

The excitement with Lola seemed to have come to its conclusion, and Isra was quite happy for that. The wound to her stomach felt completely fine, but Hannah had urged a plain diet, one without anything too sour or spicy, just so that her guts could have a bit of time to 'rest and relax'. Isra wasn't particularly pleased by that, and it seemed a surfeit of caution, but at least she hadn't been told to be on bed rest.

"I'm going home," said Isra, once she'd been questioned by the police. They'd been much less interested in her account than Mizuki's, which Isra found somewhat irritating. Isra was a victim and had been stabbed, unprovoked, which felt to her like it should have been worth a few more questions. She didn't have a firm grasp on this sort of thing though. "Just for tonight. I'll be back in the morning."

"Oh," said Verity. She looked at Emperor, who was curled up on the floor next to the herb dragon, and Tabbins, who had retreated to a position on top of a cabinet and was giving the dog an evil eye. "Will these creatures be okay?"

"Emperor is a good boy," said Isra. "Tabbins feels threatened. If Lerial misbehaves, it will be because she's eating too much from the garden. There shouldn't be any problems. I can ... push harder, if needed."

"No, I'm sure you're right," said Verity. She was standing by the door, lingering there. "Is there ... can I come with you?"

Isra stopped where she was. "Why?"

"I don't know," said Verity. "It just feels like you vanish into the woods sometimes, and we've been sleeping together — in the same room — for a few weeks now. We're friends, right?"

"We are," said Isra. They were, in point of fact, best friends, which felt not just important to clarify, but vital. She kept it to herself though.

"I just wanted to see where you live," said Verity. "And I don't have anything planned for the rest of the day."

"My house is nothing special," said Isra, though she realized as she said it that it was a lie. Her house was where she'd spent most of her life, the place she'd been born, the place she shared all her memories with her father.

"Could I come anyway?" asked Verity.

"Of course," said Isra, though it didn't *feel* like an 'of course', it felt like 'if you insist'.

Taking a moment to break down their interaction, Isra had said 'my house is nothing special' and meant 'I don't want you to see how I live and how I was raised', then Verity had asked to come anyway, which meant that either Isra hadn't done the signal correctly or that Verity had decided to ignore it for whatever reason. It was the sort of thing that Isra noticed when she stopped to ponder what was going on, and there were no good answers to be had, at least not without

asking. For a moment she debated having that conversation, but she knew that it might be awkward, despite how good of a friend Verity was, or perhaps because of it.

They took a moment to gather up their things. It soon became clear that Verity was packing for a night at Isra's house, and Isra wasn't sure how she felt about that. There was a spare bed, the one belonging to Isra's father, and it *would* be a bit of a walk from the warp point for Verity to get home on her own, but it was one thing to have Verity visit, and another for Verity to spend the night. It was possible that Verity was simply planning for the unknown, throwing extra clothes into a sack on the off chance they went late together, but it gave Isra an odd feeling. There was uncomfortability, but also excitement at the prospect. Mostly, Isra was feeling that when Verity saw the house, she would immediately have second thoughts.

Verity even went so far as to grab her lute, and that made Isra feel warm, because it meant there might be a chance for a private performance. There had been more of those, of late, sometimes at night when Isra was drifting off to sleep, and the dreams that came with a bard-induced sleep were always better, milk and honey, sorrel and witchwood.

They trekked through the forest together. It was good to be back in nature, back among the things she understood much better.

"How is your stomach?" asked Verity.

Isra thought about that, and what Mizuki had said about flirting.

"I'll show you when we stop for a break," said Isra.

Isra had taken the lead: she knew all of the paths the animals took, and the thicker ones that were forged by humans. She couldn't see Verity, but worried, with Verity's silence, that the comment had gone too far in some way, or perhaps been delivered with the wrong tone. Rather than glancing back, Isra looked through the eyes of a nearby bird, and was able to catch a glimpse of Verity blushing.

Isra was overdue for another talk with Hannah. There had been some subtle signs that Verity was interested in some kind of relationship, but what that might mean, what would come after, was an uncomfortable mystery. Isra had a good idea how their bodies might fit together, and a part of her was very eager for that, if she had read the subtle signs correctly, but after, or on a continuing basis, she was afraid that she would very quickly make a mistake.

"It's easy to make mistakes when cooking," said Isra.

