defeated her," she added as she stood back up, the performance over.

Sophie clapped with all her might. "That was incredible!"

In all her lives, past or present, she had never seen a dance like that. She just knew she had witnessed something one-of-a-kind.

"I don't understand," she said, her voice tinged with awe. "How did you come up with that on the spot?"

Isadora couldn't possibly have known about the contents of the salon beforehand. So the skull, the seashell, the cloth—every element of the performance had been pure improvisation, a feat Sophie found nothing short of unbelievable.

Isadora smiled bashfully, then placed a hand over her heart. "Here"—but she faltered, her blush deepening—"there lives a god."

"My," Sophie murmured.

Isadora closed her eyes and gently rubbed the spot over her heart as if something warm and alive was within. "She's been here since the day I first climbed onto Aria's stage. I don't even have to think about it. She tells me what I need to do—shows me what I need to do."

"Wow." Sophie's blush deepened. "After that titillating performance, they get to see your body. Talk about having one's cake and eating it too!"

Caught up in the moment, Sophie had blurted out something strange. But Isadora only laughed as if it were the funniest joke in the world. But as the laughter faded, her expression sobered. Her eyes dimmed, and she released the sheet she had been holding close to her body. In the middle of her perfectly taut, white belly, purple lines sprawled like squiggling worms, stark against her skin.

"Ah," Sophie gasped softly.

Get rid of my stretch marks, Isadora had written. Stretch marks on a woman's belly were telltale signs of childbirth—marks left when the belly grows faster than the skin can accommodate, tearing it and leaving scars that linger long after the body has returned to its original shape. Isadora was unusually young and slim for a mother, making the effect all the more dramatic.

There were ways for expecting mothers to mitigate the appearance of these lines, such as by regularly applying olive oil to the affected areas. But more likely than not, Isadora had no one around to share such knowledge with her.

"The old hag… She said I couldn't dance anymore, not with a belly like this," Isadora murmured, her voice barely holding on. "Al's father… My son's father is a scoundrel. When he found out I was pregnant, he took everything we had and vanished." She wrapped her arms around her belly, holding it close. "I'm all Al has. Dancing is all I have."

Isadora's slender arms trembled as Sophie quietly moved beside her, draping a shawl over her bare shoulders. She stayed close, her hand gently stroking Isadora's back.

"You know I… You know I…" Isadora said, her voice trembling now, too. "I hit him the other day. His crying—it was so loud, so constant. It got to me."

"It was like he was blaming me," Isadora recounted. "Like he blamed me for not having a real job, for not having any money. Each cry seemed to ask, *How could you bring me into this world knowing you couldn't take care of me?"*

"He's a baby," she whispered. "I knew he couldn't really be thinking that, but still, I…"

The blood had rushed to her head. It had all happened so fast. *"And just whose fault is it I don't have a job anymore?!"* she had screamed before her hand came down, striking the tiny, defenseless child before her.

Now, Isadora stared at her right hand, the one that had betrayed her. The way it trembled, it felt like a cruel mockery, a reminder of what she'd done.

"I wanted to be a good mother, you know?" she murmured, tears pooling in her eyes. Her left hand gripped the other, clutching it tightly as if she could crush the part of herself that had caused so much pain.

I can raise a child all by myself. And I won't raise him like a dog like my mother.

Just as Aria had washed her with such care, she would do the same for her son. Just as Aria had fed her a warm, comforting meal when she needed it most, she would make sure Al never went hungry.

But then her voice cracked, and the words came tumbling out. "But in the end, I'm exactly like my mother!" she cried, the sound sharp and broken before she collapsed into sobs.

"There, there," Sophie murmured softly, stroking Isadora's thin, frail back.

The girl before her wasn't perfect, Sophie thought, but she wasn't lazy either. She struggled with her words and letters, it was true, but was that for a lack of effort? She'd worked harder than anyone all these years—three times as hard—driven by the promise she had made to herself as a child.

Childbirth is a life-altering experience. Even those women living in the grandest mansions with the most attentive husbands would experience some physical and emotional toll in the postpartum period. So it said nothing against Isadora that she felt a bit depressed after giving birth—especially after being robbed blind by her supposed-to-be husband, abandoned, *and* losing her livelihood. In fact, it spoke volumes about her character that after all that, she'd still held herself together while carrying on with that tiny bundle of joy strapped to her back.

Because if there was one thing Sophie knew all too well, it was the sheer impossibility of raising a child alone—and the relentless stress and guilt of having to do it anyway.

Isadora's child had looked healthy. The fact that he'd cried that loudly was a sign of that, as were his plump little cheeks. He wasn't at all dirty for a baby, and his hair had been silky smooth. That first strike would also be the last. Sophie certainly hoped so, at least. For the sake of both mother and child.

Isadora had written to Sophie and reached out for help before it became too late, and for that, Sophie was eternally grateful.

"D-Do you think you can help?" Isadora asked sullenly. The tears had finally dried, and her nose had turned red from all the rubbing.

Sophie smiled kindly. "Let's see, shall we?" She held out her hands over Isadora's belly.

"Pain, pain, go away."

May you rise again upon your beloved stage, Isadora.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

And may you live a long, fulfilling life, the limelight in one hand, your son in the other.

Please.

When the soft glow receded, Isadora's belly was smooth and flawless once more.

She let out a soft whimper, and when her hand reached down to touch it, fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Thank you," she choked out, her trembling hands moving to the spot on her chest where she'd said the god resided.

It must be the god of dance, Sophie thought.

She watched as Isadora crumbled into a blubbering mess on the floor. All the while, Sophie quietly considered the most tactful way to encourage her to get dressed again.



"BY the way, Ms. Isadora."

"Mmf, wha'?"

Isadora paused wolfing down the cake before looking up and seeing Sophie raising a strict finger in the air. She chewed loudly and gulped down her bite, then tilted her head in confusion.

"Do you think you're truly fit to be a mother?" Sophie finally asked.

"Why not?" Isadora replied easily. Her attention was fixed on Sophie's plate, fork dangling precariously over Sophie's uneaten slice.

Sophie blocked the blatant attempt with a snort, then rang the servant's bell to ask Claire to fetch another slice.

"Ms. Isadora," she said again.

"Yes?"

"When you walked into the room, did you greet me or my mother?"

Isadora said nothing. When she walked into the room, she didn't even so much as introduce herself.

"Were you able to arrive in time for your appointment?"

She still said nothing. She'd been late. For a time and date she unilaterally appointed no less.

Sophie wasn't trying to be overly harsh. Her point was simple: no matter how skilled a dancer you are, how challenging your life has been, or how much effort you put in, people won't trip over themselves to help you if you can't show even the most basic courtesies.

That's not to say nobody would be sympathetic—but you'd attract a certain kind of person who also lacks basic manners. Like men who would rather rob you blind and run than stay to help raise their child.

"What's in a greeting?" Sophie asked. "It's a way of acknowledging another's presence, of politely stating that you're present. It's a way of saying, 'I wish to build a proper rapport with you.'"

"Could you say that again, but without all those big words?" Isadora asked.

"I am here. You are there. I want to be friends with you. That's a greeting."

"Really?" Isadora hummed absentmindedly. She played with the fork in her mouth, and her gaze drifted absently.

Sophie's eyes narrowed severely. "Ms. Isadora."

"Huh?"

"You're going to need other people from now on."

A look of annoyance crept into Isadora's eyes. "Why?"

She had done everything alone thus far. Everything she'd accomplished had been the fruits of her sole labor. Why would she need help now?

"Because you have Al now," Sophie replied sternly. "Do you think you're going to raise him alone? You'll need help. A lot of it. Help that you'll have to repay, in one form or another."

The annoyed look hardened. "Who am I supposed to ask for help? The old ladies in my building? No thanks—I'd rather do it myself."

They settled into a silent standoff, so Isadora continued, "Seriously. You're a rich little lady, so you don't know, but it's not as easy for the rest of us. You're surrounded by nice people, but who am I going to ask? Those old bats are impossible. They grumble, whine, complain about anything and everything. Make nice with them? No. They already hate me because of what I do." She paused, her rant cutting off abruptly as her head tilted slightly in thought.

"What is it?" Sophie asked.

"Nothing, it's just…before Al was born, they used to complain all the time—about me being up too late, bathing or whatever in the middle of the night." She frowned, her gaze drifting. "But now that Al's here, and his crying's way louder than anything I've ever done, they haven't said a word…"

Sophie let out a faint breath of relief. *Good.* That was great news. It meant there was still hope.

"As Al grows," Sophie began, "he'll need more than milk. You'll have to start him on soft foods and work up to solids, the kind we eat. But how will you know what's right for his age if you don't have anyone to guide you? And at six months, he's going to start getting sick—colds, rashes, all sorts of things. How will you know if it's serious and needs a doctor or if it's just the usual stuff that water

and rest can fix? Do you already know, or would you need someone with experience to help you figure it out? And we haven't even touched on the most important reason to have someone close to you: just having someone to talk to makes all the difference."

"S-Slow down, that was a lot all at once," Isadora stammered. "You really know your stuff. You given birth before?"

Sophie laughed off the question. "And kids are curious by nature. Before you know it, he'll be opening doors and wandering off to explore the world on his own. You won't be able to watch him every second, so the more people you have around to keep an eye on him and step in before he gets into trouble, the better."

Isadora fell silent.

"I understand—someone like you, who's always handled things alone, might balk at leaning on others now. But here's the thing: what worked for you then won't work for you now. Think ten years ahead—if you collapse and Al needs help, do you want him struggling on his own? Or do you want there to be someone he trusts to turn to? That doesn't happen without effort—without doing the hard stuff: the talking, the caring, the give-and-take. And one day, Al's going to mess up. You'll have to march him around to apologize. But as you probably know better than anyone, 'sorry' isn't a word you make your child say. It's a word you say for them, on their behalf."

"If you say so. I wouldn't know; I've never gone through it myself," Isadora said thoughtfully. Gone was the glib attitude from earlier. It finally seemed Sophie was getting the reality of the situation through to her.

Sophie looked at Isadora, thinking of what might make this transition easier for her when inspiration struck. "How about…if you imagined all those old ladies you live with are Aria, just up there in age?"

