

IVY'S WINDOW

By ivypane

Chapter One

When we entered Theoray's mind, she looked up as if she had felt it.

Her gaze fell on the view from her window as she waited. The sky had grown darker, the small shingle roofs of the houses as pale and plain with winter as the inside of a snowglobe. No matter how many times she had seen night fall on Landally, Theoray always thought the same thing - tonight, more intently than ever before.

I need to remember. This might be the last time I see it. We heard her thoughts rise as if they were our own. They were anything but sad - yet we felt the shadow of guilt that passed over her mind.

A wisp of Theoray's long wavy hair fell in front of her face and she brushed it away with a furtive hand. We felt it through her fingertips as she moved, the strands soft and weightless as down. The winter fog had wrapped the buildings in a cold shroud in the afternoon, and now as night asserted itself, snow finally fell in sullen silence. Theoray

shivered, and we felt that, too, as if her skin was ours.

It made an idle thought flit through her mind. *Am I cold, or something else? Someone passing over my grave? Or... They always say you can feel it if someone's watching you. Imagine if my family knew about this. Imagine if someone could see.*

I had heard that thought countless times in the minds of humans. Whenever they were sure they were alone or were afraid they were, whenever they committed what they saw as a thought crime. And yet, none of them had ever thought this because they could actually feel me watching them.

There were simply enough human stories about such things that it had become a recurring fear - and Theoray's head had always been full of stories. The fairytales of her childhood had not left her, despite most humans on this planet not knowing that there was some truth to them all.

I had been in Theoray's mind enough to know all was well. I would know if someone had truly noticed us watching. I would hear the panic of it beating in their head - but Theoray's thoughts raced for another reason altogether. It was only her guilty mind and the eerie old street lights outside that had made her think that way.

It was a sight I had admired many times outside my own window in the house next door. The ochre glow of the streetlamps settled on the uneven, snowy pavement like a soft-box light. The snow silvered in the dark, turning to a shifting surface of gold desert dunes under the lamps. Only the occasional passer-by was there to see this sight, and nobody that night stopped long enough to note it. Humans had missed these things more often than not in my watchful millenia.

But Theoray didn't miss it. Despite the countless times she had seen it, the countless times I had been in her head, how bored of it all we had both become, I still returned to her sometimes, precisely for this. She felt the same as me. She noticed. Like me, it always made

her glad that she was there to see it, for the sake of those who didn't. It felt like the most she could do. Bear witness.

And we both shared the same instinctive, stubborn belief that neither of us would remain in this town much longer, no matter how much time passed.

Theoray turned back to the sewing in her lap. Her room was as bright and crowded as ever, left mostly untouched from her too-recent childhood. The walls were painted with tall wildflowers, as if its inhabitant were a small bug crawling amongst them; the ceiling painted with a clouded blue sky. It was a summer day among the winter night, cluttered with tall bookshelves, homemade cosplay costumes and souvenirs and anime figurines and artwork, posters of bad cult TV shows and stuffed animals and beaded curtains and fairy lights and candles.

She pulled another stitch through the loose button on the sweater she had been working on. On the floor beside her, the packed backpack she had pulled it from peeked out from under her bed, unzipped and spilling more clothes.

In her mismatched pyjamas, Theoray's plump, tall figure was folded up on her couch like a flower bud. At twenty years, she looked simultaneously as child-like and as grown up as other conscious beings I had witnessed in moments they believed they were unobserved. Vulnerable, yet always on the verge of jumping, quicksilver-like, to the defensive stance of their social persona were anyone to walk into the room.

And, when the casement outside her door creaked, that's exactly what Theoray did. *Oh god, she really did read my mind.* She bristled, kicking the bag deeper under the bed - before relaxing again when she saw what was in her sister's hands.

"Hi ugly," Amie said, straight-faced. Her visage was the spitting image of Theoray - the same small chin and mouth, the same wide-set, brown eyes, the same height - but in all other ways she was so different that it eclipsed their similarities. Her hair was yellow starlight, her ponytail long down her back, and her spine as straight as a lamppost as she stood

in the doorway in her long, pale dressing gown, holding a plate.