"Oh?" asked Verity. "I mean, I would imagine so, but how do you mean?"

"The instructions are simple, but in practice ... I do what Mizuki says to do, and then she comes to tell me that I've done it wrong," said Isra. "I don't know if she's a poor teacher or I'm a poor student, but maybe it's a bit of both."

"She doesn't seem inclined to teach," said Verity. "Especially with cooking, I think she 'knows' quite a bit, but there's so much instinct in play that when she tries to pass on her knowledge,

she ends up leaving too much out. Though from what I've heard, at least she has some understanding of the craft."

Isra chewed on that. "There are people who are good at a craft without understanding it?"

"Oh yes," said Verity. "It happens in music every now and then. Someone will come into formal education knowing how to play songs, sometimes knowing how to play well, but not having any of the foundational knowledge. It's all just rote, memorized rules without any understanding. I'm given to understand it's even more common in the trades. A carpenter might understand what to do when a particular glue won't hold, but not *why* to do it. Healers were like that too."

"Healers?" asked Isra. "Clerics?"

"No, before clerics," said Verity. "Or rather, there wasn't really a time before clerics, but there was a time when they were much less common, and — I don't want to speak beyond my knowledge, but there was a time when there were all sorts of remedies for all sorts of things, and they didn't necessarily know why the remedies worked, just that they did."

"The same for me," said Isra. "I know what herbs to give for different ailments, but not why or how they work. I couldn't teach someone else, not easily."

Verity was silent for a moment, and Isra took another look at her from a bird's eye view. Verity seemed to be in high spirits, perhaps because there'd been no communication from her mother, or maybe because it was a free day.

The song started slowly, but built as it went, without any magic in it, just a product of Verity's voice. It was a light and pleasant song about a gardener who was filled with superstitions, and most of the lyrics that Verity wove into it were in the form of some specific nonsense that the gardener was doing.

*He placed pinecones beside his beds,
He'd heard it scared the loggerheads.*

*He always dug a rose-hole twice,
To keep away the spring-time mice.*

Isra enjoyed it immensely. It was a silly song, and Verity was always a joy to be around when she was in a silly mood. She kept the song going for as long as she could, always returning to the chorus when she needed a break from thinking up new things for this silly gardener to do, then plunging back in once again. Eventually, she stumbled, and Isra, whose own mind had been working, added a verse of her own.

*His first cucumber was always tossed,
To help avoid a late spring frost.*

Isra was rewarded with a laugh from Verity, and the song continued on, but now they were singing together, with Isra's imperfect voice serving as poor harmony to Verity. Isra had learned to sing from her father, but hadn't had all that much practice beyond what she sometimes sang

to herself in the woods or while doing chores around the house. For the rhymes, they alternated, sometimes taking turns with the couplets, other times with one of them throwing out a line for the other to finish. It was a sloppy method of song-making, but it was great fun, and Isra felt herself really getting into it, forgetting for a moment that her own voice was so greatly outclassed by Verity's. They ended it when Verity tossed out a line that ended with 'hut' and Isra rhymed it with 'butt', which sent them into peals of laughter.

"I suppose that one isn't going to go into your book," said Isra.

"No, it might!" said Verity. "It's incredibly long, and I won't be able to remember half of it, but it's silly and bright, and if I can use it to communicate to people what it's like to be free in the world with someone," the sentence seemed like it ended early. "I want people to *feel*, and not just because I'm blasting them with bardic power. The power fades away, it's the song that sticks with you, that keeps going on in your head days after the last note has faded, it's the lyrics that you recall."

"And you think that people will get that from this song?" asked Isra.

"From *our* song?" asked Verity. Isra glanced back, and Verity was smiling. "I don't know. It might be one of those things that depends too much on context, that no one would actually understand unless they were here with us, and if they *were* here with us, it would be totally different. If I were playing that song in a theater, it would have to be different, because I would want to evoke the warm spring day, the perfect weather, the way you keep looking at me through the birds."

Isra felt an intense wave of embarrassment and kept looking forward so Verity couldn't see her face.

"You do it sometimes when we're in the garden," said Verity. "Ever since I learned that you were a druid, I've thought to myself, 'I wonder if that's Isra'. And I came to the conclusion that yes, usually it is. You're the reason the flowers smell sweeter, the reason that every day has nice weather, and the reason that the birds are very attentive to what I'm doing."

