

Stonebrand

Chapter 1: Thorns Remaining

Raised hands covered in blood and body, I float through the open doorway. The broad wooden two-story farmhouse sits at my back while Thorn and Buck stand in the white light of the late afternoon sun. “Happy and healthy,” I offer, presenting as confident a grin I can manage. In this, I am certain. This I know, so act like it. My grin widens.

Buck grunts what I hope is some semblance of approval and moves to enter his home. Massive and muscled, his form catches me in the shoulder as he passes. Snapping his head back, the man hisses. His black overalls held up over a white sleeveless shirt are both now spotted with the amniotic liquid dripping down my elbows.

“Whoops,” I mutter, eyes fluttering away a flinch.

Please don’t. Please don’t do anything.

Thorn’s tense form hovers a few feet away, not too far for me to notice the balled-up fists at her side.

But Buck twists his clamped mouth and bites his tongue, opting to continue forward and welcome his newborn into the world with a square jaw, dark eyes, and recently broken nose.

My breath releases. “I’m sorry,” I whisper at his exit, but he doesn’t hear me. It wouldn’t have helped if he had.

Thorn’s shadow cools my side after Buck fades into the darkened home. Her hair is tied up in a tight tail, revealing the slight point of her half-elven ears. My elbows twitch at the thought of skimming a fingertip over them. She shakes her head, brushing black strands over her neck. Arms crossed, they cover a chest piece of thick hide and tanned leather armor— my armor. It fits her better. Dark sculpted eyebrows, the left with a single cut scarred through at an angle, rise upon her approach, but she watches the doorway without word.

Once she’s satisfied with the distance separating us from Buck, she turns to me. “We should get you cleaned up.” Direct, clear, and definitely not a question. A clipped frustration slips through the taut control of her voice. I should get *her* out of here.

I nod, maintaining upraised hands. “Maybe we could come back after. Check on Charlotte and baby Buck. Make sure everything is all right.” Please say yes.

Thorn shakes her head, narrowed hazel eyes again peering into the house. “That’s their business to figure out, Dali. You’ve done all you can. Now, let’s go before Buck senior has another fit. I *will* hit him this time, whether he makes contact or not.” Her jaw grits, pulling her mouth into a hard line.

“Thorn.” I present a smile to calm her tension. Hopefully. “All new fathers are frantic. They express that fear differently, and anger is not all that uncommon, but it is, however, more of a reason to check in later.” Bruises, Charlotte was coated in them, all shades to present a concerning timeline.

“Not our business,” she repeats, that jaw as set and stubborn as she is. Without another word, she curls her fingers around the band of my pants and tugs me forward. My arms sway with the motion but remain upraised to keep congealing liquid to myself. Thorn hates the blood, the fluids, the broken bodies. I’m lucky she’ll stand near me when I’m coated in it.

Her grip loosens at the wagon trail, where tall golden grasses part for the deep dirt divots of wooden wheels. Despite the distance Thorn puts between us, I keep my arms held high lest I ruin her armor.

A single black bloodstain near the right shoulder mars the oiled and clean chestnut brown leather coating her body— her own skin a few shades lighter— the shadow of a stray bandit arrow shot through the hide months ago, Thorn’s arrow. Eyeing the curves of the splotch, a phantom ache grows in my own shoulder, threatening to drop my arms to my thighs.

Fortune is fickle. Bad things lead to good and good to bad, and so nothing can truly ever solely be either. No situation, no thought, no person. An arrow to the chest becomes a strong beautiful companion to fill my aimless wandering. Who am I to wave away a gift, no matter how thorny the packaging?

Maybe she’s right. She’s better with people— always says what’s on her mind and manages to get what she wants. And Charlotte. There’s only so much I can do. I’d offered her all I have and urged the pain away, even if only a bit faster. She’ll walk by the end of the day with money in her pocket. Isn’t that enough?

No. There’s always more. I can always do more.

Thorn stops abruptly, and I collide with her back, smearing my fingertips down my cheeks.

“Sorry,” I blurt.

Her body moves, separating us on instinct, and wide eyes immediately fall to my hands and face.

I wave them to ward away her fears, then stop. Don’t throw anything around. “I only touched myself. Promise.”

“I don’t care,” she snips, but her shoulders remain pressed toward her ears, her feet arched to launch her sideways at another misstep, tensed as a startled cat.

Behind her churns a meandering creek. Gurgling with a full summer’s flow, the surging stream cuts the grasslands and crop rows a safe distance from the travel road. We standoff before a section that is deep but weak in flow and behind a smattering of short twiggy trees, allowing for a bit of privacy and branches to hang wet clothes.

The stream babbles and laughs at Thorn’s stance until she relaxes, setting determined hands her hips with planted boots shifting in the dry dirt. “Strip,” she demands.

Glancing down to my clothes, my own giggles spill out. “I should probably wash these too.”

“Fine.” Her head twists to stretch her neck, all apprehension gone. “Wade in, rinse off, then strip.” Presenting an open palm, she gestures for the contents of my pockets then quickly opts to riffle through the billowing cloth pants herself. The string laced through the waistband gives and stretches at her search. It tickles, but my hands wait clasped behind my back, out of the way.

Thorn presents my only possession to a cloudless sky with a twitch of triumph at the corner of her mouth. Not a speck of gore dots her skin or armor. Shaking the worn coin purse, the sides open, inviting her to dig inside. Nothing awaits but rocks—a collection retrieved from Kildal’s gate, the mountain peak now months away from this state’s extensive farming region— string, and a few bruised wild berries.

“Dali, where’s your coin?”

My mouth clamps shut. Silence is safest.

No, it isn’t. Silence is another lie.

Dardus’ voice rumbles through my mind, replaying in the memory. *Why expend twice the effort and stress of lying when we will always find our way to the truth anyway?*

“I... I left it... I left it with Charlotte.” I wince, waiting for the justly frustrated reaction. She’s quiet, so I shove the rest of the words out my dry mouth. “I told her to take it so she and Buck junior could leave if they wanted.”

“Dali.” Thorn sighs and shakes her head, brushing the tail of her hair against her shielded shoulders. “I stole coin from Buck, emptied his pockets while you were delivering the tyke.”

My jaw slips, hanging open. “He’ll think she took it.”

Thorn seethes, sucking in a full breath. “Well, how was I supposed to know you would give her everything you have!”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I blurt. “I’m sorry. I’m... I’m worried. I made it worse. Now, I only made everything worse.” Fingers slide down my cheeks, pulling the strain from my face. Sticky lines curve in their wake. I fucked it up.

Thorn sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, right above the permanent curve from a bar punch she took when she was younger. How much younger, I don’t know. Thorn insists she’s twenty— a few months older than me— but she appears younger, years younger, but it isn’t a truth I could pry from her; lies are walls we build to protect ourselves.

Why lie? Why expend twice the effort and stress of lying when we will always find our way to the truth anyway?

Maybe all we need is time, Dardus, a little extra time. I should have lied.

“What am I saying?” Thorn asks, throwing up her arms. It isn’t a question for me. “I should have known you would do that. It’s like you to do that.” The enraged undercurrents of her graveled voice fade to an exhale. She’s resigned, maybe, hopefully only resigned. One more flair of exhaled breath, and she throws an open hand toward the restless water. “Wash up, please.”

What else is there to do?

I nod and kick my leather boots off to wade into the crushing cold current. Taking it step by step, I avoid an unexpected dunk into sun-warmed waves. Several precarious strides bring splashes to my elbows, and I stop and crouch to rub stains and drying fluids from my skin. The mesh of colors dissolve to the tawny golden brown I’m supposed to be. Granules of dirt float through the current, but the majority of my natural silty coating sticks to the skin, rolling between my arms and palms as I scrub.

Maybe Buck won’t find out. Maybe he’ll never notice the coin is missing or discover Charlotte has anything more. Even if he does, the most logical explanation would be Buck forgot he gave her the money or dropped it and Charlotte found it. He won’t assume she stole it. Why would he? I’m paranoid.

I untie the woven hay twine containing my hip length hair in its trailing braid. Slow washing waves tug the three sections apart as I dip below the surface. I open my eyes to curling dark brown ribbons swirling with the current. They stick to my shoulders when I resurface. Up goes the oversized linen shirt untucked from my waistband and over my head. My heavy stone necklace sticks in the fabric before diving onto my chest, the marble lines of the metal framed pendant weaving like the stream. Excess water pools down the corners of my mouth.

Thorn waits where I left her— arms crossed and lips pressed into a firm line watching from the edge of the water. “Toss it,” she calls. “I’ll hang it up.” Her voice is softer, dragging the dense stiffness from my abdomen. She isn’t mad.

“All right!” Her attention pricks my skin while I twist water from the cloth. Then I crumple it into a ball and launch it toward her. It’s a bad throw, but Thorn manages to recover with an effortless catch. I scrunch down, keeping the twining waves above my freezing chest. I shout, “I don’t think I need to remove the pants. They should be fine.” Shivers twirl down my spine.

“We should let them dry,” she calls back, hands open above outstretched arms. A hint of laughter pitches her tone. “You can wear soaked pants, but no string will be able to hold them to those hips.” Finally, a curt chuckle breaks the stern seriousness of her face. “It’s a couple seconds of chilly assault, babe, and I *know* you’ve endured worse.”