"No. What? No!" Isadora stammered. "I'm not lumping my beloved Aria together with those stubborn old bats!"

"You're not. It's just a way of…playing pretend. Pretend that Aria, imagine if Aria, after living a long life with all its ups and downs, became a little stubborn and disagreeable. She'd still be the

same Aria who washed you and gave you soup. But life changes people. Over time, she might become a shadow of the person you once knew."

"A shadow of the…" Isadora muttered darkly. She glared at Sophie as if it were heresy for Sophie to dare to suggest such a fate for Aria.

"Are you still in touch with her?" Sophie asked.

Isadora shook her head. "Two years after I joined the club, that bastard husband of hers took her away somewhere. The last time I saw her, her eyes were swollen and blue, like she'd been beaten. I tried to stop her, but I couldn't." She turned to the window, her gaze distant. "I just hope she's all right."

"I'm sure she is," Sophie said. "Because she is right in front of you. Everyone you meet is Aria. Start with greetings. Even if they ignore you, greet them every day—show them you want to get along. And when Al's crying wears you down, don't hold back. Cry out: 'I'm at my wits' end—somebody, help me!' Say it loud enough for everyone to hear. Let them see you need them."

A door will open. Somebody will come to help. There was at least one older woman out there—a mother who, upon hearing those cries, would already be itching to help but couldn't yet convince herself it was the right thing to do. She was just waiting for the opportunity. There had to be someone like that.

Because there was nothing more Sophie could do for Isadora. She could share her thoughts, but all she could do after that was hope Isadora would listen.

"And when someone helps you, show your gratitude," Sophie continued. "It doesn't have to be much—a small gift, like some snacks or fruit, or even just a heartfelt 'thank you.' But you have to give back in some way. Since they're older, maybe you could offer to carry their bags, help them reach something, or run an errand to the market. What's unacceptable is to keep taking without ever giving anything in return."

"Okay. I can do that," Isadora replied.

The way she sat perfectly straight now and answered without a hint of annoyance prompted a smile from Sophie.

"It's impossible to raise a child alone, shut away in a locked room," Sophie said. "Even if it's hard, even if it doesn't make sense right now, please—for me—try to open yourself up to the people around you. Inside that room, it's just you and your mother. Outside, it's you and Aria. Which world would you choose for your child? Be brave. Unlock that door. Open it wide."

"Okay," Isadora said softly, then looked at Sophie with upturned eyes. "You know… You're sort of like a kind old grandma."

"Well, I take that as a compliment," Sophie replied with a smile.

Isadora chuckled, then her eyes went distant. "Makes you wonder why my mother couldn't do any of that for me."

"I'm sure your mother never had someone like Aria in her life."

Isadora smiled as if to say, *I'm sure that's right.*

Just then, a knock on the door came from Claire, arriving with more cake.



"THANK you. For everything today," Isadora said.

"It's no trouble," Sophie replied quickly. "No trouble at all."

Returned into Isadora's arms now was little baby Al, sleeping peacefully. A tiny, adorable bundle of joy.

"How cute," Sophie murmured.

"Isn't he?" Isadora replied. She thought momentarily before asking, "Would you like to hold him?"

Sophie blinked in surprise. "Are you…sure?"

Noticing her reaction, Isadora's brow knitted apologetically. "Sorry for the way I treated you at first. That was very rude of me."

"It's only natural," Sophie said.

"He *won't* catch it, right?"

It was a mother's prerogative to worry, so Sophie didn't take offense. "My parents handled me plenty, as did Martha and Claire, and they're still smooth as silk."

A few wrinkles notwithstanding, she added quietly to herself.

"Then…if you want, he's all yours," Isadora said.

“Thank you,” Sophie said, smiling gently. No doubt, the woman in front of her had taken her advice to heart and was already starting to practice gratitude. She took the swaddled bundle from Isadora and, careful to avoid any direct contact with her skin, held him against her chest.

His plump, almost translucent cheeks looked irresistibly soft, squishing out his tiny lips as they puckered, shifting slightly in a suckling motion as he slept while his long eyelashes fluttered ever so gently. Sophie could feel his warmth, the rhythmic rise and fall of his breathing in her arms—a tender sensation that tickled against her chest and filled her heart with love.

“He’s adorable,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Isadora watched the tender scene unfolding before her, then suddenly spoke, her voice carrying a newfound resolve.

“Um, Sophie.”

“What is it?” she looked up.

“Since you healed me, I wanted to say something here and now.” Isadora shifted the hand on her belly, placing it over her heart, where Isadora’s god resided. “One day, I’m going to entertain people with my dancing, and I won’t have to take my clothes off to do it. Just like this god of mine does.”

Sophie’s expression softened into a warm smile. The woman before her, backlit by the setting sun, seemed almost aflame. She stood tall, resolute, as if ready to take on the world.

“Yes, of course you will,” Sophie replied.

And of that, she had no doubt.



WITH her child on her back, Isadora walked away from the gate, pausing every few steps to glance back at Sophie and Sherlotte, who waved her off with warm smiles.

When Isadora finally disappeared from view, their hands dropped, and they stood quietly, basking in the moment.

“I’m starting to want a grandchild,” Sherlotte said.

“I knew you were going to say that,” Sophie replied with a knowing smile. “Anyway, what’s for dinner?”

They turned and made their way back to the front door, Sophie’s steps unusually light.

When she stepped inside, she was surprised to find the newborn’s soft, kitten-like wails, and his sweet scent still seemed to linger in the now-empty estate.



“MILADY, Sir Kurt Ozhorn is here to see you.”

“Yes, let him in.”

“And the door?”

“Keep it open, please.”

“As you wish.”

Not long after this brief exchange between Sophie and Martha…

“Ms. Sophie, I hope I’m not intruding.”

The irritating man and his irritating voice appeared in the doorway. Not pausing the steady rhythm of knitting needles in her hands, Sophie granted him entry and looked up.

“I’ve come to return my— Oh?” Noticing what Sophie was knitting, Kurt paused. “Expecting, are you, Ms. Sophie? I would congratulate you, but I’m unable to fathom how that happened without a spouse.”

“You know, Mr. Ozhorn, most people start a conversation with ‘hello’ and ‘how are you,’” Sophie replied dryly. “This isn’t for me. It’s for a friend,” she added, gesturing to the tiny pair of half-finished socks.

She’d started on the gift for Al as soon as Isadora left and hoped to finish it before the cold season set in. Sophie gazed fondly at the half-finished piece of red yarn in her hands and smiled, which prompted a series of studious nods from Kurt.

“I see,” he said. “But I’ve heard that clothing doesn’t make for great gifts on account of this thing called ‘personal taste.’ How are you accounting for that factor, I wonder?”

"Tell me, have you ever heard the phrase, 'not all truths are meant to be told'?"

Her buzz killed, Sophie set down her needles. She looked up at Kurt; his skin was as smooth and flawless as ever. He didn't miss a beat as he walked coolly past her and straight to the bookshelf, where he returned his book to its proper place. This was the moment Sophie always looked forward to—the part where she got to ask for his impressions.

"And how did you find yourself enjoying that one?" she asked.

"Very well, thank you," Kurt replied. "I've read it ten times but could probably go for ten more. By the way, Ms. Sophie."

"Yes?"

"How would you like it if I tried my healing arts on you today?"

Sophie froze, her eyes flaring out wide. Though, as usual, Kurt didn't so much as flinch.

"Healers need permission from the crown to use their powers outside their assigned infirmary. But those ranked three and above can use their powers in emergencies—only in emergencies, though. Otherwise, we'll be disciplined."

"And this is an emergency…how?"

"It's not. So mum's the word," he replied without a trace of irony.

Sophie stared at him in disbelief, unable to believe what this serious, serious man had proposed. But then her lips quivered. "You shouldn't."

"The rule exists only to discourage healers from using their mana for private purposes," Kurt said. "But I'm only healing the skin—I'll hardly expend any."

Sophie bit down on her lip, but Kurt didn't back down.

"As I've told you before, Ms. Sophie, I don't understand why your condition bothers you so."

"Right. Just a little inflammation of the skin," Sophie said, recalling his words.

"But I don't need to understand it to see how much it bothers you. Your life and your dignity have been defined by it."

She said nothing.

“Don’t you deserve to be made whole, too?”

She felt like crying. Though crying at words delivered so emotionlessly felt like losing, so she held it in.

“It won’t matter,” she finally said. “You’ll heal it. But it’ll just come back.”

“We won’t know that unless we try,” Kurt said. “If one thing fails, we try another. That’s why it’s called practicing medicine.”

Sophie didn’t respond.

“So don’t blame me if this doesn’t work.”

And she burst out laughing. The absurdity of hearing that from such a serious face was too much. “All right, Mr. Ozhorn. I get it. Then I’m in your hands. Please.”

She rose and gently pushed the door closed.

“Door closed?” Kurt asked.

“Yes. It’s a secret, isn’t it? I trust you.”

“I was rather hoping you didn’t.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Sophie sat back down, and Kurt pulled up a chair, settling directly across from her. Two large palms suddenly loomed into her field of view.

She closed her eyes. In the darkness, her heartbeat thumped loudly in her ears. A flash of light seeped through her eyelids. Then, an intense heat. The heat seemed to penetrate deep, deep into her skin. It was far too intense to resemble any gentle healing—it felt more like standing under the scorching sun on a hot summer afternoon.

Then, the light faded. Sophie opened her eyes.

She touched her face; she felt smoothness—her heart skipped a beat.

But then, in the very next moment, it split open like a rift in the earth, and hard little sores, one by one, reappeared across her face.

Sophie calmly set down her hand.

“Ms. Sophie,” Kurt said.

“No, no, it’s all right,” she interrupted, “We tried. It didn’t work. At least now we know.”

She smiled then, though she wasn't sure who she was trying to fool. Even as the words left her lips, she could feel tears streaming down her face—unstoppable, one after another.

She had dared to hope.

Maybe—just maybe—Kurt's powers could have changed things.

But that hope was gone now, and as the sobs threatened to break free, she clapped her hands over her mouth, breathing in deeply, desperately, trying to stifle the sounds that wanted to escape.