"Sorry," said Isra.

"Sorry?" asked Verity. "Well the last thing that I would want is for you to be *sorry* about it. I like it. You're with me even when you're not, and I like when you're with me."

Isra smiled, then turned back to Verity so Verity could see the smile.

As they walked, Isra focused a part of her attention on the house. She hadn't been expecting company, and the house was a bit of a mess, so she very discreetly sent a bird ahead to check that the place was clean. Dishearteningly, the place was very much not clean. The bed wasn't made, the furniture was in disarray, a stack of stones had not yet been sorted up onto the shelf. Isra had been treating her home less like a home lately and more like a place where she stored her things in between nights spent at Mizuki's.

Isra had learned quite a bit about druids in the past month, some of it from her guildmates, and other bits and pieces from Alfric and Hannah. She had always conceived of it as ‘talking’ to the creatures, plants, or natural features, but it seemed that in truth it was something else entirely. The ‘talking’ could be entirely silent, which she’d always sort of known, and the infusion of self could be more straightforward, more forceful, pushing her own will down onto that of a creature.

She attempted this from a distance. A family of raccoons lived in a tree not far from Isra’s house, and she called them forward using the bird. They scampered over, opened a window, and let themselves in, then started cleaning up, quickly doing the dishes and putting some things away. It took almost all of Isra’s attention, and she nearly stumbled over a root.

“Isra, are you okay?” asked Verity.

“Oh,” said Isra. “Sorry, just ... thinking.”

“Sorry if it was rude to ask,” said Verity.

“If what was?” asked Isra. “I ... might have missed the question.”

“Oh,” said Verity. “I was just feeling peckish, and wondering whether we were going to, um, eat at your house, if you had food.”

“Even if I didn’t have food, it wouldn’t take much to hunt and forage,” said Isra.

“Oh, I would love that,” said Verity. “If I could come with, I mean.”

“We can have a fresh meal then,” said Isra. She faltered. One of the raccoons had just dropped a plate, and they were all spooked. The window was open, and Isra ushered some birds in to pick up the pieces, but what she really needed was a bird that had a love of shiny things. “I’ll try to make it like a meal.”

“Like a meal?” asked Verity. Isra almost missed it, because one of the birds had pooped on the floor, and there was some difficulty in pushing a raccoon to get a rag and clean it up.

“Um, not just a collection of ingredients,” said Isra. “Not just cooked hare and a single carrot on a plate.”

“Was that ... a possibility?” asked Verity. “Also, are you okay? Is it your stomach?”

“My stomach is fine, I’m just — cleaning up,” said Isra.

“Cleaning up?” asked Verity. “How are you — oh.”

“We’re almost there, I didn’t want it to be messy,” said Isra, but it was increasingly clear that it was very much going to be messy. She’d been too far away, trying to get them to do too much, and the addition of more animals had only made things worse. A handful of squirrels had been added in to help with the dishes, and they were now playing in the sudsy water.

“Is that ... hygienic?” asked Verity.

“They’re clean animals,” said Isra. She paused. “It’s the hair I worry about, but I’ll give the dishes a once over.”

“I see,” said Verity. “That is, ah.”

“Sorry if it’s weird,” said Isra. She was flushed with embarrassment. She stepped around the bend and pointed. “Here’s the house.”

It was almost invisible if you weren’t looking for it. The roof had been covered with sod and had quite a bit of underbrush growing on top of it, with roots that had dug in deep under Isra’s coaxing to make sure that the beams would all fit snugly together and the rain would be kept out. The house itself had been built in a depression, which seemed to Isra to have been dug in at some point, though it would have been before her memory. The windows were rather small, owing to the narrowness of the gap between the edge of the roof and forest floor. A small staircase led down to the door. Sitting outside, just under the eave, was the large chiller which she mostly kept extra meat in. Beyond, there was Isra’s own garden, one which was starting to bear fruits and vegetables, but which had been a bit neglected.

“Wow,” said Verity. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s not,” said Isra. “It’s been overtaken by nature in too many ways, and I don’t have the knowledge or skill to fix it. It’s also too small.”

“The rooms of Mizuki’s house are giant,” said Verity. “If that’s the comparison you’re making, it’s not a fair one.”