“Hello? Is there a ghost in here?” Theoray said with a grin, her spike or anxiety settling. She pretended to squint. “Scrooge? Is that you?”

Amie rolled her eyes. “Is that what I get for feeding the wildlife? Rude.”

Theoray grinned wider and pulled another stitch home.

I knew Amie almost as well as Theoray. It had been their routine since they were little - Amie’s dry humour and Theoray’s jibes. Despite only having a few years of difference, Amie had always acted much older than her sister.

Amie set the plate of toast with chocolate spread on Theoray’s desk. “Tell me you’re going to bed soon? You’re not getting out of university tutoring again.”

Theoray groaned, finally looking up. “Fuck. I forgot.”

Amie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and muttered “Language,” automatically. Then, she hurried out, only raising her voice to call over her shoulder, “Goodnight!”

“Night!” Theoray called - and then, as if only just realising what had happened, slightly louder - “Thanks!”

She smiled to herself, hearing the stairs creak where Amie stopped for a moment, annoyed at her volume, before she continued her way up to bed. In her wake, Theoray closed the door, tucked a blanket under the crack, and allowed her brow to crease with guilt. *Of course, she doesn’t know. How could she?*

I had the same fears, sometimes. That, after hundreds of years of being locked away in my room, someone would still walk in. Or that someone would read my mind for the first time, inhabiting my body the way that I had done to countless others.

But, unlike humans, I had a way of knowing if that happened. I would always know if someone had begun to listen to my thoughts. My Other Eyes would tell me. They would show me the one listening as I inhabited their mind, in turn. It would be like hearing my own

voice echo back to me from the cave wall of another consciousness.

But, whatever I heard or saw, I could not utter a word back to any of them across the distance, not in their mind, nor in reality. I cannot walk in the light of day or the shadow of night. I cannot leave.

I had often thought that perhaps this room, this house, were not a prison after all, but somewhere I was put for my own protection - a liminal space of magic and half-gloom to protect my body from the pain and scarring of the light and dark. But, no matter the intentions of whoever placed me there, it still felt like a punishment for something I could not control.

I tried not to think this way. Perhaps those who had placed me here were the only ones powerful enough to hear my thoughts without my knowledge.

“Ivy. Nothing is powerful enough to listen to us.”

The warm, reassuring voice came into my mind, familiar as the hands of a loved one covering my eyes. The Other Eyes, speaking to me inside my head, unable to speak aloud. Speaking was one of the very few things I could do which they could not.

“Yet because we cannot be heard, we cannot ask for help,” I thought back to them.

“Our protection has its disadvantages.”

Even if I could be heard, what would I say? What would it be like? A mortal would not have the capacity to understand my internal meanings - not without explanation, not without a concentrated effort on my part to illustrate my thoughts in a way that could be understood. Not without turning the exchange of magical energy from vessel to vessel in my body into images or words. I could speak aloud, perhaps. But I had seen how many difficulties that created among mortals, let alone mortals and faeries.

“Telepathy is surely the better method of communication.” The Other Eyes sounded wry, despite being soundless. They spoke in my head, but the fact that they used words had

long made me believe they were a separate being rather than part of my mind - something living alongside my consciousness, making its own effort to be understood.

Or perhaps the hundreds of years of isolation had simply driven me mad. I had watched it happen to enough humans: in caves, in cities, in rooms full of other people. For all my gifts, was I really so different?

“Come, now. You must pay attention,” the Eyes told me, feeling my thoughts tug in other directions.

“To what? You pulled us out of the heads of the most influential people on Earth to show me... this? Theoray, from the house next door? We have seen all there is to see of her.” I did not understand their agitation. *“You promised me something new.”* I failed to not sound accusatory.

We slipped out of Theoray’s mind like snakeskin - and I was back in my own room. The cold of it compared to Theoray’s house made me want to shiver just as she had. But I had no need for it. I had only ever shivered inside other people’s skin.