That a strong, steadying hand reached out to calm her heaving shoulders only to falter and retreat at the last moment, Sophie didn't even realize.

"I hadn't expected to make you cry today," Kurt said.

"Forgive me," Sophie choked out.

"Which is why I didn't bring a handkerchief. I'd expected to make you smile instead."

"Don't apologize, please. It's my fault for crying."

Through the tears, Sophie mustered up a paper-thin smile before dipping her head in quiet gratitude.

Kurt studied Sophie in silence.

"I didn't know failing to heal someone could feel so frustrating," he finally said.

Sophie remained quiet, her gaze fixed downward.

"Please accept my apologies. I truly believed I could make a difference."

Hearing that, Sophie could no longer hold back. The dam broke, and her tears freely flowed as she cried out her pain. Kurt sat there quietly, watching her with his usual composed expression, his eyes steady as they studied hers.



THE crying, for the most part, had subsided, and only the quiet sounds of sniffling could be heard from the sofa as Sophie restarted her work on the little red socks.

Kurt was sitting on his chair, reading a book.

"By the way, Ms. Sophie."

"Still not engaged yet, thank you very much."

"Do you like children?"

The question caught Sophie off guard, and she stilled her hands. Suddenly, she remembered Al—that utterly adorable little creature. His sweet scent. His tiny, soft hands with fingernails like delicate baby clams. His downy, plump cheeks. The way he leaned fully against her as if completely trusting of these larger versions of himself.

"I love them," Sophie said softly. "I'd like to have my own one day."

"But you'd need a partner for that first," Kurt said.

"Yes, I'm working on that. Though…"

Sophie thought about the logistics for a second. Her tough, bark-like skin wasn't limited to her face—it covered every part of her body. Her elbows and knees, in particular, were practically as hard as rocks.

"It might be quite difficult, actually, conceiving," Sophie said. "Unless there's a man out there who likes being covered in an unholy combination of pus, blood, and God-knows-what every time we do the deed."

She laughed off her self-deprecating joke, but as the words settled, they tore a sharp hole in her chest.

"Don't you deserve to be made whole, too?" Kurt's words from earlier echoed in her mind.

It was entirely true. Every time Sophie helped another, every time she saw the change she could bring to their lives, a quiet thought would surface: *When will it be my turn?* That small tinge of envy, of unfairness, would creep out from some errant corner of her heart.

She'd dared to hope this time, which made the disappointment all the more painful. Because it still wasn't her turn. Because it hinted at the possibility that it might never be her turn. If someone like Kurt couldn't heal her, then who could?

And if her turn never came, then she could kiss her dreams goodbye. The dream of loving someone and holding her own child in

her arms one day. She'd never be someone's wife, never be someone's mother—just the monster who could heal the afflictions of others' skin while remaining trapped in her own.

"And if there was a man out there who likes being covered in an unholy combination of pus, blood, and God-knows-what every time you did the deed?"

The voice was startlingly close. Sophie looked up and found Kurt standing right beside her—their eyes meeting.

"If such a man appeared," he continued, his gaze unwavering, "would you accept him?"

His eyes were always on her—so direct, so penetrating as if always searching for the shortest path to her heart.

"It's getting late, Mr. Ozhorn," she said, setting her knitting needles aside. "Dinner will be served soon, so I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Kurt complied, but not without selecting a new book to take with him. As his broad back disappeared through the doorway, Sophie sank onto the sofa, covered her face with her hands, and wept.

Bonus Chapter: Annie Crocodile

ANNIE Crocodile sat gracefully in the center of a square of bamboo screens. Her dark, glossy scales gleamed under the sunlight, scattering tiny, glimmering dots of light across the room.

"Your Highness," her attendant said.

"Yes?" Annie replied.

"Joseph Abascal is here to see you."

"Let him in."

The doors swung open. There, a figure kneeled respectfully, a stance that concealed his unusually prominent height. His shadow stretched across the floor, projecting against the other side of the bamboo screen.

Annie swallowed nervously; a crocodile's throat rumbled.

"Seeing me in my true form, why, that could drive a man to madness," Annie recalled once saying.

So why was she here now, about to reveal herself to the one man who might lose his sanity more than any other?

"Raise the screens," she commanded.

"Yes, Your Highness," came the immediate reply, and up the screens went.

Annie's golden eyes met the man's gaze behind his silver-rimmed eyeglasses, catching the flicker of fear as his eyes widened.

It had been five years since their first and only meeting.



PRINCESS Annie Crocodile was twelve when her father, the king, brought her to the crocodile breeding facility and its adjacent

research center for the first time, revealing the shocking truth of everything behind their kingdom.

Crocodilia, the Crocodile Kingdom, owed its very existence to the creature for which it was named. This was a lesson Annie's father had drilled into her time and again. If that hadn't been enough to instill in her a deep respect and gratitude for these fearsome predators, growing up amongst the gold and copper statues of the animal littered throughout their castle certainly did.

But on that day, her father brutally tore the scales from her eyes. Perhaps he believed Annie was ready to face the truth, or he thought it was the only way to prepare her for the burdens of rulership—no one could say for certain. Ready or not, Annie was confronted with the grim reality head-on. She learned what it truly meant to be a creature worthy of having a kingdom named in its honor.

"I would like some fresh air—and to be alone," Annie said.

Sensing a young girl's need for privacy, her father granted her request. This was a vital facility of the kingdom. The only people admitted into this heavily guarded bastion were harmless researchers carefully chosen for their loyalty to the royal family.

Annie wandered out into the courtyard. She sat down at the feet of a great tree, drew her knees into a tight hug, and cried.

Grief, disbelief, and fear poured from her as tears while she sobbed alone in the courtyard. She wept for the crocodiles—the creatures she had cherished since childhood—and for herself, crushed by the weight of a sin she had no choice but to inherit. The cruelty of it all, the unimaginable sacrifice that enabled her people's survival, loomed before her like a shadow she could neither outrun nor escape.

And yet, she didn't think to condemn her ancestors for their inhumanity. They had—though, at a cost—carved a kingdom from nothing, forging greatness from emptiness.

What could Annie truly do? Reject this burden? Condemn her people for their sins and outlaw the cruelty that sustained them? Perhaps, if she were a wide-eyed idealist. But to do so would condemn countless others to poverty, hunger, and despair. The

kingdom's survival demanded a bearer for its sins. And who would bear it if not the princess, the symbol of the kingdom and all its people?

Suddenly, there was a rustling from the other side of the tree Annie was sitting against. She hurriedly wiped her tears and demanded with regal firmness, "Who goes there?" Her voice trembled slightly despite her efforts.

"Joseph Abascal," a young man's voice replied. "I'm a researcher."

"A researcher," Annie repeated. "What are you doing here?"

"Resting. I'm a bit anemic after a small research mishap, you see."

"Anemic?" Annie swung around the tree to take a look. She saw a young man at the base of the tree who looked to be in his twenties. He had bouncy black curls, glasses that looked like they were from the last century sitting loosely on his nose, and…a lot of blood dripping down the side of his arm.

"You're injured," Annie said, her eyes widening.

"A casualty of my own carelessness."

"Why haven't you called for a healer?"

"Because there's no need." His tone hardened, belying the soft look in his eyes. "It wasn't his fault. I got too close, beyond the required distance, and he, being the self-preserving creature he was, only acted naturally. If he were to be punished for my error, I couldn't live with myself."

"He?" Annie asked.

"The purple crocodile in lab room two."

"I see. Well. If you can't live with yourself, hopefully, you can live without an arm."

Joseph grimaced, looking at the cloth he pressed against the base of his arm. "I'm going to lose it, aren't I?"

"Some colorful crocodiles are venomous; surely a fact you knew better than me?"

"I did." He stared fixedly at his arm and the blood running freely down it. "I need this arm to shake test tubes."

"Yes, *that's* why you need the arm."

Annie shook her head in disbelief. About to lose a limb, and research was where this man's head went. Attacked by a crocodile, and the fate of the crocodile was what he was concerned with.

Her gaze rested on him as he languidly stared at his arm. *Fine, if he can't bring himself to care, then I will.*

Annie cleared her throat, drew her lips into a line, and when next she spoke, it was in the regal tone of a princess—of a ruler: "Joseph Pascal, I command you to summon a healer at once. Seek proper treatment, report this incident in full, and submit yourself to whatever discipline is deemed fitting. Should the blame rest not upon the crocodile, then it must rest upon you—so I trust you will accept your punishment with grace. But see to it that your arm is healed without delay. Its ability to shake test tubes and your ability to carry out research are treasures our kingdom cannot afford to lose."

Joseph said nothing, just stared at Annie through the lenses of his glasses.

Then he snorted a laugh. What Annie had thought were dark brown eyes suddenly revealed themselves to be brilliant baby blue, catching her off guard.

"As you will, Your Highness," he said.

"You knew who I was?" Annie's brow raised in surprise.

"Of course. How could I not recognize our kingdom's beautiful and wise princess?"

This time, it was Annie who said nothing and awkwardly averted her gaze.

"Wise." The word seemed to linger bitterly in the air, considering that this supposedly wise princess had been crying her eyes out just moments ago, terrified of the very duty she was born to shoulder.

Annie had an idea earlier. Though it wasn't one she'd dared speak to anyone. She feared she'd be made fun of or laughed at. But something about this moment, or perhaps about this person, made her comfortable. She sensed she could be vulnerable, speak her thoughts earnestly, and not be met with ridicule.

"Is there a way…" she began.

"Yes?"

"To skin crocodiles without causing them pain?"

Joseph's eyes widened slightly.

Annie's voice broke as tears welled up and spilled over—big, glistening tears. Tears she felt she had no right to shed, yet ones she shed all the same.

"I want our kingdom to thrive without their sacrifice. And without the sacrifice of those who hunt them," she went on. "But building something new takes time. It may not even happen in my lifetime. If so, then all right, but I want to at least see that day come."

Joseph said nothing.

"The day when their suffering finally ends."

Her mind was full of the images of the crocodiles that writhed in agony, surely screaming if they had the voice to.

Again, she wasn't naive enough to denounce the barbarity of the act simply because it clashed with her sensibilities. Without it, her kingdom would falter—its prosperity lost, its citizens left to starve and perish.