Flushing skin warms my cheeks and neck. “You’re right. I’m being a whiner,” I croak. “The air is cold though,” I whisper more to myself. Yanking the string, I free my waistline and plunge completely beneath the surface and remove the pants. I rise and chuck them to Thorn in one fluid motion. This throw is worse; it doesn’t even crest the shoreline. Slapping onto the surface of the water, the pants drift downstream. “Whoops!” I cry, two steps carrying me closer. Catch them before they’re gone.

Thorn’s faster. Wading in midthigh, she snatched them from the surface.

“I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine, Dali,” she laughs. “Just clean up.”

“All right. Sorry,” I repeat with a sigh. At least she’s no longer angry.

With a sharp intake of breath, I dunk beneath the bobbing waves. Gritty fingers scrub stains from my face, neck, and shoulders. Rise. Inhale another gulp. Dive. Warm, bubbling water soaks into skin. Frantic thoughts and fear dissolve from my crowded head.

She'll be fine. Thorn's theft aside, Charlotte needs to make choices for herself and her child. No one else can do it on her behalf, and I've done all I can to help her: one baby and one mother safe and sound. The mother was even set up better than most.

Stretching my palm beneath the water, I poke fingertips through the surface. A lily pad spawns in a swirl of evergreen, a petite violet lotus sits dewy in the center. It dances above the tempered tides, then slips downstream on bouncing waves.

Giving her money was the only other aid I could offer.

The sun-blessed water laps over my shoulders, like a sip of settled coffee, steam curling at my nose. There's nothing more I can do. I did what I could, and there's nothing more.

Splashing, the slapping of broken stream currents, pops my bubbled thoughts. Thorn wades into the water, her armor and underclothes hanging on the branch beside mine. Strength and the ability to swim brings her to my side in a few strokes.

"Did I take too long?"

Two cupping hands to encase my cheeks and firm lips pressed into mine. This is a good answer. I accept this answer.

Thorn's lips part while hands slide to overtake me, stronger than any current. My balance wavers, and I grasp for her jaw and bare back to stay upright. A groan slips up my throat as her tongue delves behind my teeth. Everything bends and shifts for her. I twist at every tense squeeze of her hands, so she's granted every move, touch, and taste she reaches for. My body against hers.

She's going to drown me.

And yet every muscle in me remains tensionless.

I don't care. At least this way it won't be my choice or fault. And this death would feel good.

I release the panic in an inhale of Thorn, and my mind slows with the thick honey of sensation.

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Stepping from the gurgling current, leaves and dirt stick to our damp feet. Light and sticky, the hot summer breeze does nothing to relieve the dripping beads of stream from our skin. Thorn is wrinkled and soft at her fingertips. I tap them with my own as

we part. Mine, however, remain the same as they always have— tight like stone and speckled with shavings of loose dust and dirt.

Taking my hair in my hands, careful squeezes wring out some of the water. Thorn strides directly to half-dried clothes. She stretches and twists them as I do my hair then tosses mine over before tugging her own over sopping skin.

I catch them in a slap of wet cloth. “You don’t want to wait? Dry off?” Pinching fingers pick at dark curling leaves, flicking them from my clothes.

Thorn shakes her head, “We should return to town.” Something’s shifted; her tone is somber.

“All right.” I’ll do whatever she wants.

We stand in the quiet until a sharp inhale cuts in. “I’m not giving it back. He doesn’t deserve it.” The words fall from her mouth with the crack of splintered wood.

The coin. She’s not upset I gave it away; she’s worried I’ll ask her to return it.

I face her, and she spins. Drops roll down her scarred back— a handful of white lines zig and zag across her skin from a time her hands weren’t as deft. “I wasn’t saying you should, Thorn.”

She yanks her shirt down, and the fabric sticks to every curve. “No, but you’ve made me feel guilty keeping it. What Charlotte does is up to her, and how Buck takes it is on him.”

I offer another quiet, “all right.”

Her mouth folds into a stubborn line as she tugs the straps of her leather armor tight. At her release, the pieces fall loose against her torso. They shift and shake with her full frustrated breaths.

My own pants resecured, I stretch my fingers out, grasping the palpable distance with a waggle of wet fingers. “Let me help you.”

Thorn huffs but strides the distance in three large stomping steps. Within my reach, she abruptly turns to the side with a dramatic exhale. It pairs nicely with the wind’s weak and warm whistle. Blurry at the edge of my vision, she absently nibbles on a slightly swollen bottom lip.

I jerk at the straps and secure the chest piece properly, fastening them into the buckles and loops to keep it in place. “Better?”

“Yes, thank you.” Refusing to meet my gaze, she instead watches her hand drift to my ribs. Her thumb skims the skin.

Eyes dart to mine, she pecks the side of my mouth, and steps carry her away in one rushing motion. “Let’s get back to Cress. We can get a drink.” Chin tilted toward the sky, she lets loose another heavy breath, her favorite expression. “We’ve earned it with the long day it’s been.”

Six hours of labor, although short for some, still makes for a lengthy day. I can’t imagine how the hours droned on whilst waiting outside with a burly father stressed to swears and white-knuckled fists. Maybe I’m lucky nothing started between them before the world welcomed baby Buck.

I poke my head through the collar of my shirt and stuff the hem into the waist of my pants. “I like that idea. I’m ready when you are.”

She’s quiet, eyes fixated on the wispy white clouds smeared across that vast blue background.

“Thorn,” I mutter. “Are you all right? I am sorry for implying guilt, but I don’t think you have anything to feel guilty about.” My fingers fiddle my pendant at the sore subject. “I’m the one who gave away most of our money.” I laugh. Dammit. It’s awkward and curt. Chomping my lip, I collect my nerves. “Is there something I can do to make it up to you?”

She shakes her head. “I want a drink. That’s all.”

The dreamstone slips from my hands, a smile climbing my face. “That. That is actually something I *can* do.” Extending my hand toward her, fingers splayed, she offers me hers. Thank the earth and sky she offers me hers. I pounce to catch it and start directly onto the dusty dirt country road that splits Cress to the south.

Stones crack and dirt crunches beneath our boots while robins and bluebirds chirp and dive through the brisk air above our path, twirling together and around one another. Their song chimes through my ears as a congratulations for a job well done. “Thank you,” I offer in a hushed tone.

“Talking to birds again?” she asks with a smirk.

Did I think she wouldn’t hear me? She’s right next to me.

I shrug. At least there’s a smile now, even if at my expense. “Everyone is welcoming here. Even the birds.”

Thorn laughs, even better, a resounding song on its own, like shattered rocks tumbling down the mountain side. “I don’t know where you’ve been Dali Stonebrand, but Cress is not welcoming. Hardly much of Dawnharbor is. It’s often standoffish to

foreigners, especially this far from the capital.” She pauses to trace the fluttering birds with a dart of hazel eyes.

“I guess I can’t really speak for the birds,” she continues, “but I can for people. They were shit before you got here, and they’re shit now. Well,” she pauses to squeeze my hand. “Obviously, I’m not counting you.”

I return the pressure. “You give me too much credit, and them too little. Everyone has been nice enough. Besides, no state is exactly welcoming to foreign parties.” I roll my shoulders with my shrug. The tight jaws, peeled eyes, and whispering words of Kildalian faces slip through my mind in a thick fog. No, most places don’t appreciate or welcome what they aren’t accustomed to. I shove the memories away, shove Kildal away. “I’ve had other towns react much more defensively. Usually it’s subtle, but either way someone like me isn’t always *welcomed*, so welcome is a *welcome* change.” I chuckle at the word play, and beam at Thorn’s brief grimace.

A glimmer shines in her eyes, and she smiles, swinging the connected limbs between us. “And who is someone like you?”

She knows. She already knows, but I do love that smile. My stomach twists, sending words tumbling out my mouth. “There’s a lot of aspects of myself that people find... unwanted.” I push our hands up, up, up. They rise above our heads and stop, stop briefly in that blissful moment of stillness before a fall. Then as a tangled meteor of fingers, they descend as far as our arms will allow. “But you already know that.”

“Nope,” she says with a pop. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. You are perfect.” Thorn glances toward me, and my vision dives for the dirt.

“You already know,” I repeat.

“I don’t,” she insists with a taunting giggle in her tone. “Tell me”

I sigh and gesture to my person, accentuating the worn and sun-stained cloth that makes up my clothes with a slow flourish of my hand. Dusting flecks of dirt from my skin to the ground, I have my answer. “Well, my overall run down and *destitute* appearance makes people apprehensive.” A flick of my fingers sprays a dozen white and violet flower petals into the air. “Any mention of magic usually sends me reeling back into the wilderness or along country roads.” I pause to survey Thorn’s expression, a poorly kept grin smothered in the slight curve of her mouth. If she wants a list, I’m going to make it dramatic. “Not to mention I’m an absolute joke, offering medical advice and aid. Scowls and laughter follow me wherever I go.”

My mind finds and grapples with a sudden curiosity, dropping my trail of theatrics. “Why doesn’t anyone in Dawnharbor want medical attention? Why do they all throw random roots into a grinder or shake smoke ribbons around their houses when people get sick? And why is magic taboo? It lacks the risks real medical treatments have. No one ever seems to want me near them.”