The Other Eyes appeared before me in my mind, overlaying the reality of the room around me like a gauze. They were only visible to me through themselves. My own eyes - the physical eyes of my body - were blind. I could only see the world through the Other Eyes, and so they were able to conjure whatever they wanted me to see in the reality I perceived through them.

So they conjured an image of themselves in my head: the approximation of physical objects and effects with which they wanted to represent their existence to me, and maybe to themselves.

I had to trust them in this - in all they showed me. I had trusted them my whole conscious life already. I had no choice. There was nothing else to do in this empty, sealed room but watch through them as the world went by.

The room was simple. Barren. I had never been outside it. The walls were covered in peeling yellow wallpaper, its faded intertwining rose design fighting for space with water stains. The door was painted shut from the inside. The floor was a scratched, heavy, dark wood, and there was a metal bed frame in the corner, covered only with a damp mattress and a dusty white sheet. I sat in the room's only ancient wooden chair, my bare feet dangling. And, in the middle of the outer wall, in front of me, there was a single window, grimy with a thousand rainstorms and overgrown with ivy as thick and dark and glutted as a leech.

But, when the Eyes cast themselves into being, the way I saw the room transformed. Theirs was the only luminescence which did not hurt me - and this light was always the first thing to appear. First floating spots - pink, yellow, blue, orange, green, purple. Then, the glowing patches sharpened into shards of neon glass, lit with phosphorus. They rotated in systematic, kaleidoscopic patterns which knew their paths as surely as particles know the laws of physics, the laws of gravity and mirrors and magnets. A settled pattern.

And there they floated, before me in my mind. A pair of eyes made out of mosaic, their shining disparity shifting and shimmering like a nervous shoal.

They spoke again. ***"This is something new,"*** they said. ***"At long last, Theoray has prepared to leave home. She is ready."***

I sighed. *"She has claimed to be ready for years. This is not the first time she has rearranged the contents of that same bag."* I matched the Eyes' gaze. *"Is that truly all?"*

They spoke again. ***"No,"*** they said, ***"that is not all."*** The fractals that made them up pulled closer together, filling my vision. ***"It is so tenuous, still, and I have waited until the final moment, but... I believe the hour has come."***

I could not help how my mind trembled at the words. I had almost accepted that it would never come to pass. The few other times the Eyes had told me of similar celestial events, nothing had happened, in the end. Only the Eyes' sad speeches of failure. Only

glimpses, brief and bright and precious, of who I truly was, and where I was from.

The Eyes looked at me in my mind's eye, some pieces of their mosaic spinning in place, some undulating up and down in harmony with the others, like a breathing body. *“The time has come for Orion’s plan. The red moon rises. The ritual is set. And, finally, the last portal to Diastia may open.”*

My chest ran cold, then hot. Diastia. The faerie planet. The Eyes had told me that was my true home. I only had their word; I didn't remember anything about it. But I also knew I didn't belong in this room, alone, among humankind. I had longed to go home ever since the Eyes told me home existed. But, aside from my magical imprisonment in these four walls and my inability to go outside, there had soon appeared another reason why home was out of our reach.

The portals to Diastia had been sealed. We had watched them peter out to cold nothingness a few decades ago. Once, we had seen the few faeries interested in this planet pass through freely, back and forth between Diastia and the mortal world - through their eyes, and through the eyes of the mortals they mingled with.

But, just like that, passage stopped. Nobody on this side of the portals had any answers for us as to why, besides the sense that war had broken out over things I didn't understand in places I did not know.

The stranded faeries went into hiding, and, one by one, most died, using up the magic that was their lifeblood to nothing, unable to replenish it from the faerie planet.

Even before that, though, I had only ever seen Diastia in their memories - a paltry, bitter substitute for present experience. After that, all I could do was reread the minds of those who remained again and again for glimpses of my home, their reminiscences faded as the pages of an old storybook.