So if she couldn't abolish it, then at the very least, she wanted to grant the creatures peace—let them drift painlessly into death as though carried gently to heaven's gates. She knew all too well this was self-delusion, that no lives would be saved, and this amounted to nothing more than a misguided attempt to soothe her own conscience. Yet, even understanding that, she couldn't stop herself from yearning for it, from asking for that small mercy.

For a while, she wept. And for a while, Joseph studied her with his deep blue eyes. "I'm of the same idea, Your Highness," Joseph said. "Which is why my work has been on researching anesthesia."

"Anesthesia?" Annie looked up at the young man, her eyes filled with hope. He met her gaze and softened his expression, reflecting that hope back at her.

"It's a medicine that would let us skin them without causing pain or damage to their skin. The research is still in the very early stages. The earliest stage, in fact."

He handed Annie a handkerchief, which she accepted to wipe away her tears. The fabric was simple yet impeccably clean, and as she dabbed her face, it felt as though it absorbed more than just her tears—it seemed to take her grief and pain with it. Her tears ceased.

Or perhaps those deep, ocean-blue eyes gazing into hers compelled them to stop.

"I've run the numbers myself," Joseph continued. "Floristry, agriculture, gold, and silversmithing are our next largest industries, but even combined, they aren't enough to fill our kingdom's coffers and won't be for a long while yet." His gaze met hers, unwavering. "That is why I became a researcher. If we can't wean ourselves off the sacrifice of the crocodile in time, then I'll dedicate my life to easing their suffering. It means more than I can say to know you, Princess Annie—the future of our kingdom—share the same values as I do."

Annie was momentarily speechless, lost in the intensity of his gaze. It was a breach of decorum to look at royalty so boldly, but she couldn't even bring herself to object.

"Given how many livelihoods depend on the crocodile," he continued, his voice steady, "the earliest we might end their suffering is in our children's time—or even their children's time. I used to think it might be impossible. But now, knowing you will be leading us, I feel hope—true hope—for the first time in years. Indeed. It seems you're not only wise and beautiful, Your Highness, but deeply compassionate, not just toward your fellow man but crocodiles as well. Today, you've given me more than I could have dreamed: a reason to believe in a better future."

New tears fell. This time, Annie didn't bother to wipe them away. Instead, she pulled her own handkerchief from her breast pocket—an ornate piece of fabric—and carefully tied it around the man's arm.

"Call a healer," she said. "Make sure it's properly tended."

"As you will."

Joseph glanced at the makeshift bandage, then rose to his feet. He was taller than Annie had anticipated—thin, with spindly arms and legs.

Their eyes met. The fleeting moment of contact sent an unexpected warmth through her, though she maintained her royal poise.

"I expect great things from you, Joseph Pascal," she said, her voice steady.

"Your Highness."

With that, Joseph bowed, turned, and walked away.

Once alone, Annie let the unfamiliar warmth linger for a moment longer than she should have. When she recognized it for what it was, her chest tightened. She gritted her teeth, forcing the sensation back, smothering it.

She was a princess. Nothing good could come from letting such feelings take root.

Quiet tears slipped down her cheeks. She reached for the handkerchief she still clung to, intending to wipe them away, but upon realizing what it was, what it signified, she raised her arm to discard it but faltered, the motion incomplete.

She lowered her arm, and her gaze fell to the plain white cloth. She pressed it against her chest before tucking it carefully into her breast pocket. One hand rested over her heart as she steadied herself with a deep breath, her thoughts turning to her duty, her kingdom. Wiping her tears, she composed her face with the dignity befitting a future queen.

But even then, the faint pressure of the handkerchief in her pocket remained.



THE bamboo blinds lifted, revealing the same eccentric researcher she remembered; five years had done nothing to change him. Just as in their first meeting, at first glance, his eyes seemed an ordinary brown, but when they widened, they revealed themselves to be a stunning shade of baby blue.

Though this time, they had widened in quite the shock. "Princess Annie?" Joseph said.

“The one and only,” Annie replied smoothly. “You remember my voice, don’t you? It’s been a while, Joseph.”

His blue eyes seemed to glow brighter with every passing moment, fixed on Annie with an almost enraptured intensity. His entire body leaned subtly forward as though lifted by some invisible force. Though his arms remained politely at his sides, the tension in them was palpable, as if resisting an overwhelming urge to reach out and touch her.

Impressive, Annie thought. She had expected the “madness” to take hold immediately, but it seemed he had more self-control than she’d given him credit for.

She let out a soft snort of amusement, then got off her chair and walked towards Joseph, going, of course, *plap, plap, plap.*

“What?” she said, playfully feigning offense. “Not going to ask to see the inside of my mouth? Don’t want to stick your arm inside? Go on, whatever you need for your research.”

“I can touch you?!” he blurted out.

“You may.”

“Oh-oh!”

Joseph practically tripped over himself as he rose to his feet, only to kneel again. He took his princess’s hand reverently in his own. None of it was usual. Not the blush in his cheeks or the gleam in his eye. Everything about him screamed the urge to turn Annie inside and out, measure and study every inch of her body—just as Annie had expected.

“Your back…may I?” Joseph requested.

“Do as you wish,” Annie replied.

“Thank you, Your Highness!”

“Oh, but you should know,” she added casually, “word has come from my father—you’re to be my husband.”

He froze in place.

“Please. Don’t pretend that seeing me like this has left you anything less than absolutely thrilled.”

“Correct, princess.”

The lack of hesitation in his response, the deepening flush of his cheeks, and the unmistakable joy radiating from him all filled

Annie with a sense of relief. And yet, in a darker, more cautious corner of her heart, doubt stirred.

Joseph loved crocodiles—that much was beyond question.

But what about Annie?

The Annie who walked on two legs, with skin instead of scales, teeth instead of fangs—did Joseph love that Annie?

As quickly as the doubts arose, Annie tried to chase them from her mind. Those weren't thoughts she needed to entertain. Feelings, love—such things had no place in a royal marriage. But then, a droplet of water fell onto the back of her hand. Startled, she looked up; Joseph was crying.

"It makes you that happy?" the words gently tumbled out.

Indeed, the man before her was more perverse than she'd ever thought possible. A crocodile freak, research nerd. The type to forget even to eat if he thought he was on the cusp of discovering something great.

"What else could make me happier?" Joseph said through his tears. "From that day forward, you've never left my thoughts. I see it—those proud, compassionate tears streaming down your face, the strength in your posture even as you faltered. I hear it still—your trembling voice, steady even as fear tried to break it. Not a single day has passed without you in my mind."

He reached into his pocket and drew out a handkerchief—the very one Annie had dressed around his arm all those years ago.

"I told myself it was impossible—that a bookish man like me, whose hands were meant for turning pages, not holding women, could ever hope to win the heart of someone as regal and beautiful as you. So I buried those impertinent feelings deep, convincing myself they would fade in time. But they never did. Instead, I threw myself into my research, hoping that if my work could bear fruit and serve you, it might be my quiet way of loving you.

"To live to see this day, to feel this happiness…" His fingers trembled as they gently traced the ridges of Annie's hard, scaly hand. "And to behold this magnificent form of yours… Oh, I could die. I could die this very instant!"

"Please don't," Annie said immediately. "Not until we've had children."

"Yes, how many do you want? Twelve? Twenty-four?"

"*Human* children, please."

She gently swatted him with her tail and closed her eyes. To no avail, however, as eventually, the tears did fall—big, glistening drops.

"Isn't that what you deserve, Annie? Someone you can be entirely honest with, who loves you—both sides of you—with all their heart?"

Annie nodded silently to the echo of that beautiful voice from her memory.

There had been someone out there. Someone foolish enough, brave enough, to love her—all of her—even the tears she shouldn't have shed.

One day, she hoped to make it back to that magical salon, this time with the love of her life at her side. Because she knew the girl who ran it would smile for her and feel genuine joy for her happiness.

She cast her gaze out the window, her thoughts drifting to that bustling port town.

Happiness—please find her, that beautiful, kind girl bound within the walls of that estate.

Hope—won't you reach her? She's been hurt enough; she deserves it no longer.

Annie made this wish as her hand rested in the hands of the one she loved, as his eyes beheld her with unspoken devotion. She wished for that same warmth and love to find its way to her.

The tears continued to fall, and as they did, Joseph took out another handkerchief. White, unadorned, just like the last one. Seeing it, Annie couldn't help but smile.

Epilogue: Silver

"I'M hooome!" the gruff and boisterous Captain Silver of the Olzon Fleet triumphantly bellowed as he flung open the door to his home, his voice ringing with exultation.

"Hey, Dad," came the reply—not his wife's voice, as he'd expected, but his…

"Daughter!" he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with delighted surprise. "Come ta visit, have ye?"

She held up a basket. "The neighbors dropped off some fruit, so mom wanted me to take some home."

Silver looked fondly at his daughter. Tempered by marriage and motherhood, she was no longer the whimsical little girl he once cradled but a woman who grew ever more like her mother with each passing year.

"But, really, Mom," she said, turning to the woman next to her, "are you sure I should take this much? You've barely left anything for yourself!"

"It's fine, darling," came the reply. "How much can an old man and woman possibly eat?"

"I mean…have you seen Dad?"

"No, no, don't fuss! Give 'em all to wee Margot—tiny little thing needs it far more than this old salt and his missus!" Silver said and erupted into booming laughter, the kind that seemed to shake the very walls. He could just picture his tiny granddaughter with her cherubic little cheeks. Better, he figured, to nourish a child with all that fruit than to let it sit idly with an old couple destined to kick the bucket soon enough.

"Well, if you're sure," the daughter relented, tucking the basket into the crook of her arm. "By the way, Dad?"

"What's it, lass?" he growled, his daughter's low voice catching his attention.

"I wanted to apologize. For last time. I totally didn't look into things, and as a result, *that* happened."

That. Must've been talking about the episode where he was chased out of the public bath for having tattoos. Seeing the apologetic look on his daughter's face, he broke out into a grin as wide as the horizon. Then, without a word, he yanked off his shirt and threw it to the floor. Paying no mind to whatever his wife or daughter might've been thinking, he spun around to show them his back.