A trill of wild laughter bursts from her to interrupt my trail of complaints. “Small farming towns, Dali,” she says, managing a level voice. “It isn’t this way in bigger cities. My rule is if the mayor’s house is made of stone, the people will likely have some sense. But out here, amongst these wooden homes no one will likely listen to a face so round, smile so bright, and eyes so wide.” She strums her thumb over the back of my hand. “When you get old and wrinkled, people will flock to you and eat up any wise words you offer, even magic.”

An old, wrinkled medicine woman twirls in my mind. She throws pinches of cinnamon dust through the air to ward away evil fae and curses. Nonsense. “I don’t know if I would prefer that.”

Thorn laughs. “I would.” Then her dark brows furrow. “Kildal is a big city-state, isn’t it? Both in one?”

I nod. “Yes. It’s nothing like anywhere I’ve been in Dawnharbor.” I lower my voice as we approach the wood-stacked buildings of Cress. Split in half by the country road, the tiny town is nothing more than a line of businesses creeping along the edges of a wide and well-maintained dirt path. With additional levels or high jagged façades, they tower over passersby, trapping them in for a night or two as all good roadside towns do. Any folks who reside within town have jammed their beds and belongings into a corner room or second story of their stores. The rest of them sleep in porched homes speckled throughout the tall windblown grass and till hard ground to grow potatoes, corn, and carrots.

“Nothing has ever been like Kildal,” I mutter. My chest constricts, while my father’s pipe and mother’s potato pancakes weave through my mind, the phantom smell filling my heart rather than my nose. Nothing else has quite felt like home.

Thorn hums a thoughtful sound, tapping her fingers over mine. “I’d like to see that: big underground dwarven city full of working men and women without babies.” Her voice doesn’t drop a pitch. “That’s all anyone cares about out here— babies and marriage. Well,” she sighs, “and the occasional funeral.”

This time I laugh. Thorn's scowling face fills my imagination at locals voicing such expectations to her. I couldn't stand to hear whatever reason or remark she offers them. Sometimes I wish I could say what she does. People listen to Thorn, to really hear her. But she hurts. Her curt tone and pressing requests sometimes lead to squirming excuses and shifting eyes. I don't want that part. "Yeah, well no one's moving here, so they've got to preserve their town somehow."

She scoffs, "I'm surprised people can find someone to fuck out here they aren't yet related to."

"Thorn!" I snap with a hush. Watching nearby buildings, there's no one propped in a cracked door or waving dust ridden rags out open windows.

"They should know, Dali. If they don't, they need to figure it out," she says, not an octave lower.

How well are records kept in towns this small? How detailed and public can they be? Nope, I drive the thoughts from my head. "You've been to the capital, haven't you? Dawnharbor? I haven't, but its priorities aren't the same as they are out here, are they?"

The tail of her hair shakes with her shrug. "No, but they catch you with a hand in the pocket and you lose a head rather than the hand. I'll take my chances with local backwater guard guilds over the capital city guards working directly under the guidance of some king."

"I guess no place is perfect."

Thorn grunts. "No people either."

"Well, then," I start with a skipping flourish and throw my open hand to the rundown inn of Cress— The Wilting Water Lily. Uneven planks of wood stretch above its ceiling to impose it over the street. Drawing visitors in with its creaky wooden sign swirled with vibrant yellow paint and sturdy clean hitching post, it clamps its claws around them with cheap liquor and achy beds.

"How about a perfectly imperfect shot of whiskey?" I ask.

That brings a smile back to Thorn's face. "Jess does pour them a little too high, doesn't she?"

Good. Stay happy. I love you happy. "She likes you," I offer with a mirrored grin.

Thorn leans in for a kiss, a prolonged, breathless, and delightfully greedy kiss before declaring in that sweet tingling whisper, "I'm taken."

I sigh, letting the fluttering petals of nerves fade out of my stomach. "I didn't mean it like that."

A wind's gust throws dry dirt in swirls around us and the street. Thorn reaches to settle a strand of damp hair behind my ear. "Course not. You would never notice something like that in the first place, and if somehow you did, you'd say nothing." Her smile twitches to something a tinge more serious. "I however am capable of both those things." Hand on my lower back, she slides us into the building.

Inside the dim acrid scented tavern, a handful of people litter the space. It's too dark to see their faces, but familiar heads of hair and cheeks press to sticky tables. They're those who hide here most nights, some most days as well. Bowing to or resting on the splintered wood, mugs sit positioned between slack curling fingers. Thorn and I weave through the sluggish and slumbering bunch to find the two stable stools seated before the bar and climb into them.

Jess, the barkeep, traipses to meet us the moment we're seated. "Afternoon," she chimes with a broad, toothy grin. Loose blond hair, a near brown in the dim light, fans over her shoulders, and she throws it behind her. "Should I start with the shots or simply bring down a bottle from the shelf, darlings?" She punctuates the question with a sway of her curvy hips and folded hands rising to her lips.

"Good afternoon," I offer, and Jess beams brighter.

"Bottle," replies Thorn, retrieving her coin purse from the hidden pocket of the armor. Sewn into the waist, Thorn uses the lack of light and Jess's flighty nature to slip the bag out unseen.

Jess's attention flits back at the chiming of the coin. Her grin broadens. "You've got it. Anything for my two favorite ladies." She twirls toward the dusty and cracked shelves of liquor set high above the back of the bar. Catching a stool in her palm, she drags it close and hoists herself up.

My unoccupied fingers find and fiddle with the marble dreamstone pendant flat against my chest. Tugging the chain taut and spinning the ends between my forefingers causes the waving lines of the mountain landscape to transform into lapping waves on an unseen shore.

How is Kildal? How is my mother? Surely, she's no longer worried, no longer heartbroken, after four years. She could be. I still am.

"Have you written your brother yet this week?" She noticed my fidgeting.

Dry wave after dry wave crash. "Yeah, I sent a letter yesterday. One to Kiri as well." Hopefully he reads them to my mother, at least sums them up, so she knows I'm all right. That I'm doing the best I can.

If we truly want to see happiness and compassion in this world, we can only guarantee it by putting it there ourselves.

I'm trying. I think not two minutes after I complained about the countryside... I'll do better, Mom.

"Dardus, right?" asks Thorn.

"What? Yes. Dardus is the brother I write." I doubt Daerren would find any fun in reading my letters. He might have thought the whole thing an elaborate joke, for the first week at least.

"And Kiri is a little girl you know? A child if you will."

I sputter a laugh and the assault of illusory water quiets. "Yes, Thorn, a child. I know you don't like them much, but I happen to think children are adorable, especially this one." I trace my finger over the jagged lines of the marble mountain peak. "She and her family helped me through a difficult time, and I owe her at least a check in now and again."

Thorn's lost interest sparks in a meaningless shrug. "Whatever you say."

Not that I would know what any of them think of my letters; I'm never in the same place long enough to get a response. They know. I've told them.

What if they've stopped reading them?

There's a chance Dardus never receives any letter I send. Do the Exarchs monitor correspondence in the city? Does contacting my family break a stipulation of my sentence?

Faster and faster the stone turns between my fingers. No, he receives them, he reads them, and he knows where I am and why. I need him to.

"Ere you go," cuts in Jess, setting the bottle and a single glass upon the bar.

The dreamstone drops, indents pressed into my skin where it'd been.

"Dali, dear," Jess starts, although her gaze sticks to Thorn scooping up the bottle and tugging at a cork wedged too far into the neck. Shifting her attention, Jess leans into the counter, a tiny pout puckered on her lips. "You think you can fix something for me? A small little trinket I broke? I don't want to pay for repairs, and immediately thought of my sweetest and most enchanting customer." She winks at the subtle mention of magic. "Of course, only if you wouldn't mind helping me out a bit." Lashes flutter over her bright eyes.

I put on a smile; one I hope I can prompt to reflect on her. "Of course, Jess." I reach across the table, but Thorn's uplifted hand thwarts me.

“Let’s see it first,” she says, eyes glancing at Jess’s tight fitted and low-cut linen dress as it stretches to retain the woman’s more than modest breasts as she leans over the countertop.

“Come on, Thorn,” begs Jess. “For a friend, you won’t do it for free?”

Thorn wraps her foot around the leg of my stool, dragging it closer to hers. “Gotta see what it is first. Good friends don’t lie.”

Hypocrite. I pull my lips into my mouth to keep the word from slipping out.

Jess stands, watching us both. Then with a final look at me, she sighs and digs below the bar, shuffling rags and clinking glasses until she reveals the busted chain of a necklace. Hanging at its center is a tiny silver charm. A cheap hybrid metal, it sports spots of discoloration. They nearly consume its vague bulbous shape. It’s a cat.

“That’s not too bad,” I offer with my same smile. As I lean toward the object, a hand slides over my thigh.

Thorn shakes her head, unwavering stare on Jess and her tiny trinket cat. “One night. Same room we used last.” Not a question. Not a debate. A demand.

“Thorn, that’s too much,” Jess pleads.

“Thorn,” I whisper. It is too much. “I don’t mind fixing it.” Cress has been one of the few towns not immediately wary of my minor magic. It’s rare to be asked outright for its use; I consider it a high compliment.

“That or we’re not helping,” Thorn bargains without offering me a flicker of her attention. I guess it doesn’t matter what I think.

“Fine, fine,” snips Jess. “But you can’t tell no one it was broken, got it?”