“I went to your house,” said Isra. “And to the Overguards’.”

Verity was still looking at the house, and she gave a little laugh. “The Overguards are a large family with as much wealth as they could ever want, and my own family is — you know. None of these are fair comparisons.”

“It is small though,” said Isra.

“True,” said Verity. “But whether it’s *too* small is a matter of your needs, isn’t it? Do you wish you had more room?”

“I don’t know,” said Isra. She frowned. “I never really thought about having a different house.”

“I like the idea of a small house,” said Verity. She was still looking at Isra’s house. There was a sound of something breaking from inside. “Is that ... do we need to do something?”

“They’re just cleaning up,” said Isra.

“Ah,” said Verity. “And when you say ‘they’ ...”

“Just a moment,” said Isra. She’d been concentrating on the animals, trying to direct them, but it wasn’t going all that well. The squirrels had been a mistake.

She had them leave the house all at once, birds flying out of the window first, then the squirrels, and finally the raccoons, whose paws were still wet. The window was on the wrong side, so Verity was witness to this stream of animals leaving the house.

"Ah," said Verity. "That is rather a lot of animals."

"It was messy," said Isra, frowning. "I just wanted it to look nice for you."

"You should have seen my room at The Fig and Gristle," said Verity. "I lived like a slob. It was nice, for a change of pace."

Isra regarded the house. "I suppose eventually we'll have to go in."

"I'm prepared," said Verity. "In my mind, it's going to look like it's been ransacked by a raccoon, but I know that it can't possibly be that bad."

Isra slowly approached the door and opened it. She took one last look around, and decided that there was nothing she could hastily fix before Verity came in.

"Oh," said Verity as she took a few tentative steps inside and looked around.

If you were generous, you might say that the house had several rooms, but it did take quite a bit of generosity. Isra almost felt like making a joke about it, but it felt like it relied too much on self-deprecation, so she held off. Then Verity didn't say anything, which made Isra nervous, so she went ahead with the joke anyway.

"This is the foyer," said Isra, gesturing at the three-foot wide strip of house that needed to be kept clear so the door could swing open. Most of her shelves were there, along with her winter clothes, for lack of a better storage place. "And here's the breakfast nook." She pointed at the table, which was missing one of its two chairs. "Past that curtain is the bedroom, and you can see the master bath beside it. The kitchen is, naturally, beside the dining room." She pointed again to the area she'd called a breakfast nook. This wasn't an original joke, it was one that she'd read in a book, but she had found it quite funny, and hoped that she hadn't botched it.

Verity gave a smile that indicated that she appreciated the effort, but didn't find it all that funny.

"Where do you ... I mean, when there are things you want to do, where do you find room?" Verity looked more confused than anything else, and her eyes kept going to the tile floor and the rugs that were laying on top of it.

"I go outside," said Isra. "Most of what I do is outside."

"I think I've changed my mind," said Verity. "It is quite small."

"Too small?" asked Isra.

"Like I said, that depends on you. But I think I would go insane," said Verity. "There's a part of me that sees it as cozy, and I don't think I need all that much room, realistically, but you can

hardly move around. And with two people ...” She stopped. “How did you and your father manage it?”

“We were almost always together,” said Isra. “But by the time I was ten, and would get on his nerves, he trusted me to be alone, and if he needed space, he would go outside. He would say that he was going for a hunt and that I could stay in, but then he would come back in, too late to have been hunting, and without anything to show for it.”

“What do you think he was doing?” asked Verity.

“I don’t know,” said Isra. “Taking time to himself, I suppose. By the time I was five, I was already fairly self-sufficient. He was a good father, in some respects, but I liked when he left and I could be on my own.”

“In some respects?” asked Verity.

“He taught me well, to read and write, to hunt and fish, to think clearly, all kinds of things to help me survive,” said Isra. “But especially now, I’ve found myself wishing that he would have let me have a normal life, one with other children. Being with the party, it’s been so simple and easy, with so many points of confusion cleared up. My father — there are questions that he never had a chance to answer, because he was dead before I thought to ask them.”

“Was he ... rough with you?” asked Verity.

“No,” said Isra. “Or, I don’t know, because I’ve only ever had one father, but no, he never struck me.” She didn’t know if that was quite what Verity had meant. “When I was younger he would hold me down sometimes, if I was being, in his words, a brat. I don’t know if that’s normal.”