He looked over his shoulder to gauge their reactions. His daughter's jaw was on the floor. His wife didn't so much as flinch. But if there was one thing decades of being together let him know, it was that she was just as stunned as their girl.

"How…?" his daughter murmured in disbelief.

"The little miss daughter o' the director—turns out she learned a touch o' light magic. Waved her hand, said some fancy words, and poof, the whole thing disappeared!"

Silver looked at his daughter; she was speechless. He then looked at his wife; she was expressionless. Boring, but at least she wasn't rubbing her face all over his unblemished back like a certain company president.

He couldn't be bothered to put on his shirt anymore, so he picked it up and threw it over his shoulder. "Anyway, that's the gist of it so invite me again sometime, why don't ye?"

"I'll… I'll try," his daughter finally said. "You know those tickets weren't exactly easy to get?"

"Aye. Sorry ta trouble ye again."

"No, not at all." Tears welled in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Dad. And… thanks."

"What fer?"

"Nothing."



HIS daughter left, clutching the overflowing basket of fruit. As Silver stood in the doorway waving her off, his wife silently approached from behind. She ran her fingers across his back, then pressed her cheek against it, but still no rubbing.

"What're ye doin'?" he asked, his voice warm with amusement. "Gonna fall head over heels fer me all over again?"

"No. Just thinking about how you've become a real old geezer."

"Well, can't outpace Father Time, can ye?"

"Well, if there was one captain that could…"

His wife pulled away, and Silver turned to look at the woman he married. She was caring, even-tempered, and effortlessly beautiful, and he often wondered what twist of fate had brought her into his life. Time had softened the tautness of her skin and woven silver through her raven-black hair, yet none of it diminished her beauty in his eyes.

The bold tattoo on Silver's back had once been a badge of honor—a mark of manhood and masculinity in his youth. It stood as proof of blood spilled and bravery earned, embodying everything he valued in those days.

So when did it come to him that true masculinity was in something else entirely? Had it been when he'd settled down? Married? Had children? Or perhaps it was when he found steady work, placing trust in the director and earning the trust of his subordinates in return.

Maybe it happened in one of those moments; maybe it happened in all of them. Or, there was a stark after and before. Like a switch had flipped, the pursuit of glory, violence, and honor no longer were the most important things. It became about protecting his home, family, team, and company.

Silver's back had once been his pride. But now, his pride lay in the people and purpose that stood behind it. Unlike the tattoo, this pride wasn't flashy, tangible, or visible, but it was far more real, steadfast, and deeply rewarding.

"What's fer dinner?" Silver asked.

"Bread, soup, the usual—plus a roast chicken. Mushrooms were fresh today, so I put plenty in the soup," his wife replied.

“Lucky me, that’s me favorite.”

“I know,” she replied with a knowing smile.

Silver gently eased himself into a dining chair. Before long, the table was set with hot, familiar dishes, and his wife took her seat across from him. It was the start of a meal they had shared countless times before—and would share countless times again.

Epilogue: Yvonne

YVONNE pushed open the stately front door, its surface worn smooth from age, and announced her return.

“Welcome home, darling.” Her bear was there to greet her. His hair had thinned, his roundness grown rounder, and his hands, as usual, were caked in dirt, evidence of his latest muddy exploits. He regarded her with a warm, affectionate gaze as she approached.

“Have you been out playing with your tubers again?” Yvonne asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he replied with a nod, “Next, I think I’ll try developing one that thrives in colder climates.”

A proud smile graced his face—not the smug expression of an arrogant liege lord lounging in his castle while peasants toiled below, but the contented smile of someone who had worked the fields alongside his people and shared in their prosperity.

Yvonne’s features softened into a smile. Perhaps it was all the reminiscing she had done today, but her chest felt light, brimming with that same feeling she’d had when she had thrown herself into his arms that day.

“Tea? I picked up your favorite today,” she said.

“Did you?” he replied. “Then yes, I’d love a cup.”

He smiled warmly at her, and an amusing thought crept into Yvonne’s mind. That even if she had returned home sans mole today, she doubted he would have even noticed. If she’d asked, *notice anything different?* At best, he’d reply, *did you cut your hair?* And that would be that. But Yvonne didn’t complain. Because that was simply the kind of man she married.

A quiet chuckle escaping her, Yvonne turned on her heel toward the kitchen. Only one person in the household knew how hot he liked his tea. Her.

Her husband, seemingly aware that Yvonne's spirits had lifted after a recent blue spell, looked pleased as well. His smile grew ever wider.

Noticing this, Yvonne stopped. "Darling."

"Yes, my dear?" he replied, his tone gentle.

She smiled. "Nothing," she said as she resumed her stroll toward the kitchen. It all felt so magical then—how a solitary girl and her mole had ended up like this. And to think, if her mother had found the courage back then to burn it off, none of this would have been her life.

It wasn't quite summer yet, but some industrious summerbugs had already begun their rhythmic chirping. Yvonne's thoughts drifted to her mother and the love she'd shown that day—a love etched in the tears of a woman agonizing over a decision that would irrevocably shape her daughter's future. How many years had her mother carried the guilt, blaming herself for the burden of that mole she had passed down? She'd been a woman much younger than Yvonne was now, bearing a burden of guilt and love in equal measure.

"Thank you, Mother," Yvonne whispered. Her steps felt light, and she was just a shade of a mood away from bursting into a cheerful hum.

"Thank you," she repeated.

Yvonne walked with large, confident strides as if stepping over the phantom image of the defenseless child she once was and the mother who had loomed above her. Love—she had received it then. Now, it was her turn to give it. Its shape, its color—she knew them intimately. Through magic, coincidence, or whatever force of nature it had been, she had been tenderly enveloped by love, time and again.

As she brewed the tea, the hum finally escaped her lips. Preparing the tray, she added the small treats thoughtfully arranged

by the cook. She carried it back towards her husband, her back straight and her smile proud.

Soft light illuminated her as she walked. No doubt, her husband was now diligently scrubbing his hands, eager to avoid the scolding she had given him countless times before.

Unaware the tune she was humming was the same one she used to sing so long ago, all alone in the flower patch as she tended her blooms, Yvonne kept smiling and walking.

Epilogue: Scrumptious

DECADENT confections from the Olzon estate, a bottle of dry wine—his father's favorite—from the market, leafy greens, crusty bread, smoked meats, and cheese a little bit better than he'd usually allow himself to buy, all weighed heavily in Scrumptious's arms as he walked home. At the market, no one had spared him a second glance—a sense of normalcy he wasn't sure he'd ever grow accustomed to.

As he stood before the battered, timeworn door that marked the entrance to his house, he was reminded, once again, of the stark contrast between his life and that of people like the Olzons.

"I'm home," he called out, pushing the door open.

"Welcome back," came the immediate reply from his mother, not even bothering to hide the fact that she'd been waiting anxiously all this time. Only then did she glance up from her knitting to meet her son's face. Her knitting needles and the half-finished piece slipped from her hands, clattering to the floor.

Two steps.

That was as far as Scrumptious made it into the house before he had to stop, fearing his knees might give out under the weight. He set down his things and stretched his arms, watching as his mother slowly approached. She reached out, her hand trembling slightly, to touch his face. As her fingers traced every line of his face, tears began streaming down her weathered cheeks.

A weak, broken warble escaped her lips as her knees buckled, but Scrumptious caught her, pulling her into an embrace before she could collapse. Her frail frame felt so light, so fragile in his arms—nothing like the lively, stout woman he remembered.

She clung to him, her body trembling as she sobbed. "I'm so sorry…for everything…"

"It's not your fault," Scrumptious murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Please, forgive me," she cried, her voice breaking. "Forgive this hapless, old mother of yours…"

Please stop, Mom, Scrumptious thought, his throat tightening as tears pricked at his eyes. *Or you're going to make me cry, too.*

Never once had Scrumptious's parents pitied him or called him a "poor thing." They had known, instinctively, that doing so would only validate the sadness he carried and make it harder for him to bear.

For a while, he let his mother have her moment—crying, touching, and holding him as if he were still her baby.

But before long, a third presence, heavier and gruffer, loomed beside them. Scrumptious looked up, expecting and seeing none other than his father.

"Father," Scrumptious said, his voice uncertain.

His father didn't reply. His gruff face remained set, the lines of determination deepening…hardening…until, without warning, he dropped to his knees and prostrated himself before his son.

"Father?!"

"Sorry, my boy," his father said, his voice trembling.

Scrumptious stared in disbelief at the sight before him—his father's head bowed so low that his bald spot was glaringly visible as he pressed his forehead to the floor.

"I wonder," his father whispered, his voice breaking, "if ye can ever forgive me."

The apology washed over Scrumptious like a wave, leaving him silent, adrift. He could only stare at his father's bone-white fists, clenched so tightly they trembled, the scars and burns on his knuckles starkly visible when pulled taut against his skin.

Those hands. They had beaten him, ripped up the flyer to his dream school—taught him everything he knew.

His eyes shifted to his father's hunched back. It looked like an old, withered tree trunk, gnarled and bent by years of wind and weight.

His parents had never apologized to him—not once. They had not even so much as expressed a word of sympathy. Was it coldness? Or had they refrained because they wanted him to keep moving forward? If even his own parents had lamented what had become of him, would he have been able to go on? Now, their apologies came only because the scars were gone. He knew, with certainty, that if he had never sought out that magical salon, those words of remorse would have remained forever unsaid.

He was so glad he had sought it out. Tears blurred his vision as he savored his father's halting apology, tasting the rawness of it like something rare and long overdue.

"Okay, Mom, Dad, that's enough of that," he finally said. "I bought wine and snacks, so let's drink and eat."

He returned his mother's tear-streaked smile, gently nudged his father to his feet, and made his way to the kitchen. Pulling out the cutting board and knife, he prepared the food, letting the familiar motions ground him.

Suddenly, he remembered, and his hand drifted to his earlobe, his fingers meeting the rough, scarred texture there. A single tear slipped down his cheek. He bit his lip hard, holding back the flood threatening to follow.