“Course not.” Then. Then Thorn grins, and her taut spine curves to relax. I don’t love this smile. She does, but I don’t. It’s false, the one that gets her what she wants, the one she props up to smother her frustration.

Thorn gestures for me to take the necklace, and I tear my gaze from her, that smile, to finally do what I’ve already attempted twice.

Wrapping it between my fingers, the sticky metal chain is either bent or broken in several places. Splotches of black and brown cover the feline charm. Burns? My damn eyes will never know in this flickering outdated candlelight. Thorn has better eyes, eyes like my brothers’. “I can’t change the coloration or remove whatever’s stuck in the chain, but I can repair what’s broken.”

“That’s fine.” Jess waves away the words with a fluttering hand. “Please hurry.”

“Of course. I’m sorry.” Running my fingertips over the chain, I take in a breath. Ale-saturated tavern air fills my lungs to untangle the knots in my chest.

Bend.

It does, leaving the complete, endless looping chain links draping from my fingers.

Jess’ joyful screech snaps a nearby dozing dreamer out of slumber as she tears the jewelry away. It hangs before her face while fingers grip, tug, and test my repairs.

“Perfect. Thank you, Dali!”

“You’re welcome.” I mirror her joy, the bright cherry cheeks dragging a smile beneath my own. “Always happy to help.”

Cradling the trinket in cupped hands, Jess whispers, “I owe you.”

“One night,” reminds Thorn.

“Of course,” giggles Jess, with another wave of her hand. “One night upstairs for the two of you on me. We’ll lend you the same one we did last night, but I’ve got to put it on the tab, or Hector will know. Make sure you ladies clear out with me in the morning, ‘kay? Then it won’t matter.”

“Perfect,” replies Thorn with that same devilish grin.

“Great,” squeals Jess then rushes out of sight.

“Thorn,” I start, but she cuts me off.

“She broke it herself, Dali. Probably another fight with her boyfriend.” Hazel eyes roll. “And she didn’t want him to know she broke it. If she takes it to be fixed, someone’ll tell him. Small town, remember? Really the room wasn’t asking for much.”

“I don’t know, Thorn. A whole night for a necklace? Fixing it didn’t take much out of me. Doesn’t seem fair.” It isn’t fair. Why can’t you see that?

Thorn pops open the bottle, releasing a brief victorious huff. A real smile shines when she faces me. “Doesn’t seem fair to *you*. Fairness is subjective and always bargainable.”

What if I don’t care about being fair?

If we truly want to see happiness and compassion in this world, we can only guarantee it by putting it there ourselves.

What if I want to help? What if I want to see people smile?

Tipping the green glass back, she chugs the drink down. I flinch. Stonebrand upbringing screams at the base of my skull: this isn’t how you drink whisky. My stomach lurches in agreement. However, when she offers me the bottle, I drink at a slower but improper rate all the same.

*

Rays of near white light shine in specks through the itchy covers of an inn blanket. I groan, but the plea doesn't entice sleep to return. No, it banishes it further, to fade behind that ever-evading door of tranquil darkness at the edge of my pounding mind.

Come back...

Another groan echoes mine. It's followed by the fidgeting and spinning of smooth skin, and the blanket rips from my eyes.

A yelp rushes out my throat at the sudden sunlight cast over my face. Intense and endless, it spikes a sharp pain through my skull. Limbs scramble to block out the sunlight.

"Mm. I'm sorry," Thorn says, soft and unconvincing. Her arms encompass and draw me close. Smooth and sleep scented, I sink as much as I can manage into her.

"Do you want me to protect you from that evil sun?" she asks with a groggy laugh. "Keep my sweet stolen earthworm safe from the brightness?"

"You're mocking me," I mutter, burying my face in her.

Thorn giggles. Her lips press to my temple as the thrown corner of a cheap gray wool blanket flutters over my head. "Yes, I am, but in the most loving way, my little cave dweller. How long until that light no longer wakes you up in the morning?"

"I don't know," I groan. It's been years since I left Kildal. I should be used to it by now, but no, it still drags me from sleep no matter how late I fall into bed.

"Hmm. Well, I guess that sunlight sensitivity will continue to ruin late mornings." She presses tighter, allowing the curving skin of her hips and breasts to warm me.

"We should get up," I croak.

"See?" Thorn sighs, her fingertips tapping against my shoulders. "How about a few more minutes? An hour at most?"

"Thorn." Still, my hands curl around hers, fingers entangling. She's warm. And we have nowhere else to be. No urgent matters or appointments.

She hums, maintaining her hold. "Why do I have to be in love with such a sweet and responsible girl?"

Love. In love. "I'm starting to think you're still drunk." But there's no bite to the accusation; I'm all stupid smiles and fuzzy thoughts.

Love.

She laughs, nuzzling her nose into my neck. “Only a little.”

A clattering of furniture sounds out from below, muted by the wood planks of the floor, but undeniably from below.

“A little early for a bar tiff,” I mutter, wiggling toward the edge of the bed. The sound hums familiar through the wood. A whisper of wind sparks a seed of worry in my stomach. Is that the wind or my own stress?

“More reason to simply stay here,” she answers in the same breathy tone, tugging me back.

The gruff hollering of a baritone voice vibrates through the cracks. “Where?” it demands in a forceful tone, a tone I do recognize.

“Buck,” I realize, rising from bed. “Thorn, it’s Buck.”

“What?” She sits up frazzled, the groggy sheen in her eyes fading. “Charlotte must have said what you did! She told him you told her to leave! Dammit! Dammit Dali!”

Wood crashes together, rumbling between the cracks. I launch to my feet, my clothes careless confetti around the bed. “Thorn, we have to help her.”

“What? No! She’s fine. She’ll be fine, Dali. She’ll blame you, and he won’t even fault her for it. He’s probably not upset with her.” Watching me lift my shirt from the floor, Thorn sighs but it does nothing to temper her flaring impatience. “Dali, we don’t have to get involved with everything. Some things are fine the fucked-up way they are!”

Jamming my feet into my boots, I finally meet her hardened eyes. “Thorn, the baby wasn’t a boy. That’s why I told her to leave. She didn’t give him a boy and couldn’t even tell him that. She was so scared, she lied about her child’s sex.”

“What?” she shouts and claws her way out of the blankets.

“Yes.” I shrug. It’s all I say because I should have said something sooner, yesterday. I should have said all this yesterday in the stream. I move toward the door.

“Dali, wait.”

Her voice, the pleading tone, tugs at my head and yanks hesitation into my stomach, but it doesn’t catch my feet. I descend the creaking and busted stairs with frantic bounds.

She’ll talk me out of it. She’ll stop me. Try to slip out the back and claim this isn’t our problem, but I bore witness to the creation of this problem. I can’t leave. *I* wanted to help Charlotte. *I* offered aid with magic, with money, with advice, and it yielded this result. How could I turn away now? How could I abandon her now?

At the tap of my toes to the tavern's wooden floor, Buck swings his bloodshot eyes to me. The same stained shirt and overalls hang wrinkled and half open from his chest. Never a good sign.

"You," he yells, rushing forward.

I scramble sideways, but he's too wide. His familiar posture fills his face with the bubbling rage of Theldon, but this violent level of anger is foreign to those memories. Despite his claims, Theldon could never murder me. However, the cavern brown irises of this man sear that possibility into my dry mouth.

Trapped in the red maze of those eyes, he snatches my arm and jerks me to face him. Fingernails dig through the fabric and into my skin, but the grip hurts more than the pressure of dull, chewed nails.

Calm. Stay calm. It doesn't hurt. It doesn't.

Muscles ache to contradict me.

It doesn't hurt a lot.

"Leave, Buck," screams Jess, a busted broom clenched in her fists. "You're drunk! Go home! Go home, or I'll call for Hector!"

"Doctor," he starts, the voice dripping in slurred sarcasm at a title I never enforced or asked for. Another insistence of Thorn. I should have insisted against it. "You were with my wife a long time yesterday. Maybe you can tell me how coin made its way to her pockets." Buck's hot, bitter breath sprays spit saturated with an alcoholic burn. With years of farm work constraining my arms, Buck easily shoves my back to the wall. "Why'd you do that? Surely, she lies. Surely you wouldn't tell her to go."

Charlotte did exactly as Thorn said, but he doesn't know about baby Buck. That's good. A subtle wave of relief tickles at the mass of worry in my gut, doing near nothing, nothing of substance in face of the wide raging black eyes bearing into mine.

Lie. Anything. Any possible excuse. He's controlling, not unreasonable, not completely. There's an explanation that'll calm him, a lie that'll dull the blade of his fury.

"I'd hoped she'd leave you." Why did I tell the truth?

He yells, the anger displacing the air. Then my skull rams the wall, spreading the prickly pain of light and noise after too much whiskey into the back of my head. The head. Don't injure the head. Strain stretches through my neck. Barely born, it extends, reinforced by Buck's thick fingers tightening around my throat.

"You witch! I knew," he mutters. Thumbs pressing my windpipe, they seal out air. "I knew not to let some witchdoctor into my home. I knew you'd hurt my Charlotte. Steal

her and Junior away with magic and lies, but my Charlotte is stronger than tricks. Roaches, you all are with your heretic magic, defying the natural.”

I absolutely do not defy nature; I exemplify it. The floor shivers with my thoughts, curling at my will. Even the wind gusts beneath the crack of the tavern door. Both prepare for my call.