“My mother hit me,” said Verity. “Not once I was older, but I remember it happening a few times when I was little. I once overheard her saying that one must never hit a child in anger, but that if it was done with deliberation and calm, it could help to straighten a child out when nothing else would work.”

“Mmm,” said Isra. “Do you believe that?”

“I don’t know,” said Verity. “It seems cruel to me, but if it gets the desired result ... I always understood it as something my mother didn’t want to do but felt was necessary. I was never afraid of *her*, or at least not the threat of pain.”

“It seems cruel to me too,” said Isra. Her father had been her world, in many ways, even if there had been secrets between them, even if he hadn’t done quite as she might have wanted. She looked at the curtain that separated the beds from the rest of the living space. “Can I show you where you’ll be sleeping?”

“Yes, please,” said Verity. “Oh, but I suppose I never asked if I was sleeping here tonight, I had just packed with that in mind and — I don’t want to impose.”

"I think now that you're here, it's no imposition," said Isra. "I don't have much hospitality to give, but I would give it all to you." She pulled back the curtain. "The bottom bed will be yours."

"Good, thank you," said Verity, but Isra felt like there was a bit of forced enthusiasm there.

"The mattress won't be as good as at Mizuki's," said Isra. "But the sheets are clean, and it's filled with feathers."

"Do you — do you just have this bed made and ready?" asked Verity.

"Yes," said Isra. She kept herself from fidgeting. "I was feeling lonely, some months ago, and had thought that I might ... invite someone home with me. To sleep together."

"I ... see," said Verity. "Wait, do you mean actually sleeping together?"

"Yes," said Isra. "I understand now that 'sleeping together' implies coitus, but at the time I only had some vague notions. I'd thought that someone would ... I don't know."

"Can I ask a frank question?" asked Verity.

"Yes," said Isra. "Please."

"When you were thinking this, was it men or women you'd be inviting back to your place?" asked Verity. She was looking tense, like this question was the stillness of a small prey when a predator came near.

"I wasn't thinking," said Isra. "I was just ... I don't know. I didn't think that I would invite them, because if I did, it would likely be in the wrong way, and they would be confused, or laugh, or feel embarrassed. I thought, somehow, that they would invite themselves, and I would somehow say yes, and it would all just magically work somehow."

"It would be nice, if it were like that," said Verity. "If the right kind of people would just come up to you and ask if you wanted to be friends."

"It did happen," said Isra. "Just ... not quite in the way I expected. I was approached in the middle of the day and asked whether I wanted to join a dungeoneering party."

Verity shifted uncomfortably and set down her lute case along with her sack of clothes. She cleared her throat. "Mizuki said that her initial approach didn't work out, when she asked you about the dungeon?"

"Did that ... bother her?" asked Isra.

"No," said Verity. She sat down on the bed, feeling the cushioning. Isra was worried she would make a comment, and decide not to stay. "Well, a bit. I think she was just confused."

"I like when people are straightforward," said Isra. "It was some time ago, so I don't remember exactly, but Mizuki was talking a lot and I didn't fully understand why. Alfric's approach was more straightforward. I understood what he wanted."

“Straightforward,” nodded Verity. She bit her lip. “So when you were talking about bringing someone home, that was about friendship?”

“I don’t know,” said Isra. “It was nesting behavior. I’ve never had friends, unless you count the animals.” She sat down beside Verity on the bed. “I never thought of myself as lonely.”

“You have us though,” said Verity. “And we’re not going away.”

“You might,” said Isra.

“No,” said Verity, shaking her head.

“When Lola made her offer, that she would take care of your family if you left the party, you considered it,” said Isra.

“I did,” said Verity. “But ... a part of what I was thinking about was how much it would hurt to leave. When it was all over, I was thinking to myself about how I really would have thrown my family under the wagon for this party.”

“And should, maybe,” said Isra.

“It won’t interfere,” said Verity. “I don’t think so. I’ll just be gone for a bit once a week.” She frowned. “I don’t want to talk about that though. It’s been pressing on my mind, and I just want to have fun. Lola is in prison, we can celebrate, right? And you can show me what your life is like when you’re not spending the night at Mizuki’s.”

“Yes,” said Isra. She got up from the bed, ducking to keep from hitting her head. “Let’s go hunting.”