I'll never forget it, he thought. *The days of being an outcast, of being seen as a monster. I'll never forget the misery, the shame, the depths of how deplorable I felt. And I'll never forget how fortunate I am now to have the rest of my life ahead of me while others still remain hidden in the shadows, consigned to their disfigurement.*

That was why he had left that bit unhealed. It was a deliberate reminder so he would never forget.

Make good food. Never lose sight of the pain of being downtrodden and misjudged, no matter how far he'd come. That

was all he could do. Make good food—not just because it was what he loved, but because it was his gift.

He had been given a second chance, a new lease to wield that gift, to serve food so scrumptious that someone might savor it and think: *I'm glad I made it to this point alive if only to taste this.*

Silently, he set to work, preparing a modest meal without the use of their hearth. A fresh salad. Simple sandwiches of cheese and smoked meat. The decadent confections he'd brought home. He arranged everything neatly on a plate, then pulled out three glasses. The sun still hung high in the sky, but if there was ever a day that called for drinking before dusk, it was this one.

With a soft smile and tears brimming in his eyes, Scrumptious quietly went about preparing their meal.

Epilogue: Lily

"I'M back," Lily announced, pushing open the service entrance to her family's inn.

"Lily!" Her mother was the first to rush out, her voice sharp with worry. "Just where have you been? Do you have any idea what time it…" The reprimand died on her lips as she froze, her eyes fixed on Lily's face.

Lily smiled. And the tears that she had just managed to hold back began to spill once more. "Did you miss me?"

Her mother stood motionless, her breath hitching as she raised a trembling hand toward Lily's cheek. "How?" she finally whispered.

"Could you get everyone?" Lily said, her tone firm despite the tears streaming down her face. "I have to tell you all something."

But her mother remained rooted to the spot, unable to move, her wide eyes still locked on her daughter's face.



A heavy silence engulfed the room. Father, Mother, Brother—all sat frozen, their faces etched with disbelief as the weight of Lily's

confession settled over them.

She told them everything—the betrayal she had committed against a friend. The same friend who had healed the scars on her face. Though that betrayal was no longer held against her, Lily couldn't forgive herself. Her story was halting, interrupted repeatedly by her own self-recriminations, but she pushed through to the end.

Her father had reacted the most viscerally. His face had shifted with every word, turning blue, red, and every color in between as he listened. But as Lily finished, his features hardened, and one emotion emerged dominant: *rage*.

"We will go and apologize," he said at last, his voice low and trembling with barely suppressed fury, his fists clenched tight at his sides.

"Honey…" The mother said.

"We will *go and apologize*," he repeated. "We will bow, grovel if we have to—but we will do whatever it takes to ask for her forgiveness. The way you treated that girl… I can hardly believe it! How many apologies would it take to… No, not even a hundred would be enough! I wouldn't forgive so easily if I were in her place. Nothing can excuse your behavior, Lily. Nothing! What you did was… was unforgivable! I'm going now. Don't try to stop me!"

"At this hour?" the mother said gently. "Are you trying to make things worse?"

"I said don't try and stop me!" the father barked back. "For all the pain we've caused, they can strike me as many times in return! At least then, it'll make things right!"

"Enough," the brother interjected firmly. "You're not trying to make things right, Dad; you're trying to ease your own guilt. We will apologize. But we'll do it right—by reaching out first, asking for an appointment, and going together. As a family. Right, Dad?"

At his son's calm and logical interjection, the father couldn't say anything. Slowly, he locked his hands together, pressing his thumbs against the corners of his brow as if trying to steady himself.

"I suppose I just don't believe it," he said at last, his voice unsteady after a long, cooling pause. "That she forgave you…just

like that." His words wavered, and his hands dropped as he looked up, eyes glistening.

"Oh, honey…" the mother whispered.

"She forgave you. And healed it all for you," he continued, his shoulders trembling with the effort to contain a sob. "Is she… Is she a saint, or what?"

That was all he could manage before he broke down, tears spilling freely.

Seeing their father cry, the rest of the family followed—mother, brother, and Lily alike. Together, their tears filled the quiet space. As Lily wiped her face, her fingers brushed against her smooth skin, the sensation of which only made her tears flow harder.

Held in her mother's warm embrace, her brother's hand gently stroking her back, Lily's thoughts drifted to Sophie, whose name alone filled Lily with a comforting warmth.

How could she ever repay the kindness Sophie had shown her? That kind girl. That sickly girl. That dignified girl.

When they were children, Sophie always sat the straightest, behaved the politest, acted the most mature. She never let anyone see her cry, but that didn't mean she never shed tears. Lily was certain that even now, behind closed doors, when no one was watching, Sophie's gentle smile might falter, and tears might streak down her face.

Sophie wasn't a monster. But she wasn't a saint either. She was just a girl—fragile, vulnerable, human. If you hurt her, she felt pain. If you cut her, she bled—a fact Lily unfortunately knew better than anyone.

How could she ever repay Sophie for not laughing at her face? For not telling her, "serves you right," and showing her the door, as she had every right to do? For not calling her a hypocrite, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a betrayer, and all the other unkind words that would have rung just as true?

Lily had been shown true compassion on this day. Sophie had swallowed her anger, sadness, pride, and ego—all for the sake of moving forward. No doubt Sophie had never wanted to see her face again. But not once did she let those emotions show. Instead, she

had offered Lily only a gentle smile, her hands steady and careful as she healed her with kindness and grace.

Lily held that memory close, her chest tightening at the thought. She gritted her teeth, clenched her fists, and let determination course through her. One day, she vowed, she would repay Sophie. No matter what it took.

Suddenly, an employee of theirs burst in. "Boss, can we get a hand in the dining area? They're killing us out there!"

Lily was the first to move. Before anyone could react, she'd wiped away her tears and tied an apron around her waist. "I'll go!"

"Lily, kitchen—" the mother directed before stopping herself and glancing up at Lily.

Lily's lips trembled one last time as she smiled and wiped the final tear on her apron. "I can work front of house now, can't I, Mom?"

Her mother said nothing, her eyes shimmering with emotion. Lily tightened her smile, and that was all it took—her father and brother broke down completely, their sobs loud and unrestrained. It was so strange to see her usually unflappable brother covering his face with his hands, crying into them like a child.

"All right, then," her mother said, her voice calm but firm. "Put on your brightest smile, Lily—one that'll make every customer want to come back. You can do that for me, can't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," she replied crisply.

The women in the room sprang into action, leaving the men to their tears. Well, they could have their moment, but someone had to do the work! Hungry mouths wouldn't feed themselves.

"Table three, order up! Wine's for them, too!" someone shouted from the kitchen.

"On it!" Lily called back.

"Bread's ready! Can you take it, ma'am?"

"I've got it," her mother replied briskly.

Mother and daughter strode side by side into the dining area, their hands full and their hearts fuller. Now stronger, more resilient, their warm, welcoming smiles said everything that needed to be said.

Epilogue: Scarlett

AFTER finishing her makeup, Scarlett studied her reflection in the mirror one last time. Over a layer of face powder, a faint touch of rouge sat upon her cheeks. Just enough to conjure the illusion of youth but a tired, weary youth. After all, this was supposed to be the immortal witch Ohara: young yet enigmatic, naïve yet ancient.

Indeed, the precise shade of scarlet on her cheeks was critical, and the best part was she could adjust it however she liked. No longer did she have to rely on a makeup artist. Not since she'd mastered the art herself.

She wore a high-collared navy-blue dress, the collar in question trimmed in gold. A delicate rose-shaped brooch was pinned to it—a quiet memorial to Ohara's love, one she was said to have cast aside. Her copy of the script in hand, she made her way to the rehearsal area. She could still memorize every line in a single reading—that much hadn't changed. But now, she liked to revisit the script every now and then, jot down little notes on her interpretation of the scenes—even those she didn't appear in.

As she stepped onto the set, she noticed that every gaze turned toward her. She felt a rush of nostalgia, and a smile curved her lips—an act that seemed to stir the hushed atmosphere into livelier murmurs.

"Hey, Scarlett," a voice called out. Turning, she saw a rather baby-faced man strolling toward her casually.

"Goodness, Eddy, is that you? How many years has it been?"

Eddy. Seeing him again was a delight. He'd been one of the more memorable actors she'd worked with before her injury. Back then, he'd still been an inexperienced newbie. She vividly remembered a dancing scene they'd shared, during which he'd stepped on her feet more times than she could care to count.

His approachable good looks had always been his greatest asset, earning him the role of the male lead opposite her. But on stage, he used to freeze like a deer in headlights—adorably so. The realization made Scarlett pause. She hadn't thought of him that way

back then, not even remotely. And yet, here she was, finding his charm strangely endearing now.

"I heard a fellow actor put a curse on you to turn you into a monster," Eddy said, giving her a once-over. "But I don't see no curse."

"Oh, the curse was real," Scarlett replied breezily. "But I met this little fairy who got rid of it for me. Now, I'm one hundred percent curse-free."

She cast her mind back to that day at the salon, where that "little fairy" had erased her scars. Most people, when they heard that a famous actor had been stabbed in the face, would rally behind the victim and denounce the attacker (any internal schadenfreude notwithstanding). But not this fairy. She had chosen a different path of empathy, even for the attacker. She mourned not only for Scarlett's suffering but also for the attacker's anguish, their heartbreak, and their sorrow.

It was this profound compassion, Scarlett believed, that truly broke the curse. She was convinced that in that long-abandoned dressing room, the sounds of weeping no longer lingered. The same gentle light that had lifted her scars had also delivered the earthbound spirit of her attacker from eternal limbo, guiding it to the heaven it deserved.

"Remind me," Eddy said, breaking through Scarlett's reverie. "Do we have a love scene in this one?"

"You're the king," Scarlett replied dryly. "What kind of adaptation would this be if we did?"

"Ah, darn it," Eddy said, shaking his head with exaggerated disappointment.

Scarlett chuckled.

"You free for dinner tonight? We've got a lot to catch up on, don't we?" Eddy asked.

"Not me," Scarlett said. "Sorry, but I'll be at home rehearsing."

"I could help," Eddy offered.

"No, you can't," Scarlett said, smiling just enough to signal the finality of her answer.