No. No, magic. I will not end this like that. I will not prove him right.

He presses tighter, and breathes a stale whisper, “and roaches are to be crushed.”

The blood pulsing in my ears subsides for Theldon’s words to curl into the back of my skull. *Why? Because Fera Stonebrand wanted to take in a stray bug. Bugs are for squashing not keeping.*

No. I wasn’t. I’m not.

“I didn’t do that.” I’m choking. Scarce blades of air drag through my wheezing windpipe. Digging my own broken fingernails into his does nothing. My strength is nothing compared to his. A life of labor versus a life of running.

I used magic to heal not to hurt. I manipulate the body, never the mind. *Never* the mind.

“Dali!” Thorn’s cry reaches my ears, recognition arduously blooming in my hazy mind as she rams her body into Buck, dagger in hand. She jams the blade into his thick shoulder. For a moment they hover in the air, the knife sunk in skin like a sliver of wood in a hand.

Then motion resumes. Buck screams, hellfire tearing through his throat, and tumbles backward, releasing me. Thorn reels to plunge the dagger in again. Her arm arcs toward his face.

“No,” I shout, one hand reaching to catch her wrist, the other jumping to my hoarse throat.

My flailing limbs give her pause and Buck the opportunity to knock a fist straight into Thorn’s mouth. Her body hits the ground with a dense thud.

No! Don’t black out. Don’t black out. Stay with me, and don’t black out.

She groans, but her fluttering hazel and whiskey eyes remain open. Not focused, but open. Mostly.

Meaty hand holding the blood from gushing out his shoulder, Buck glares at Jess frozen behind the bar. Mouth agape and soundless, she stands white knuckled at the grip of her battered broomstick. Then Buck lunges for Thorn on the ground.

Do something! Move, dammit!

My body leaps, shifting into the light-haired form of a mountain lion, fur puffed on end against my skin. Claws extend into flesh in one pounce. A low growl rumbles from me. Draw his attention away from Thorn.

A shrill scream breaks Jess' frozen stance, the broom clattering to the floor.

Buck's yell adds a low complement to Jess' high notes. He slams into the wall, cracking my back against the wood. A gnarled growl in his spitting mouth, Buck throws his thick skull into mine.

Blurred colors frame the edges of my vision.

No, no, no. I'm not letting go.

Persistent cat claws extend.

What now? What now?

An answer arrives in the uneasy thrust of a beautiful half elven woman fresh from a potential concussion. Thorn mirrors Buck's first throw, catching him in the jaw. Distracted, he takes the full force of the punch and drops, crumpling forward onto the floor with a toppling of wooden chairs.

Claws retract, and I climb off the hulking form to pace circles around him. A comfort soothes my pounding heart at the twitching of my tail twitching. Fur remains puffed while vertical pupils watch for signs of movement; these eyes that are better than mine, these eyes that see more.

Buck doesn't move. Breath flows, but his limbs don't twitch, and his head doesn't rise. I wait and watch. Circle after circle. A calloused finger curls and I pause, my shoulders rising.

Don't get up. Don't get up.

I huff and huff, splattering my spit onto the wood. Don't get up.

"Dali," Thorn pants. "Dali," she calls again, voice lowered to her rare soothing tone. A shaking hand extends into my vision, and I follow the limb until there's brilliant hazel eyes shimmering into mine. A short span of space separates her fingertips from me, but she doesn't move to reduce it.

Oh no.

"Dali," she repeats. This time her voice is level, sweet.

I shake, the fur rippling along my body, and jettison up on hindlegs to reclaim the shape she knows, the one I was born with.

Thorn exhales, her fingertips slipping around mine. She pulls me into a hug. Her labored breath and rapid heartbeat pulse against me. Don't move. Love her.

“Are you all right?” Tender taps dance through my hair, her careful voice tickling the shell of my ear.

Pressing the back center of my skull squeezes my face into a wince, tilting the room tilts. “How about I get back to you in a bit, once everything starts to settle?”

“All right,” she mutters, hand still tightly encasing mine. I scared her, didn’t I?

Broom returned to her own clutches, Jess inches over to the edge of the counter to peers down at an unconscious Buck. Her attention shifts from him to us. “Get out,” she whispers. Her dewy eyes stare at me, wide and blinking.

“What?” A mass of pain throbs against the spine of my neck.

“Get out!” Her scream fills the wooden shack of a tavern. “Out before I get the guard captain! Get out now! You’re cursed! Transformations are the sign of evil magic! Cursed evil!”

Her words bob around my heavy mind. She wants me to leave. I’m supposed to leave. “Oh.”

Leave.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m very sorry.” I wasn’t going to use magic. I wasn’t supposed to use magic. I decided that. I did, but the decision didn’t stick. This is my fault, a natural consequence of my decision, so I should leave.

“Just get out!” Jess reaches at her neck, fingers wrapping about the cat pendant. Yanking it free, she tosses it across the floor. It skids with the hollow thud of knocking wood. “Take your witchcraft and curses with you! Out!”

“What about our tab,” muses Thorn, spine taut and shoulders level.

“Get out! This is your last warning!” She tilts her broom forward, wielding it as children wield wooden swords.

“Fine with me,” answers Thorn, her mouth twisted in a bitter scowl. “Hope your dingy inn burns.” She hacks a wad of spit onto the floor. “Let’s go, Dali.”

“Thorn,” I whisper, squeezing her hand.

This won’t make it better. Tell her that.

My mouth hangs open, empty and dry.

“No, we aren’t wanted, and that’s fine.” Thorn laughs. It devolves into a scoff. “That’s fine,” she repeats. “Let’s go. Let them keep their drunk abusive backwater asshole and the beat and broken children he’ll make. It’ll make Cress the dream! Best damn town in the whole kingdom!” Thorn releases my hand to throw her arms out with another empty laugh. “Come to Cress because you’re passing through but stay because you’re too

damn drunk to remember where you stabled your fucking horse!” Stepping over the silver necklace, she scoops it up. “Good thing we didn’t have stuff to retrieve anyway.” She fiddles with the loose straps of the leather armor and slips the pudgy cat charm into the hidden pocket. Then she strides out of the tavern, leaving me to catch up with a jog.

I grasp at her arm, stopping her in the middle of Cress’s dirt road. Little wooden buildings tightly packed around us make the farming town stunted and short. “Thorn, you don’t have to come with me.”

She wheels sharp on her heels. “I’m not staying in this shithole without you!”

Staring into the hard hazel eyes, a pit sinks through my stomach. I didn’t relieve tension. I didn’t give her options. That’s not at all what I did. No, I hurt her. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean it like that. I want what’s best for *you*. I don’t want you to do anything for me because of me.”

“What about us?” she asks.

A croak slips out of my gaping mouth. Say something. Say anything.

I point to her hand, resting curled at her side. A red imprint spreads out from her knuckles to the backs of her fingers. “That’s going to bruise,” I mutter. I reach, and she pulls back.

“You first. Then me.” Hazel eyes dip down, staring her rage into my neck. “I can already see the handprint, and it’s pissing me off.” Balls form at her wrists. It could be from Buck’s bruise or my blatant disregard for her question.

Don’t ask; do whatever she says. Hand stretched over my aching throat, I reach for the soft trickling life of wheat and grass. My skin heals, prompting the remedy to move at my pace rather than their own. Pain reduces to nothing, and the pounding at the base of my head recedes. “Does that look better?”

“Yes.” Tension fades from her high shoulders, but she says nothing else.

I reach for her forehead, and thankfully, she allows the touch. “How does your head feel?”

Thorn leans into my palm with a deep exhale, all her frustration blowing out with the breath. “Heavy, but I’m fine. I’ve taken a few hits in my life. Harder hits. Trust me; I’m fine.”

Brushing the ridge of her nose with my thumb, her skin brightens to the whims of my wishes before I utter the plea, banishing the twitch in her knuckles and spreading splotches tracing her jaw.

“Thank you,” she says.

“Thank you,” I echo. “For staying with me.”

Her eyes dwell in mine then she looks away. “We should find somewhere to stay tonight. I’d rather not sleep outside.”

I swing my arm toward the road and put on a stiff smile. “Lead the way.”

*

The poking and prodding of hay alerts my mind, clearing away the groggy morning haze. Turning through the dried plant, my shrunken brown haired rabbit body kicks up debris in sprays of honey wheat confetti. Its layers obscure my vision with lines of shadow. Despite my fur lined limbs, it’s cold.

Wait.

I shouldn’t be an animal. I’m an animal when I’m alone, and I did not fall asleep alone.

Unless...

I swim through the hay, paddling toward the surface. A burst of chilly air prickles my throat as I revert to a bipedal form, limbs squirming and trashing in a now puddle of hay. Pieces cling to my skin between the layers of my clothes.

“Thorn?” I call, voice hoarse from sleep. “Thorn?”

Spears of light leak through tight gaps in the wood to stripe the interior of a dim and empty barn.

Well not completely.

A cow moos, prompting the clucking of hens, but there’s no other noise, no human noise. The silence seeps into my skin, deeper than the hay could prick.

The cow repeats his cry, enunciating the sounds slow and sad.

“How long ago?”

Another bass bellow.

My heart cracks while my body crumples without support. “Oh. That long ago.” Gathering my knees, I tug them tight to my chest to hold me up, to fill the jagged emptiness.

She left.

