

When I was little, my dreams used to scare my Mother even more than they frightened me. Children were supposed to see flowers that spoke to them, and swim with water creatures. They were supposed to grow wings and soar through the air above the trees and in the clouds. But I never dreamt of those things. Instead, I was woken up by my Mother more nights than not, mumbling into her chest about the deep fissures and cracks tearing apart the earth and splitting open my world. And in the fissures- claws, talons, that hooked into the ground and pulled themselves out of the blistering red cracks. Rumbling that sounded like beasts stomping through my ears and trampling my thoughts, screams that pierced my mind and shattered any peace I hoped to have.

Sometimes after I was put back to bed, and the sweat and tears were dried from my skin, I could hear my parents fight over where the nightmares came from and why I'd been plagued with them. I'd press my ear to the wood of my door, careful to avoid splinters as I strained to hear their words. Most of the time their arguments led to nowhere, but I still remember the last one they ever had.

*"Perhaps she is seeing the place you tell her people will go in the end if they are not good," my Father passive-aggressively suggested, raising his eyebrow. "You know, the one that your religion insists is real?"*

*My Mother scoffed. "Of course. Our child is plagued by unholy sights, and the first thing that you seek to do is blame me."*

*"What would you say the explanation is then Freya?" Father challenged, shaking his head. "Those 'unholy sights' would certainly have given me terrors as a child, why not her?"*

*"Are you truly to ignore the obvious? It's You, Enoch! You and your family, your bloodline, Your-"*

*"Watch your words carefully."*

I remember how chillingly cold my Father's voice became, cold enough to make the room itself feel like it had dropped several degrees in temperature. And their argument fell to a hush. I'd never heard him sound like that, no matter how angry or frustrated. And I'd never heard my Mother go so quiet. I went to bed that night with the realization that my Mother may have trusted and respected my Father, sometimes I think she even loved him. But she never forgot who he was. I don't think she ever could. And thus, neither could I.

Eventually, my mind grew to conquer the dreams. By the time I was old enough to argue with my Mother as much as she had with my Father, the terrors I'd had as a child were frail memories on the edges of my mind. My attention was drawn to other things, like the way my dresses fell and cinched around my waist, and my endless battle to get the curl of my hair to cooperate and obey my impatient hands.

But my Father left my family not long after my nightmares ended. I could tell that my Mother had always suspected him of being connected to them somehow, but she never spoke such suspicions to me. It was always a whisper under her breath, a comment that she thought I'd been too far to hear. And I never talked to my Mother about my Father- not where he'd gone, or why he'd gone. The only thing that reminded me of his presence in my life was a necklace that my

Mother had gifted me. She said that she had asked him to make it for me, and that it would protect me. She'd gripped my hands tight enough to almost bruise them, and made me promise to never take it off.

When I got older, I began to question just how well a necklace could protect me from the world. But the little girl who'd made that promise refused to let me take it off.

After my Father left, my Mother, Freya, decided to cross the shadowed forest and offer her services as a craftswoman to the court that presided over the neighboring realm, a place called 'Dytheria'. She became a jewelry maker for them, decorating the Dytherian royal family and noblemen. My Mother became rather popular among the court and especially with the Princess, and was able to take care of us with royal funds. I grew up watching her leave our quaint cabin early in the dawn, pressing her lips to my forehead as birds colored the air with their chirps. She wouldn't return until the moon did, at sunset.

During the day, I'd walk from our cabin to the main village, which was nothing more than a few merchants and some of the larger cabins of those who lived in the Harvest. By the time my Mother returned I'd always have dinner waiting, and clothes hanging outside if the breeze was warm enough.

Sometimes I missed watching my Mother at her crafting table in our cabin, before she began to work for the court. Miniature glasses perched on her nose, and a candle at the corner of her desk. But the sacrifice was worth the comforts that her work brought us. And while my life was void of excitement, I never longed for surprise and awe. I was happy, *we* were happy.

For years our happiness survived. Me and my Mother, and sometimes my friend Krislin whom I'd come to know after my Father left, continued on with our simplicity and little joys.

Until one winter's dinner came, and my Mother did not eat. She instead looked at me, and said one thing.

"You are to come with me to the palace tomorrow," she spoke, pushing food around on her plate with her fork. The simple statement was spoken as though she had said something about the food being well made, or the weather growing colder.

"... I am?"

"Mmhm," my Mother confirmed, stuffing food into her mouth. My eyebrow raised. How mighty convenient for her to now be unable to speak.

"You told me that crossing into that realm was dangerous. I worry for you every time you do it," I watched her nod. "You told me when I was little that you would 'watch the palace burn before your child crossed that treacherous path'", I repeated. "Has there been a royal fire that I was unaware of?"