That small smile still on her face, she swept her gaze across the set, pausing briefly on each face she encountered. Him. Her. Him, and her—all of them the people who would share the role of Ohara with her. Excitement buzzed in her chest, a ticklish sensation that seemed to lift her off her feet.

She spread her arms out wide, just as she had on the day of her first big performance. "Now, let's put on a show, shall we? Our very own *Witch of Rididora.*"

Eddy said something beside her, but Scarlett was too caught up in the moment to catch his words. Smiling softly, she ran her fingers over the script in her hands.

Epilogue: Isadora

"MORNING," Isadora said.

It wasn't morning—it was night. But in that gentleman's club, what was night if not morning, and what was morning if not night?

Not long ago, Isadora would have waited silently in the wings, keeping to herself until it was her turn to step onto the stage. But lately, she'd gotten into the habit of greeting people. What surprised her most was how often they greeted her back.

Even the more standoffish girls, who shot sharp glances at Al and clicked their tongues in irritation, greeted her back. More than that, they *talked* to her. The former were standoffish because they had been working since morning. The latter couldn't help but react viscerally to Al because they had lost their own children. Those brief exchanges that simple "morning" facilitated were nothing short of eye-opening.

Isadora tried to do the same at home, though her efforts there had been far less successful. There was one rather disagreeable old woman there who always timed her sweeping of the common areas near Isadora's room when Isadora was returning from work in the early morning, just as she was about to fall asleep. The first time Isadora greeted her, the woman reacted like a corpse had sprung to life and started dancing a jig. For now, her only responses were

huffs and snorts, but Isadora held onto hope that one day, she'd receive a proper greeting in return.

Surprisingly, that stuck-up old lady was starting to grow on her. Isadora never thought she'd find someone like her oddly endearing.

The dancer on stage finished her routine and stepped back into the wings. She was a mother herself. When Isadora saw her, she gently offered up little, sleeping Al. Without a word of complaint, the dancer took the baby into her arms.

"Thanks," Isadora said.

"Not a problem," the dancer replied with a grin. "You know I appreciate a good tip."

"Of course. Where do I stick it?"

"No touching. You know the rules."

She blew Isadora a kiss, then headed off to take care of Al while Isadora danced. Isadora had always liked her. Both her large breasts and her bubbly personality.

With her arms now free, Isadora shifted focus. She stretched her arms and legs, loosening up and running through her routine in her head. Every move came together perfectly; she still had it.

One of their new dancers was slated to perform before Isadora. The girl was pale as a sheet, clearly nervous. Isadora had always suspected she came from a well-to-do background—something about her, from the way she spoke to the way she carried herself, had a refined air that reminded Isadora of Sophie. Even the way she danced hinted at a foundation of formal training. Whatever her story was, one thing was clear: she was no amateur.

Yet if her skill wasn't the issue, Isadora realized, it had to be the stripping that had the young dancer so on edge. That wasn't great. Sure, some customers liked a shy act, but just as many would complain if she couldn't deliver confidence on stage.

That was the business Isadora was in. Not every dancer was here out of sheer passion, as she was; many arrived by force of circumstance, bearing stories too painful to share. Normally, she would've stepped back and let the girl learn on her own. Lately, however, she'd found herself taking more of an interest. A certain busybody seemed to have rubbed off on her.

Without a word, she dropped a hand on the girl's shoulder, making her scream.

"Relax, you're stiffer than a board," Isadora said.

The girl's baby blue eyes looked accusingly at Isadora. She then bit down on her lip. "Aren't you embarrassed?" she asked.

Isadora said nothing, prompting the girl to look away.

"I'm embarrassed. I'm mortified just being here," she said.

Still, Isadora remained silent.

Not that she didn't bristle internally. *Embarrassing? Then why don't you pack up and go back to where you came from? If you can, that is!* That was what she would've said had she not bitten her tongue. But since that day in the salon, whenever she wanted to say something rude, she'd hear a stern voice scolding her from somewhere in the back of her mind. It felt motherly, even though the person behind that voice was younger than Isadora herself. How strange was that?

Isadora swallowed her harsher words and offered the new girl a gentle smile. "Embarrassed?" she asked. "I'm not embarrassed at all."

The girl looked up at her, uncertain.

"Maybe you're embarrassed to show off your dancing, but I never do a routine I'd feel ashamed of. If you hate it so much, then swap with me. I'm up for two songs."

That clearly wasn't the reassurance the girl needed. A frown formed on her face, and tears welled up in her baby-blue eyes.

Isadora sighed and placed her hands on the girl's bare shoulders. "Listen, I'm sorry. But you're here, aren't you? Maybe it's not by choice, but you are here. Keep your head down, do it enough, you'll get used to it. Trust me."

Startled, the girl flicked her gaze back up to study Isadora for a moment before dropping again. "All right," she whispered.

"Swap with me," Isadora said, releasing the girl's shoulder. "You haven't really seen me or the other dancers perform yet, right? We'll show you how it's done first and warm up the audience for you."

Isadora smiled warmly at the girl, hoping to convey her sincerity and passion. She was certain no one was more eager than

she was to step onto that stage—and no one else found dancing quite as exhilarating. She glanced at the brilliant lights beyond the curtain, feeling a familiar ache of longing.

Despite her pride, she wondered if there was a way to captivate an audience through dance alone—without the need for stripping. If such a performance existed, maybe even those with complicated circumstances could discover a deeper joy in moving to the music.

Because ultimately, that was what Isadora truly wanted: for people to understand the magic of dance, share in it, and feel the same thrill she did. Why? Because there was nothing more fun than dancing.

The music changed. She took a breath, wore a smile that rose from the depths of her heart, and nimbly leaped into the light.

Mary, the Maid (Epilogue: Arasyll)

IT had become quite evident to everyone in the household, or so Mary believed, that Head Maid Jane had been in an uncharacteristically foul mood of late.

Jane was the longest-serving staff member, having originally joined the household as Lady Emeralda's lady's maid some twenty years ago. Mary, one of the younger maids, would not have dreamed of inquiring after Jane's age—it would have been the height of impropriety. Still, she privately surmised that Jane must be nearing the age when retirement became an inevitable consideration. Indeed, murmurs among the staff suggested Jane herself was wrestling with the prospect.

And yet, until such a day came, Jane remained to Mary—hired just two years prior—an almost mythical figure. She seemed to exist on a plane beyond the reach of ordinary maids: a model of poise, precision, and mastery that Mary could only hope, someday, to emulate.

Fine wrinkles lined Jane's pale face that lent her an air of quiet authority rather than fragility. For a woman of her years, her height was unusual—she stood tall and willowy, her frame thin yet commanding. To Mary, she brought to mind the image of a long icicle suspended from the eaves: a fixture that might easily be overlooked yet somehow always compelled the eye, its presence both austere and mesmerizing.

What was most remarkable about Jane, however, was her uncanny ability to vanish in plain sight. Mary had observed this phenomenon time and again, each instance no less perplexing than the last. It was like Jane could melt away like snow into the earth, becoming something as intangible as air. She was in the room with you, yet she wasn't. She heard everything but never listened, saw everything but never watched. It was the mark of the consummate professional, a skill honed to perfection through decades of service. To Mary, it seemed almost supernatural, an art of invisibility no amount of effort could ever replicate.

Jane always swept her sharp gaze from one end of the hallway to the other, and nothing escaped its notice. If anything were out of place, however slight, Jane would see it. On exceedingly rare occasions, when something wholly intolerable had occurred, she would go so far as to voice her concerns directly to the master of the house. Such moments were almost unheard of, yet when they did arise, her words carried the weight of her years of service and impeccable judgment. Most often, though, she remained modestly within the bounds of her station, her every movement imbued with the dignified composure of one whose very bearing seemed supported by a spine of steel.

This manner of conduct, Mary had heard, would be unthinkable in other households. A maid speaking so openly to her employer? Such a thing would border on insubordination elsewhere. Yet, in this house, it was not only tolerated but respected. The master of the household was, by all accounts, a man of extraordinary magnanimity and adaptability. When Jane or any of the other servants spoke, he did not interrupt nor dismiss their words out of hand. Instead, he would listen attentively, thoughtfully nodding as they spoke, his face

reflecting genuine consideration. Once they had finished, he would offer a quiet chuckle—a sound unhurried and sincere, as though he had just been entrusted with a pearl of wisdom from a trusted advisor. It was an exchange Mary could hardly imagine taking place anywhere else, yet here, it seemed a natural and inevitable part of the household's rhythm.

The master of the household was a taciturn and calm man of forty-two. When he smiled, he did so in a manner that crinkled all the lines beneath his eyes at once. There was a kindness to it, a reassurance that spoke volumes, even when he said little.

Yet this quiet kindness was only one side of him. When faced with threats or challenges, he was said to transform into someone different altogether—fierce, unyielding, and ruthlessly decisive. In moments of crisis, particularly when harm threatened his people, he would stand at the fore, shielding them from danger. That was the version of the man Mary knew best, shaped by the tales of his valor she had grown up hearing. To her and all the other residents of this remote, snowbound region, their lord was more than a man; he was their guardian spirit—their very own winter wolf.

But the winter wolf was all alone. Eighteen years ago, his wife, Lady Emeralda, had died in childbirth, the tragedy claiming both her life and that of their newborn child. He had remained unmarried since then. Refined, dashing, and kind-hearted, the master surely must have had more offers for a second marriage he could shake a stick at, yet it was said that he refused every single one.

"They truly were the picture of an ideal couple, so deeply in love with one another," Jane had often said. She was the consummate professional, an untouchable paragon the vast majority of the time, but only when she spoke of their master and his late wife would her gaze grow distant, her eyes glistening with something tender, almost wistful.

Mary often found herself contemplating what Lady Emeralda must have been like. Surely, she had been a woman of radiant beauty, her presence imbued with a gentle, untroubled grace. It seemed to Mary that only such a creature could have fulfilled the

ideal of noble matrimony as Jane so often described. Only then could she believe that anyone might truly deserve their master.

Yet, this line of thought left Mary with an odd, restless frustration. For all her master's enduring vigor and charm, no woman had yet come to stand at his side. In this land, where social events nearly demanded the presence of a couple, that empty space beside him had become a glaring absence. It wasn't that anyone dared speak ill of it—of course they did, behind closed doors. But even then, Mary mused, it was less a criticism and more a testament to his perfection. With so few flaws to be found, even something as simple as his bachelorhood became a point of fascination.