She left and asked a cow to tell me she’s sorry.

I laugh; it’s hollow. After all the shit she gave me for talking to animals.

“She really left,” I whisper.

I don't need an answer, but the cow moos the same story again. He doesn't add an inflection of pity or deliver the sounds in a softened matter for a tender heart. No. Facts and facts alone.

"I heard you." I blurt. "Thank you for telling me." I'm not grateful. "You didn't have to." I wish he hadn't.

I wallow in the hay and wait. My head will tell me what to do next. Wait. Something will come. Some idea. Some direction. Yet, her absence sloshes around my mind like half broken ice over a stream. I already know that. Still, the fact is chewed and contemplated over and over as if she'll reappear if I take long enough to accept she left.

What am I supposed to do now? Where am I supposed to go?

Nuzzling my nose and chin between my knees, the tears stream into the cloth of my pants. Hay drifts down my back. Chunks coat my frazzled, unbraided hair.

Thorn had all the answers. She knew the directions and the reasons and the purpose. She *was* the purpose, my safe and stable, direct and organized, always determined and sure purpose.

I shove onto my feet in a burst of motion.

I'll find her.

Clucking hens peck at one another while the cow swishes his tail. All eyes conveniently avoid mine.

No.

No.

A clunky teeter tugs me back into my ball. Thorn wouldn't run if she wanted to be chased. She doesn't play games, not this kind.

Smearing my running nose across the knee of my pants, a sobbing sigh grinds in my throat. I know where to go. I know what to do, what I've been doing—wander. Without Thorn.

Her name fills the swirling sadness of my mind with her face. The sure smile and narrowed eyes tear my hollow chest to shreds. It hurts. It hurts like a torn muscle but deeper, as if my heart and lungs have been cut from my ribs. Dammit, why does it hurt?

Pathetic.

Pounding my wrist into the side of my temple breaks apart the self-pity. Thorn deserves more than a convenience cry. She left for a legitimate reason, and here I am crying about being alone in a barn. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My stomach churns, sending soundless sobs out my mouth. Grasping at my legs, I tug them tighter. It'll stop. Eventually...

Distraction, find a distraction, a thought to throw into the cog of dark cloudy gears in my head.

I have nothing, and no one. Again, I have no one... Reaching for my elbows, I compact into the tightest ball I can.

I have no one.

No. No, I'm not going to stop here and never move again. I won't! Do something. Anything. Move. Keep shifting through the motions. The next usual motion.

Sucking in a sniffle, I expand into my meditation position— legs crossed, arms stretched out to balance upturned palms on my knees. The loss of pressure allows an icy void to fill my stomach. Breathe.

One. It quakes on the exhale.

Two. A crackle of grief stutters the breath. Dried hay inhales through my nose.

Three. Animals bustle nervously around the barn. It's late in the day. Someone should have arrived by now to see to their needs.

Four. Easy. Empty. Empty my head. For a moment. So I can think, so I can breathe, so I can hear, so I don't stop moving. Not again. Not like I did with...

Vanya...

Good morning, cursed one, whispers the dirt and wheat dusted wind, cool and prickled from between the wooden boards.

'It isn't funny.' My pointed thoughts flow from me to them and vice versa, through the connection that grants me all I can do, all I might be worth...

Why? I thought it was rather silly, they droll on in their huffy tones. *The whole concept is absurd. The woman called you cursed when she is the cursed one. Her and all the others in that town who are too dumb to realize they too are animals.*

Here comes the rant, the wise lessons of nature ignored by all others. Lessons I am obliged to hear completely and, according to Vanya, spread to other ears, willing to listen or not.

The wind heaves a heavy condescending gust, then prattles on without another breath. *They dress themselves in absurd cloth and prance around on two legs declaring themselves no longer animals. In fact, they claim to be above animals. They have forgotten their place. The empty-headed fools. How dare they call you, one who remembers in mind and body, a curse. Their ignorant arrogance shall be a curse unto them until they die.*

‘I don’t think they’ve forgotten, merely hope to.’ I release my own held breath. If they won’t breathe, I won’t interrupt with my own.

Oh, you give them too much credit. They have forgotten.

My mind is too heavy, too tired for abstract conversation or an in-depth argument, especially about yesterday. I’ve been kicked out of towns before, with and without Thorn, and it’s usually for the same reason— magic. The animal transitions seem to be the most disconcerting. I know better than to use magic in such a public place. I knew that in the tavern. I knew it, and I didn’t listen. If I had, I wouldn’t be here, alone, listening to the wind lecture me on human civilization.

‘If they had truly forgotten, they wouldn’t try so hard to model behavior so distinctly human.’ A snuffle escapes. No. Stay focused. Stay present. Stay moving.

That is true, they bluster. They must eat with their human manners, they condemn those who fight to sort their problems since it isn’t civilized, and I do not wish to even begin discussing their impossible standards of sex. They say that but release another huff before continuing the rant. If the way they hide the act and the sheer amount of shame they surround it with isn’t enough to annoy, then one should see how they get all excited and doe-eyed when a baby arrives, pretending like it fell from the sky. I guarantee you we aren’t making babies up here. At least not mortal babies to be dropped down onto doorsteps fresh scented, doughy, and clean.

Late summer harvest winds usually have a sense of skepticism, but this region’s is the worst I’ve encountered. It may come from their continual movement through the small, stagnant farming towns or their lackluster views of endless crop fields, but whatever it is, winds in this area are consistently negative, growing cold and bitter, more than most other seasons.

‘We do have an intelligence animals tend to lack,’ I offer. A subtle reminder that I am also human.

Yes, and you squander it doing everything the hard way. You. I guess they didn’t need the reminder.

Not to mention all that overthinking you mortals do. Sure, your thoughts contain complexity, but then you go and hurt yourselves by overdoing it. Overdoing all sorts of tasks. Your kind overdrink, overeat, overwork, and overthink. Animals rarely commit any such waste. Not unless domesticated, then they are reliant on humans to monitor their excesses as well. A rough gust rubs the wood in a scoff.

‘You seem rather indignant this morning. I can leave you if you’d like.’

They are bitter, whispers the growing grasses, their voices flowing together in a mass, meshing in harmony with matching pitches and inflections. *I expect with the early start of their attitude shift, it will be a brisk fall and harsh winter this year.*

Silence, snips the wind, *I could start the autumn air early if you would prefer. You grasses would freeze before another comment could be mustered in your chattering blades.*

Very harsh winter, they repeat. *Harsh like the slight of a woman fleeing in the darkness. No, that is more painful than harsh*, they decide.

Sharp aches strike through my chest. She's gone, and that's all right. It hurts, and that's all right.

You are strong, young stonehealer, whispers the grasses.

Not strong, corrects the wind with a snap. *She would not be alone if she were strong enough to carry the burdens of the Thorn as well as her own.*

My eyes squeeze shut at the scathing comment. Maybe I wasn't strong enough. She did take care of me, monitored my meals, baths, and sleep. What did I do for myself? For her?

Ignorant words from an entity swayed in their emotions by the seasons, rebukes the grasses in the same monotone mass of voices. *Immortal does not mean all knowing*, they scoff, grasses churning together in a short rustle. *Time breeds confidence, and confidence breeds ignorance.*

There's laughter in the wind, a brief burst, harsh and cold. *Says the entity which slumbers for a fourth of the year. How the earth holds your snobby roots and blades, I'll never understand. I do however know the time I have experienced vastly outweighs yours. I was a strong defiant gust long before the stone beneath your roots crumpled to a hospitable dirt.*

Silence. I adopt silence. Don't intervene. Never intervene when the elements argue. They don't care about my opinion, and their argument may spawn from grudges held against one another for years, decades, even centuries. I could allow my mind to wander, not press on the connection passing my thoughts. No. No, being caught inattentive during an argument is worse than intervening. My shoulders slump as I wait for the words to end.

Age does not equate wisdom, chants the grasses.

It equates experience, chimes the wind, it's pitch arrogant and wispy. *And experience equates wisdom.*

Enough, bellows the earth. Their voice quakes from the ground beneath me, shaking dust free from the walls. My posture falls in line. *The marble sproutling is not interested in listening to you bicker.*

It is her job to listen, declares the wind. *She is a stone slinger, element conduit, and shifter of animal shapes. A natural caster gifted with her abilities on our whims. Her abilities depend on her listening to our bickering or whatever else we wish to say. Our wisdom, in whatever form we deem relevant, is critical in her understanding and the way her power presents itself in each of our domains.*

The grasses offer nothing more than a shushing sound— one I'll take to mean neither agreement nor dissension.

Stone and dirt rumble, rippling out further, an intimidation tactic, an assertion of dominance. Earth and water excel with this particular maneuver. Wind, however, doesn't affect enough rapidly enough, while fire pushes too much too quickly to allow for threatening; they simply burn.

Then when she sees it fit to attempt an influence in the region's wind current, feel free to deny her. However, as her magic primarily extends through the stone and earth, along with the plant's guidance in her healing arts, I would advise you, young stonehealer, to contemplate blocking out the voices of the unnecessary and catty.

The worst possible outcome— I've been asked to pick a side. Breathe. Take a moment. Compose myself. Entities such as these have nothing but time.

'Thank you,' I offer. 'I will keep the lesson in mind going forward, but I engaged in this conversation and do want to hear it in its entirety. I agree that good advice and wisdom can come from many sources, even bickering.' I'd also prefer not to travel in a bitter blistering wind for the next week. Resentful winds trail for quite a time.