My mother shook her head. "No, no fires. Tomorrow is just... a special day."

"'Special'?" I said back, my tone teetering on the edge of mockery as I leaned forwards on to the table.

My Mother swatted at my arm, correcting my manners. "Indeed."

"Special *how*?" I continued, growing suspicious. "Is something wrong? Do you need me as a witness? If you've done something, I can lie-"

My Mother chuckled and cut my ramblings off. “Goodness, who did you get this skepticism from? I cannot simply invite my daughter to join me at work? If you must know, there is an appreciation dinner being hosted by the royal family in 2 days for those like me who service the court. I thought you may enjoy the opportunity to go see the palace, have some wonderful food.”

I felt my jaw drop open. “Well why did you not start with that?” I asked, grinning. “I would love to join you, but how are we going to get there?”

She smiled. “A few royal guards are going to escort us. They are nice fellows, they know how to safely navigate the forest. We will be fine, do not worry yourself. I have asked a couple dressmakers to bring us appropriate wear, so all you have to concern yourself with is crawling out of bed with enough time to make yourself decent.”

The news brightened my night, which I ended up barely sleeping through. I’d never been so excited for a sunrise as I imagined the dresses I’d get to wear and the handsome guards that would escort us through treacherous woods. Part of me always wondered how dangerous the forest truly was, if my Mother had crossed it so many times unharmed. She never spoke of the palace or what it was like there, but if she had worked there for so long it had to be... decent, at the very least.

By the time I woke the next day, my Mother had already made breakfast. The dinner was not until the next day’s evening, but time was stretched and tightened in realm crossings. And she wanted to introduce me to some of the palace staff that she’d met while working before the dinner.

We were finishing our meal and putting dishes away when hooves clomping against the ground filled the small space in our cabin and rumbled the ground. I gasped and rushed to put things away, using one hand to close cabinets and the other one to fix my hair and clothes as my Mother chuckled and went to greet them.

“Welcome to the Harvest!” I could hear my Mother greeting the guards as I scrambled to find my shoes. “I do hope the journey getting here was not too harrowing.”

I put on my second shoe and then walked outside, almost directly into the head of a giant horse grazing on the overgrown grass of our lawn. The horse sighed and continued to eat.

“This is my daughter, Lysia,” my Mother introduced, pulling me over to her side. I raised a hand, my lips curling into an awkward smile. The men were tall, wearing dark red uniforms that consisted of a long coat reaching their knees with gold and silver trimmings. Weapons were tucked into a belt in their waist, as well as their rider’s boots.

“Thank you for escorting us,” she told them, clearing her throat. “I hope it was not too... bothersome.”

One of them, a young man with light, clear, blue eyes and black hair that curled around his ears shrugged. “Oh, we were passing through anyways.”

“I am surprised that they sent you, Commander. Usually you are with the Princess,” my Mother noted to the other guard, motioning for me to follow them over to the carriage. I lifted myself inside of it, my hands sinking into the red velvet cushions as I sat down.

“The King wished to ensure your safe arrival,” the Commander explained, helping my Mother into the seat next to him and across from me. He had green eyes that looked like the pine trees during spring, and long dark brown hair that was tied into a ponytail. The other guard remained outside to steer the horses.

“That is rather kind and generous of him,” I commented, looking to my Mother for agreement. She gave me a tight smile as I grew more excited. “What is the King like? Also- what is your name?”

“My name is Alyx. And the King is...” He paused, his eyes narrowing.

“Dedicated to the safety of his people,” my Mother filled in. I frowned slightly, thinking of all the times when I’d interrupted someone and the scolding look my Mother would give me. “Now before you ask more questions regarding what everyone is like, perhaps take into account the fact that you will be meeting them all very soon. And you can see for yourself what they are like.”

I sighed but nodded, and did not pester my Mother or Alyx with any other questions. I watched my village go by through the window, staring out at the slowly rolling hills and vast fields of farm lands and orchards. Even during the descent into winter’s coldness, the fields remained green. The beginnings of flowers that bloomed in the chill months were just buds rising from the earth.

We watched field after field, hill after hill for what felt like years until we reached the borders of the forest. I tried peering out of the window as we approached it, but my Mother pulled me back and drew the curtains before I could steal a glimpse. Alyx drew the curtains on the other side.

“I cannot even look at the trees?” I mumbled, crossing my arms.

“I do not want them looking at *you*,” my Mother corrected.

“...What?”

“Whatever you do, do not open the carriage doors,” Alyx warned, drawing our eyes to him. “This forest has been known to conjure illusions, so if you hear things, or see oddities, ask someone first if they see or hear it as well. If they don’t, cover your eyes and ears and wait until we leave the forest. Understood?”