A few portals had remained open, but they were ancient, ritualistic, unstable - and

perhaps their time would never come, the Eyes had said. But, after all, it had.

I stood from my chair to my full, small height, full of anxiety and indecision.

“If Orion’s plan succeeds... Will we see it ourselves? Will we see Diastia?”

“More than that,” the Eyes said. ***“We may be able to go home.”***

I froze, still staring out of the window.

“How? Is that... true?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“No,” I allowed. *That I know of,* I added, in my heart of hearts. Sometimes, I was unsure whether the Eyes needed me to turn my thoughts into words to know exactly what I was thinking. Sometimes, I felt as if they understood me even when I didn’t want it.

I did not know, and it had always troubled me. I was too used to knowing.

I looked out of the window through the Eyes at the same street I had seen so many times. In the heavy, wet snow, the few pedestrians who had passed by had left behind only the ghost of their breath and their footprints, re-frozen to ice around the impressions of their hurried feet. No cars went by. The cottages, their windows mostly empty, floated in the sea of fog like the prows of abandoned ships. Their ‘For Sale’ signs continued their decay in the same sullen silence as the mostly senior residents of the town, who had long retired to bed to practise their retirement from life itself.

When I had seen the film *In Bruges* in one of our many excursions to the cinema through the minds of especially quiet humans, I knew exactly the words for the place, the feeling. *A fairytale town. How’s a fairytale town not somebody’s fucking thing?*

Punched through Landally’s tedious blue night, Theoray’s window shone like a paper sun, and as I saw her pass by it, I knew our thoughts were one.

I can’t wait to get out of here.

I forced my thoughts into words - an effort to be understood. *“Show me,”* I said to the

Eyes.

“Yes. It is about time.”

Time. Time dilated around us - or rather, the Other Eyes pushed my mind along at an impossible speed. The Eyes had told me that faerie minds are different from those of humans. We had magic in our veins, not blood, and every organ was merely a vessel for our power.

No matter. Just like an oxygen-deprived human brain, our vision blurred, tunnelling before us. The space in my head felt like fire.

I knew what fire felt like. I had been in the mind of a human as they burned alive.

And then, I was outside my body - a feeling more familiar to me than being inside it. Still, I was keenly aware that the only thing protecting me from dissolution in these moments of transfer was the Other Eyes. They were a membrane around the energetic impulse of my existence, like a cradle carrying me over a bottomless chasm.

The Eyes once told me that these moments were the most dangerous. Our life entirely hinged on them concentrating on not scattering us, like so many rays of light, across the snow.

It had not gotten easier with time, only more familiar. It was not the same thing.

But it was still freedom, for a moment. Neither absolute darkness nor absolute light could hurt me here, outside my physical body. In these moments, I could imagine the sun on my face without the stinging pain it usually brought me.

Outside, we were surrounded by winter. The Other Eyes pulled me along the street by my house, intermingling us with the fog low on the ground and the errant, pathetic snowflakes still drifting from the sky.

I sighed, airlessly, incorporeally along with the breeze, and settled back into Theoray's bones like the first snap of frost in wood.

* * *

Theoray was still bent over her work. She pushed the needle through, and I felt the pinprick of pain as she hit her finger. She pulled away, cursing, a drop of blood pooling in the small hole before she brought it to her mouth. I tasted it: the metal of the needle, the iron of the blood.

"I never tire of these things," I thought to the Eyes.

"Likewise."

Theoray raised her head. The porch light had turned on. She had been waiting.

She stood, leaving her sewing in her room and making her quiet, quiet way down the stairs to let Orion into the house. We followed at her shoulder like a spectre.

She was excited to see him before the bonfire, before their other friends crowded in.

I knew this house as well as my own – as well as I knew Theoray herself. This house was almost as good a friend to her as the creature standing at its door, or her sister. It had held Theoray when she cried more often than her parents had, keeping her solitude and secrets safe as if they were its own.