Exactly, huffs the wind. *She understands the extent of her position, the importance of doing her duty. However, cursed one*, they chuckle with repetitive gusts shaking the wall. *I would like to stretch my breezes, so I shall wish you a good day.* With that goodbye, the wind's voice fades out of the barn and my mind, leaving the rustling grasses and rumbling earth as my primary company.

Rushing out after a partial win, very wind-like.

You are well grounded, rumbles the earth. *Not arrogant like a wind, overly impassioned like a flame, or wavering like a wave.*

'I tend to waver quite a bit actually.'

It's not the same, comments the grasses. To stretch and bend with the ways of those that can overpower or those needs you prioritize is different from consistent indecision. Much like leaving a town that shuns you after aiding in their medical dilemmas. Persisting in an area you are needed but fleeing when you aren't isn't wavering, it's adapting.

The earth hums in agreement. *You are a child of stone though, forged in rock made flesh. You are meant to be of us.*

Stone and life, confirms the grasses. Be well stonehealer.

And remain strong, adds the earth. Hearts may break but we... We cannot. Not truly.

The voices drift away, but I wait. Ensure no more follow. It's disrespectful to break one's connection before they are sure the entities have ended their speeches and advice. Probably on the same level as ignoring an argument.

Once enough time passes, my hands fall from my knees, settling into my lap. That didn't help. Was that their attempt to make me feel better, or was that something else entirely?

Don't dwell; their intentions are rarely clear.

Numb fingers rub against my palm, pressing and spreading the granules of stone specks coating my skin. Stone, rock, and dirt, they are all quick to claim me. So, unlike Thorn, I am never alone, not truly, but I can still wish to have kept her, that I could have been enough. Then I could have ensured *she* wasn't alone.

Dragging tears from my face, I climb to my feet. Collect everything and go. Everything I own already sits on my person— nearly nothing. Again. It's fine. I'm fine. Push through the motions. With an aching sigh, I throw a few feeble attempts in dusting the hay from my clothes. Time to go. Keep moving.

It's like cold, dense marbles sit in my throat.

Don't be like when Vanya left. It's not the same.

Keep moving.

Blinding white sunbeams of an early afternoon overwhelm my flinching eyes. Windblown crops tower the nearby road and overwhelm the golden landscape. Loose sun-bleached dirt, free of weeds, allows plants to rise thick and tall above my waist. It's well maintained, yet there's not a soul around to preserve such perfect appearances. Not a farmhand in sight.

"Are you done crying?"

Metallic fear jolts my body straight. It sparks on the tip of my tongue. I was alone. I saw no one. I could not have missed an entire human being against a background of flicking flame tinted grass. It's impossible.

Facing the edge of the barn, hard face settled on me, is a petite elderly woman. She stands, crooning over a slim staff. Its shining golden handle, forged into the shape of a horse's head, curves against the weathered skin of her palm. Storm cloud gray hair sways tied in a low tail and fans across her mid back as she shakes her head at me. Faded elderly eyes drink me in.

My nervous hands shift. Cover something. What? What am I supposed to hide?

She taps her foot to a stuffed bag standing half buckled in the dirt. A pile of folded leathers and a large, curved hunting dagger keep the bloated bundle much needed company.

Stamping the cane into the ground, a puff of dry dirt coats the woman's leather shoes. "Are you ready, or did you need more time to cry and whine?"

"I'm sorry. Uh... who are you?" I ask. The farm owner, obviously. "Oh. Uhm. Of course. You own the farm. I'm sorry. Yes, I'm ready to leave. I didn't take anything, I promise." I offer upraised hands to prove nothing is stashed in them. "You can search my pockets if it would help." People really like to do that, double check the pockets. Occasionally they like to pat for hidden ones as well. Although that's usually a tad more awkward and uncomfortable.

The woman shakes her head. "Take this armor and get changed. We should already be on the road."

My hands drop to my sides. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Take this armor and put it on," she repeats. "I don't want to waste any more time. There's only so much daylight in a day."

"Oh, all right," I say as if it explains her strange behavior, which it does not. Wait. Is she taking me in for trespassing? I cannot go back to Cress. They called me a witch and a curse, so I can't imagine it's a leisurely stay even in their prison.

No, why would she give me armor then take me to the local guard post? "Where are we going, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Bridgeport. I have an appointment."

"Bridgeport?" My hands rise again as I step toward the woman. "Ma'am Bridgeport is not a safe town. It's overflowing with bandits and smugglers. Nearly every person who travels through has a bounty on their head." Avoid Bridgeport. I was warned

this even in Greenfield, the first petite village I stumbled into when I arrived in Dawnharbor. Everyone says this: avoid Bridgeport. Well, maybe not *everyone*. “Ma’am, Dawnharbor has been unsuccessfully trying to establish an effective legal system there for decades,” I explain. “What kind of appointment do you have in a place like Bridgeport?”

Her eyes harden, the sheen in the silver-gray vanishing like the spine I swore I kept in my back. “Obviously an important one, if I’m going to Bridgeport. It’s also why I’ll be bringing an escort. I know I’ll need someone to protect me through the city.”

“An escort?” I mutter with what little confidence remains under her glare. Armor and a pack wait at her feet. Armor and a pack she pointed out to me. “Me?” Sense settles in the chaotic nonsense of my mind. “Oh no. No, no, no, no.” I wave my hands, maybe warding off her intentions. “I can’t.”

The woman raises a wide gray brow. “Well, do you see any other people around I can take?”

A mocking laughter of a wind bustles by, bending the grasses into a bowing stretch to reveal once again there are no fieldhands in sight. “Well, no, but I’m not very good at these sorts of things, I assure you. They have guilds for this kind of work. One’s nearby that you can hire, or you could even post a personalized inquiry on the board in Cress.”

The woman shakes her head with a sharp exhale. “I ain’t got time for that shit. Besides, none of them have magic.”

“Excuse me?” My hands clasp together at my stomach.

“Magic,” she repeats, enunciating each sound in the word, the ending is much sharper than the trader’s tongue would have you spell it. “I know what you did in Cress. Not only the thing in the tavern, but I know you’ve been helping with the cold and sick before that. I’d bet a little more magic went into those healings than you let on.”

“Well, I—”

She tsks, waving a pointed finger my way. “Don’t you go lying to me. Your big glossy eyes and blushing cheeks give you away, and it’s a waste of my time to drag you back through that dusty dirt-hole to tear off some bandages. ‘Sides the miracle of health ain’t enough to ease those fuck’s superstitions, but,” she says with a wave of her cane, “if you didn’t already know that, you wouldn’t have gone to such lengths to cover it up.”

My arms wrap around myself, hands squeezing at the elbows. “I use magic as a last resort.” I say the morning after being asked to leave Cress for what I deem an inappropriate and unnecessary use of magic.

“Perfect,” chimes the old woman. “It’ll scare off the bandits, and I’m old. You can’t expect a woman of my... of my experience to travel the weeklong distance between here and Bridgeport without some sort of first aid on hand. I might stub a toe and croak right in the fields, leaving my body to be found and ravaged by bandits and bears.”

“I don’t want that,” I whisper.

She nods, a grin sprouting on her face. “Oh.” She releases a faint groan as she bends to retrieve the pile of loosely folded leathers from the ground. Her hand holds the bones and muscles of her back and hip together as she twists. “Your mouthy friend said you’d be more than up for it. All I had to do was throw in a please.”

Thorn.

“Uh. When did my friend talk to you?”

“Last night when I caught her sneaking out of my barn. She said if I let you stay, you would take me to my appointment, so unless you’re going to bend back time and find a new place to stay the night, go change.” This time the old woman tosses the garments.

I fumble to catch all the pieces and scramble to stack the disarrayed sleeves and pant legs against my chest. One deep inhale and I present a final plea. “I’m really not good at this sort of thing. My friend—” The word catches in my throat. I pause and clear it away. “She’s much better at these kinds of jobs.”

“Well, *she* didn’t sleep in my barn. Sides, she’s long gone now, so get changed.” She punctuates the statement with a jab of her cane into dry crunching dirt. “I’m sure you’ll do fine. I need the presence, an intimidation tactic, more than I need an actual bodyguard.”

I glance down to my person. “I— I wouldn’t really define myself as intimidating.” She must see I’m not going to be effective. I don’t think I’ve intimidated anyone. Ever.

“That’s what the armor and dagger are for.” The pinch of patience she contains drains from her tone. “I want them back when this is over,” she adds, “so don’t go ripping or chipping anything. They’re both brand new. New cuts and forging. Cost me more than a few shining silver.”

“Oh, I won’t.” I can’t really promise that, can I? I never intend to break most of the things I’ve broken. “I mean I can mend whatever I break.”

“Good. Make sure you got a few spooky tricks prepared too in case people get too close.” The woman chuckles then a stern expression swallows her joy. “Like I said though, I don’t want you to hurt nobody. Magic scares most folk in this area, so you shouldn’t need nothing big.”

“I noticed.”

“All right, get going,” she demands. The harsh pitch of her aged voice scurries me into action, tugging and pulling the articles from my person to replace them with the thick underclothes and darkly tanned leather armor. The fabric is comfortable while the pristine leathers reek of fresh stain. They’re definitely new, the sort of chaffing new that isn’t necessarily an asset.