“Understood,” my Mother replied, at the same time that I asked what sort of illusions we might see. My Mother had never told me what it was like to cross the forest, only not to do it.

“It depends on the person. But hopefully that is not an issue we run into,” he knocked on the wall of the carriage and shouted something in a language that I did not know, perhaps it was native to his realm. The carriage began to move once more.

The forest’s silence was the first thing that I noticed. It was the sort of silence that made the quiet stillness of my village seem raucous and loud. There were no birds, no wind rustling the trees. No leaves falling from those trees. It was the sort of silence that sucked sound into it and made it vanish, like a color so dark that it absorbed any light. And it was cold- the carriage had been warm even in the crisp chill on winter in the Harvest, but now it made my hands feel frigid and shivers ran up my arms.

I didn't notice that my hands were wringing together until my Mother laid her hand over mine, and gave me a nod of reassurance. But as soon as I nodded in return and turned back to the curtain, I saw her press her fingers to her lips and tap her chest 3 times. It was a simple prayer motion that she only did when she was scared.

Neither Alyx or my Mother spoke, so I didn't either. Alyx kept a watchful eye on the curtains even though they were closed, and I tried to keep myself from imagining monsters lurking outside of the carriage, stalking us from the treetops. My hands began to shake again, and my Mother leaned forward after a few seconds and placed her hand on mine to stop its' shaking. And it remained like that until we broke through the forests' trees, and Alyx gave us a small nod, and reached over to open the curtains.

"Welcome to Dytheria, Kingdom of Victory," Alyx announced. My nod of acknowledgment was little more than a small shake, the chill of the forest still hanging over me as my Mother pushed the curtains open as wide as they could go to take in the scenery.

"Oh... my..." I breathed. I'd never in my life seen a place so... magnificent. The rolling hills of villages and farms that I'd always known may as well have been a dollhouse compared to the magnitude of Dytheria. A deep, wide, valley served as a home for what seemed to be thousands as I stared out at the many little villages spread out from one another, some of them connected by small streams. The realm opened up at the top of a waterfall that dropped down hundreds of feet and fed a river that wined through the lush valley.

At the other end of the valley from the water fall, there was a long bridge that led to the base of a range of mountains. There were villages among the mountains as well, but they were not as large as the ones within the valley. And the mountains were mostly surrounded by a dense forest. The sky was painted with clouds that were protruded by the mountain's rocky peaks, and at the top of the mountain range sat a grand castle of gold and white, glistening in the sun. The castle looked big enough to house everyone in the villages below it. Flags with a sun divided by a sword on them were flying proudly in the wind.

"Rather impressive, is it not?" my Mother asked. I could see her smile from the corner of my eye as I nodded.

"To say the least. You go there every day?" I asked, shaking my head. "And you never once invited me?"

My Mother scoffed. "As though it were easy to convince you to come this time!"

"Yes well perhaps if you had told me it was in a beautiful valley on the top of a mountain, I would have been more easily persuaded!" I defended, finally leaning back from the window.

"I am glad you like it," she conceded, rolling her eyes.

To reach the palace entrance, we had to cross the valley and get to the base of the mountain range, where the bridge was. 2 guards were standing on either side, guarding a metal gate that divided the mountain range. The gate lifted for our carriage, and the sound of it's metal hitting the ground once more resonated through the long, dark, tunnel that was lit only by the occasional lantern on either side. Once they were on the other side of the mountain range, the river that wined through the valley opened up to a large, calm, lake with deep blue water. The path up to

the palace was a steep cobblestone trail that cut through the mountain to eventually reach the palace gates.

I never pulled my eyes away from the lake and lands beyond. It was mostly forest, with the occasional plume of smoke arising from a cabin nestled into the green. The vastness of it made me feel insignificant, like my entire life was little while I was in the Harvest.

The bumpy, uneven ride on the cobblestone came to an end when the steepness turned into a flat courtyard lined with white and gold tiles, and Alyx opened the carriage door and got out, extending a hand to me and my Mother. The sight of the palace was even greater when standing directly in front of it. I craned my neck to take it in fully, seeing the balconies with vines of ivy wrapping around it and creeping on to its stone. The last light of the setting sun shone a deep orange on to its walls, turning its gold into a brass.

“We have quarters prepared for you both in the north eastern wing,” Alyx told us. “I would escort you if I could, but I am afraid I must go meet with the Princess.”

My Mother waved Alyx off. “Thank you for bringing us Commander, but I can lead us from here. Come, Lysia,” she grabbed my hand and led us through the palace gates, nodding to the guards that stood by it. “We need to get you ready for tomorrow’s dinner.”