But the stair beneath her still gave her away, its creak as sudden and loud as in the many horror movies I had seen through human eyes. Theoray flinched and froze mid-step, waiting for Amie's door to open; but the sound had not been for her sister's benefit. I knew as well as Theoray did, that the only person who this house had no secrets from was their grandmother - and it seemed it was not intending to keep any tonight.

"Theoray?" a soft, full voice called down the stairs. Theoray made a face, keeping completely still, balanced on one foot on the staircase.

"Theoray, come up and see me," Eleanor repeated. Theoray shook her head, and then turned on her socked heel, padding back up the stairs past her room.

Her grandmother's bedroom door was only cracked open, so she opened it carefully in case she was just on the other side – but she was not. As agile for her age as always, Eleanor

was already back in her bed, sitting upright and smiling at her granddaughter. Her blind eyes were white in the scattered light of the dimly-lit room.

“Theoray, are you having trouble sleeping again?” she asked.

Theoray took a few awkward steps across the carpet and hung back, unwilling to prolong the conversation by coming closer for the moment. “Uh, just getting a drink from the kitchen.”

Her grandmother tilted her head, her smile opening up into more of a grin. She still had all of her own teeth. They shone like ivory piano keys yellowed with age in the light of the lamp - more wolf than grandma, for a moment. Theoray bit the inside of her cheek, hesitating before she relented.

“I was going down to let Orion into the house,” she muttered.

Eleanor folded her arms, not sternly so much as with a slight air of smugness.

“Hmm,” she said. Theoray shifted her weight from one foot to the other, looking around the room in silence, unwilling to face her head on for the moment.

Despite their differences, her grandmother’s attic room had always reminded Theoray a little of her own. It was, of course, stricter, neater – the curtains were replaced by lavender cloth blinds, the desk clear save for a potted plant and a heavy stack of journals, and the cream-coloured carpet, though discoloured from age and smoke, was soft beneath Theoray’s feet. But the bright quilted sheets, and Theoray and Amie’s childhood scribbles on the walls, and the reams of gardening books and equipment on her shelves made Theoray still feel connected to Eleanor the same way as when she was small, for all the distance of her new adulthood. She was the only mother figure she and Amie remembered, after all.

But Eleanor herself was as much of a contradiction as her room. She had an untamed, curly abundance of salt and pepper hair that reached between her shoulder blades, sun-browned skin cracked by wrinkles like ancient heirloom porcelain, and a strong body

filled to wideness by age. Yet despite the power and wildness of her appearance, despite her riot of hair and the garden soil that clung to her outside clothes, there was something bright and strict about her in the lines of her tailored clothes, and the intensity of her unseeing eyes cracked like a whip.

I had always liked her, for my part. She had the breath of Diastia in her, even after all her years of living on Earth. It was only faeries like her who survived this long on their fading magic since the portals had closed - cautious, judicious, resilient.

“And are you and Orion staying home tonight, or are you planning to go elsewhere?” Eleanor finally asked, forcing Theoray’s attention back to her. As she spoke, Eleanor felt for her nightstand and, finding her packed pipe and matches, struck a spark and lit the tobacco inside with a steady hand.

When she turned back, her eyes were not quite looking directly at Theoray. “Come along; don’t hover. Sit with me a moment.”

Theoray obliged, pitching herself on the side of the bed and running her hand absently against the quilted cloth sewn from innumerable patterns. Eleanor’s blind eyes found her properly at last and, clasping the hefty, gently smoking pipe in her chiselled mouth, she reached out and patted Theoray’s knee reassuringly. Theoray looked down at her hand, riddled with veins, her strong fingers roughened and dry around the pads from her gardening work. She covered it with her own – smooth-skinned, long-fingered, pale.

“We’re going to meet our friends –” she said, and, in the same breath, “don’t tell Artemie.” It wasn’t a lie, but she still felt guilty.

Her grandmother smiled, but her eyes remained sharp as flickers of pale fire. She pulled on her pipe, her eyes half-closing to white crescents for a moment, letting a few plumes of smoke loose from her tightly pursed lips before taking the pipe in hand again.