One brow pops up on the woman’s face. “Not really a shameful type, are you?”

“Huh?” Glancing down to my half-dressed body, realization strikes me dumb. She intended for me to change in the barn. “Oh... uh... I guess not.” Warmth spreads through my skin. These are the interactions I needed Thorn for, to keep me from being an idiot. Most people haven’t seen bodies as frequently as I have; they aren’t as insensitive as I can be. Maybe no one is. Maybe other healers and herbalists are more tactful, and I really am the odd one.

Tightening the straps at the sides and adjusting the belts and secures along the legs appropriately, I test the strength of their make. They don’t budge a centimeter. A smile rises into my cheeks at a job well done. This is one of the few things I can do better than Thorn, and she’d worn armor years before I’d touched a set. She may have grown up on the streets and hopped from town to town stealing from travelers on the road, but I can still get into a set of leathers quicker and properly.

She’s roaming again. Bitter and full of hate. Alone. Again.

I yank the final strap tight, securing the chest piece and squeezing my stomach. Thorn will be fine, and she doesn’t want to be chased. If she did, she wouldn’t have left. Not how she did.

The old woman shoves the sheathed dagger into my hands, dragging me from waterlogged worry. “Stand tall,” she demands, and I do. “Good. Good.” She scrunches her face into a tight stack of wrinkles. “There’s hay in your hair.”

“Oh, sorry!” I tear the spattered strands apart, shaking the pieces loose of debris then twist the three clean chunks into a spine-long braid. The tip of the tail sweeps across my hips, but with the hardened leathers, the usual tickling sensation is absent.

With a grunt the woman taps my legs and torso with the butt of her cane. “You know how to put on a set of armor, so I assume you know how to use it? How to fight?”

“Fight? No, not really. I mean, I’ve always worn armor to discourage bandits from robbing me.” What good that tactic did; I was ambushed on the road several times when I set out, but it taught me to keep off the roads, weave through the trees and pastures as much as possible. I learned most bandits hide along trade roads in ditches, trees, long grasses, and ploy overturned carts. That was one I would always fall for— the fake victim scenario. Thorn did say it was their most successful trick. “No. I’m not proficient at the whole fighting thing. You don’t need that, right? You said this was an appearance adjustment, an intimidation tactic.”

“It is,” she clarifies quickly. “I was curious. Your name, dear? We haven’t shared those yet.” The old woman smiles bright, a full set of weathered teeth peeking through her thin wrinkled lips. Not a smidgen of her previous impatience peeks through those expressive eyes.

That’s a sudden shift. “Uhm. Well...” It’s a name. What harm is there in a name? “Dali. Dali Stonebrand. And you?”

“Muriel Isenberg.”

I offer a slight head bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Muriel.”

She hums, cocking her head to the side. “Most wouldn’t be able to offer so genuine a greeting. Not after I trapped them in a job with debt. I won’t be paying you,” she clarifies, but it doesn’t seem like news. I suspected as much, but I’m not exactly in a place to negotiate. “I knew you were here last night,” she adds with narrowed eyes. “I let you stay so you wouldn’t be able to refuse my offer.”

I put on a smile, one as big and polite as I can manage. “I don’t really have anywhere else to go.” I chuckle, but it catches and gathers in my throat. “Or anything to do, so if we make the best of it, I’m sure I can get you where you need to be.”

A task. A distraction. A snippy, but otherwise nice old woman to walk into a town nearly a week away. I can do this. I can do this, and it’ll help. Help me move and operate and prevent me from collapsing. I won’t end up like... Like I was with Vanya.

Muriel hums again as her eyes scan over me. “You’re a little strange, aren’t you?”

I laugh and attempt to prevent my discomfort from trickling in. “We all are, aren’t we?” I fail.

Dull displeasure cries sharply in the indifference of her expression.

“I’m sorry.”

“How about you don’t talk when we get into the city, all right?”

“Sounds like a solid plan.” She’s intimidating for her age and crooked posture. Or... Or I’m pathetic. A sigh heaves from someplace deep in my core. “Should we go?”

“Yeah, we should have left hours ago.” Muriel points toward the path cutting through her fields of wheat and corn. “Lead the way.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Stepping down the gravelly horse and wagon trail splitting Muriel’s land, fear keeps my tongue still in my mouth, fear of an old woman. At the main road, Muriel indicates the direction with a point of her cane. A few feet remain between us, close enough to plant her firmly in my peripherals but far enough we won’t be mistaken as relatives. Our walking formation declares our relationship— woman and employee— so blatantly I have to think it’s intentional. Walking at my own pace, and she matches it. Surprisingly quick and perseverant for a woman of her age. I hope I’ll be able to move even half as well as she does when I’m that old.

I don’t have a map. I don’t have a map anymore.

The scraps of paper quickly dissolving to bits of waterlogged confetti float downstream in my mind. What a clumsy step that was.

Thorn walked us town to town from memory. I guided us through thick fields and occasional patches of forest to keep off the roads, but she found our destinations.

Muriel doesn’t consult any parchment either. She walks straight and forward, her attention on the road ahead. Like Thorn. This must be what happens when you live your entire life in one region.

In Kildal I could walk to Marken’s in fifteen minutes. I knew which alleys to cut and which to avoid, and I still know to leave the Quartz Square before the nineteenth hour to avoid being stomped down by dusty work boots, but to know an entire countryside is a familiarity on an entirely different level. To most travelers the acres of blowing wheat, rising stalks of corn, and dirt lines of potatoes and carrots must all look alike.

“How old are you?” Muriel’s voice breaks the silence with a raspy edge. I’d already forgotten its sound.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“How old are you?” she repeats.

“Nineteen, ma’am.”

Muriel grunts. “You engaged?”

“Uh. No, not currently.” I tug at the circular marble landscape hanging in a pendant around my neck.

“Your husband already dead?”

“What? No. No, I don’t have a husband. Never have.”

“Hmm. Wish mine was,” she mutters then clears her throat to press further.

“Ladies your age usually newly married or engaged. You ain’t got no one like that?”

Flipping the pendant between my fingers, I squeeze my eyes shut against the image of Thorn. Chomping down on my bottom lip traps the whimper in. Once the piercing pain passes, I answer. “Nope. No, I don’t.”

“Huh. Guess I should’ve figured that from the way ya move about. You don’t act like most nineteen-year-olds I know. You ain’t skippin around with that deplorable hum on your lips. Not pluckin flower petals from your fingers or boastin about whatever dumb work your husband or fiancé does.”

I’ve met that kind of sweet eyed folk, but it seemed more like a blissful contentment than annoyance. Sure, no one acts like that in Kildal, but dwarves live longer. Marriage happens a handful of years after they turn fifty if they’re lucky, but never before twenty.

Life was different in Kildal. So were the people.

Have Dardus or Daerren met anyone since I left? Anyone that might stick? What if I have a sister or brother-in-law?

Another pulse of pain, dull and chilled climbs from my stomach to my throat. Do they still talk about me? Should I still be introducing myself as Dali Stonebrand, or am I simply Dali now?

Dali.

“You’re runnin out of time,” continues Muriel. The crunching dirt and gravel breaking beneath her cane give her words a monotone rhythm. “Maybe a couple good years yet, before whomever you find will probably have a history. If you want one that’s been only yours, you gotta get on it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I mutter. I don’t care. I don’t care about any of that. Why are we discussing this? Is this in reference to her own life, mistakes she’s made or seen others make?

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” she adds. “You’ve got a nice face. Might need to clean up a bit, but it’s still nice.”

Nibbling my lip, my thoughts remain thoughts. Muriel doesn't care about the grains of dirt coating me. No one does. Well, they do but not about why.

That remains the same as home.

"I wouldn't say you've got sharp features," she continues, skimming my face with squinted eyes. I drive my own gaze into the cloudless sky. "Prominent is probably a good word," she decides. "My you look like you've been carved out a soft stone. They must've forgot to dust you off." Muriel chuckles. "Plus, you got all your teeth, none too crooked, and with that little round nose on that innocent curved jaw and those big cocoa brown peepers you got, your age won't show as it grows, if you know what I mean."

"Thank you," I offer, picking up the pace enough to move us quicker but not for her to notice. Hopefully.

"Little too athletic though," she adds, catching my ankle with the curve of her cane. The momentum of my movement colliding with the sudden pull of hers swirls me around to face her. Flapping outstretched arms keep me from tipping to either side completely.

"They don't like girls who can run and lift and climb. Not in these parts," she mutters. Her mouth pauses as a hard line above a set jaw. This is something she's upset about; this is something personal.

"But you listen," she whispers, releasing my foot to jab the cane into my hip. Her rapid tapping the metal between the edges of leather stings. Not enough to drag any pained sound from my lips but enough to be uncomfortable. "You don't fight. That's what you said, right?"

"No, ma'am."

"Polite too," she notes. The clear silver-gray eyes scan my face. Muriel readjusts her cane in her hands, pressing the butt into the ground again. "When we get into the more urban areas, you let me do the talking. Remember that."

I nod. "Yes, ma'am."

"Folk that look and act like you don't usually walk these roads, but I ain't asking for no reasons." Muriel sighs. "Yeah, I'm too tired to hear any sad shit today, so let's keep it moving along."

"Yes, ma'am," I repeat.