Thus, when the announcement came that the master was to wed again—this time to a young lady of merely eighteen—Mary and the other maids could scarcely contain their delight. A new mistress at last, and with her, the promise of an heir to follow. The household, which for years had labored only to stave off stagnation, was suddenly alight with a vigor and anticipation that had been absent for far too long.

To the older maids, however, the news seemed to have come with all the excitement and glee of a funeral wake. Yet Mary did not take their cooler reception personally. Instead, she regarded it as proof of how dearly Lady Emeralda must have been held. At just twenty years of age, Mary was beginning to grasp the complexities of human sentiment: how one person's joy might be another's sorrow, how one event could be experienced in countless different ways.

On a day after the news had been delivered, Mary was sweeping the manor's service entrance when something unusual caught her eye. A woman, her steps uncertain, was making her way along the gravel path towards the house. The sight gave Mary pause; the new mistress was not expected to arrive until the following day. Preparations for her reception were in full swing, with every staff member—save for Jane, who had been dispatched into town on an errand—busy ensuring the manor was spotless. The goal was to create a serene haven for the young lady after what was sure to be an arduous journey.

Compounding the flurry of activity was an unfortunate twist: the master had been called away on urgent business. His absence had set the household on edge, with every servant quietly willing him to return in time to greet his new bride. Nobody wanted the poor woman arriving, weary and alone, to a strange house with not a single familiar face to receive her.

At last, the young woman reached the manor. She was just as young as Mary, if not slightly younger, quite tall and thin, and carrying someone on her back.

"May I set you down here?" the young woman asked.

"Yes, yes, this is far more than I would've dared to ask. Thank you, thank you!" the person on her back replied.

Mary started, recognizing that voice, though it was much weaker than she'd ever known it. "Ms. Jane!" she exclaimed.

The young woman looked up at the sound and smiled, seemingly as if finally assured she'd arrived at the correct place. Her dark brown hair held a tinge of purple, framing a face that, though pale, was undeniably elegant. Her short, shoulder-length hair had been slightly undone by the journey, and beads of sweat glistened on her brow. Mary could hardly fault her; after all, she had carried an entire person—elderly and fragile though they might be—for who knew how far.

Wanting the young woman relieved of her burden even a moment quicker, Mary beckoned the pair inside with a hurried wave. She led them to a chair, where the young woman lowered Jane with such care and precision it seemed as though she had rehearsed the act countless times. Mary's eyes lingered for a moment on the girl's hands—rough and calloused, the unmistakable marks of a working woman.

I'll gift her a bit of my lotion for her trouble, Mary thought, her gaze softening. She had a particularly effective formula that worked wonders on hands worn by labor. With the chill of winter fast approaching, it was imperative to tend to such matters before the cold set in for good. If moisture crept into cracked skin during the frost, it would only worsen the damage, making every task that much harder to bear.

“What happened?” Mary asked Jane.

“I wasn’t minding my step,” Jane replied, a touch of embarrassment creeping into her tone. “Entirely my own doing.”

“She tripped and hurt her foot,” the young woman added helpfully.

“Oh, dear,” Mary murmured, her gaze flitting briefly to Jane. For Jane, of all people—that maidly paragon of focus and precision—to lose her footing…she truly must’ve thought the world of Lady Emeralda.

A brief, awkward silence settled over them. Jane sat stiffly, her brow furrowed in frustration, her pride plainly wounded by the mishap. Then, as if suddenly recalling the presence of their guest, her expression softened, and she looked up with newfound urgency.

“My deepest apologies, miss,” Jane said, inclining her head slightly. “I cannot thank you enough for your kindness. However should I repay you?”

“Please,” the young woman replied with a gracious smile, “it’s quite all right. We happened to be traveling the same way, after all.”

“You have business with the master?” Jane replied in surprise. Mary, too, blinked in astonishment. She thought surely this girl was a maid from another household. Upon closer inspection, she was carrying a single piece of luggage—a large, weathered bag. To have carried both that and Jane, well, she was clearly made of sterner stuff.

The young woman paused for a moment, then knitted her brow apologetically. “My name is Arasyll Norrby.”

The words landed with the weight of an anvil.

Both maids froze, their expressions as blank as the polished silver in the dining room. And then, as if propelled by some unseen force, Jane rose from her chair, her movements halting but determined. Before she could make it to the floor fully prostrated, however, the young woman—no, their young mistress—firmly pressed her back into the seat.

“I have disgraced myself,” Jane declared solemnly.

“As I’ve said, it’s perfectly all right!” Arasyll replied. “I offered to help, so there’s no need to trouble yourself further!”

"I have disgraced myself."

"Really, I quite enjoyed it! You were no trouble at all—light as a withered old tree trunk. No, that's not the expression. A feather! Light as a feather!"

"I have disgraced myself!"

And so it went, this curious exchange circling round and round until at last, a fragile calm descended upon the group.

Jane's sharp eyes flicked to the bag at their new mistress's side. "I had heard Your Ladyship would be arriving alone," she said carefully, "but I was not informed that your luggage would be following separately."

At this, a faint blush crept across Arasyll's cheeks, and she lowered her gaze, her hands tightening ever so slightly around the worn bag. "This is all I have," she admitted softly.

Her fingers moved over the bag's weathered surface with a tenderness that belied its humble appearance. The gesture—or perhaps the bag's contents—seemed to steady her, and after a moment, she lifted her head again, offering a small, resolute smile.

"I do hope I haven't caused undue disappointment," she said. "I might well have arrived with nothing at all, but…this is dear to me, and I could not bear to leave it behind. I know there is much for me to learn—more than I can yet imagine—but I hope you will guide me as best you can. Whatever faults I may bring, I promise to do all I can to correct them with all my heart."

Then she bowed, her short hair—far too short for a noblewoman—bobbing slightly with the motion. Jane's practiced eye scrutinized the gesture and speech, finding no shortage of faults, not least of which was the bow itself—entirely improper for a lady to lower her head to her own maid. Normally, Jane would have unleashed a sharp rebuke, but something stayed her tongue.

Mary, observing quietly, noted the restraint with some amazement. At twenty, she was beginning to understand that people were rarely the caricatures they might first appear to be. They carried beliefs and values hidden beneath the surface, unspoken yet present. Jane, too, had her complexities.

Instead of the tirade Mary half-expected, Jane released a slow, deliberate sigh. "Well then, milady," she said at last, her tone measured but firm. "I won't go easy on you. There is indeed much to be done."

"I'll be in your care," Arasyll replied crisply.

"Ms. Mary," Jane said briskly, "show Her Ladyship to her room. I'll see to it that the household is informed of Her Ladyship's early arrival. So much to do. Always so much to do." She muttered the last part more to herself than anyone else, her brow furrowed.

"Is your foot fine?" Arasyll asked.

"Perfectly, milady," Jane replied. "Just needed a bit of a fright, is all."

"I thought fright was the remedy for hiccups…" Arasyll remarked.

"And Ms. Jane's foot, if you'll believe it," Mary added.

The two young women exchanged a look and then a smile. In that brief, unspoken moment, Mary felt certain that she and the strong, capable new mistress would get along perfectly well.



IT had become quite evident to everyone in the household, or so Mary believed, that Head Maid Jane had been in an uncharacteristically good mood of late.

Retirement? Even though her age called for it? Nonsense. Perish the thought! Not now, when there was a fine young lady to be raised!

There was always a commotion somewhere in the manner. Recently, Mary had taken to hiding her broom. There was a certain someone—a troublesome someone—who insisted on sweeping even when there wasn't a speck of dust to be found.

Meanwhile, the master himself was smiling more often than usual. That air of magnanimity, bravery, and lofty purpose—qualities that once seemed to render him almost otherworldly—had softened. He seemed less like a grand, untouchable figure and more like an ordinary man with simple pleasures and quiet joys. Mary considered

this a very good thing. Slowly but surely, the master descended from his celestial pedestal to join the earthly world.

"All right, everyone, it's time for the great pickling!" Jane declared, brandishing a knife like a commander rallying her troops for battle. Her proclamation was met with a resounding "Oh!" from the assembled staff and neighbors, all wearing expressions as resolute as hers.

Among them stood the young mistress herself, her features set with equal fervor. By now, her presence in such humble yet essential tasks no longer struck anyone as unusual. She had become, as naturally as the turning of the seasons, one of them.

Through the open windows, the wind carried the faint, smoky scent of fallen leaves. Winter approached once more—a season harsh, dark, and seemingly without end.

Yet it was in enduring the bitter cold that the denizens of this land had learned to cherish light and warmth all the more. Who could better understand the fleeting joy of spring than those who had braved the long, unrelenting night? They were strong, resilient souls who knew the value of standing together, of facing hardship with cheer and resolve. They endured because they believed, deep in their hearts, that light would come again.

These were strong people. Resilient people. They knew the value of helping each other, facing difficulties together with liveliness. They endured in this land because they knew light would come.

Winter preparations were underway, and they would continue in earnest for some time. For the moment, though, the air was alive with the vibrant hues of vegetable peels spinning midair, landing deftly in baskets. Laughter and the cheerful voices of women filled the room, their sound a defiant warmth against the gathering cold.



Third Loop: The Nameless Princess and the Cruel Emperor

By Iota AIUE Illust Misa Sazanami

In all three of her lives, Princess That never received a name from the cruel emperor. But this loop, she has the support of dragons and tigers on her side!



A Young Lady Finds Her True Calling Living with the Enemy

By Syuu Illust Fujigasaki

A young lady with a hidden talent for business finds herself married off to a general known as The Battle-Crazed Savage. Misunderstandings and negotiations kick off their enemies-to-lovers romance!



The Abandoned Heiress Gets Rich with Alchemy and Scores an Enemy General!

By Miyako Tsukahara Illust Satsuki Sheena

A feisty alchemist gets a tsundere enemy general to help her collect resources! Will she be able to tame him and his dragon?!



URL https://crossinfworld.com/

Twitter @CrossInfWorld

Cross Infinite World