“Of course,” she said, her voice deep with dissipating smoke. “I only tell people

things that it would benefit them to know - *especially* your sister.” She grinned again, and winked. “And I won’t tell Amie you called her by her full name, either.”

Theoray flushed a little. “I just think it’s pretty,” she mumbled. “I don’t know why she hates it so much.”

Eleanor patted Theoray with her free hand again, and then released her. Instead, she propped her chin up with her palm and leaned her elbow on her other crossed arm, occasionally pulling on her pipe.

“Where are you all off to then, I wonder? It’s far too late for anything to be open in town.”

Theoray would have lied if she thought it would do any good. But Eleanor knew her lying voice too well. “The woods,” she said. “For a bonfire. For the red moon tonight.”

It’s not a lie. It’s not a lie, she repeated to herself, over and over. Guilt still stuck in her throat. She would never have even considered leaving if she wasn’t sure Amie would be more than able to look after Eleanor.

I ignored Theoray’s thoughts. I still didn’t really believe that she would leave. I had more important concerns. “*Is that what Orion has been waiting for?*”

The Eyes stirred in me, approving and anticipatory.

“The woods.” Eleanor nodded without a shadow of surprise. She closed her eyes and sighed, another wave of smoke washing over Theoray. It was sweeter than most tobacco, more cloves than tar. “What is the weather like, Theoray?” Eleanor asked quietly.

“Uh, it’s snowing.”

“I know,” Eleanor said, with a twinkle. “The air is crisp with it; the cold is unmistakable. But,” she gestured with her pipe in the direction of the draped window, “how heavy is it on the ground?” Her tone was wistful. “I haven’t been outside a while.”

“Well, it started off light, but now the whole town is covered, and it’s not stopping! If

it keeps going, no one will be able to drive up.” She liked her chances of skipping tomorrow’s university tutoring more and more. Dr Weard’s car never handled snow well.

Eleanor nodded. Her face had softened, and her already-distant eyes seemed to transcend past the darkness she lived in, into something Theoray couldn’t see. “I think I’ll go for a walk later.”

Theoray balked a little at the response, then smoothed her expression, as if it mattered. She felt like it did. “You shouldn’t go out if it snows us in at night. You don’t want to slip on the ice.”

“Well, maybe I’ll ask for an escort,” Eleanor smiled. Theoray felt a prickle of guilt, and began to stand, banking on an escape.

“I shouldn’t leave Orion at the door in this weather.”

“Of course. But,” she looked at Theoray, sharply and wearily. “Theoray, please be careful. The woods can be a dangerous place.” She put her hand on Theoray’s again, her fingers closing around her wrist like a manacle - not painful, but insistent and strong.

“Remember what I told you,” Eleanor said, very firmly.

Theoray’s body tensed. “Wood and town are not the same,” she repeated. “Nature doesn’t give a shit.”

“Yes.” Eleanor smiled faintly.

It was one of the things she had been most insistent they learned when they were children, even though the woods planted around Landally had been only reedy saplings when they were young. Times had changed. The trees had turned thick and dark over the years, growing up alongside the sisters at a rate that few humans cared to notice was unnatural.

Eleanor let go of her hand. Her soft smile was back, only a little hardened around the mouth if you looked closely - and Theoray always did. It was Eleanor’s usual expression.

“Good,” Eleanor said. And then, an afterthought indifferent as a breeze – “And give

my regards to Orion, would you?"

Theoray stood. "Alright, Gramma." She pricked a little with cold sweat. "And thank you. For not telling... Amie," she forced herself to say.

"No use in her knowing," Eleanor said brightly.

"Goodnight," Theoray said, backing out of the room.

"Goodbye, Theoray." In the gloom, her grandmother's voice sounded warmer again - but sadder, too. "Stay safe. Stay together. I love you."

Theoray stepped out of the door, her hand on the doorknob. Her voice sounded distant in her own ears. "I will gramma. I love you too."

She closed the door behind her, and started her quiet way back down the stairs.