

Hey! This is a project I've been working on for a while. It's my first time writing and finishing something this long, so I'm a bit unsure as to the quality. Hope you enjoy!
Here's a version in [Times New Roman](#).

CW: Rape, Forced Heterosexuality, Homophobia, Transphobia, Dysphoria, Violence, Racism

It was once just me and him.

"Come, Sarana," mother said. I refused, cowering behind her robes as I watched the young boy spar. Her silk often blocked the excess stresses of the outside, though now I peered out from behind her just enough to watch the two boys duel.

The blonde boy's footsteps were silent on the mat as he twirled around his opponent, knocking him to the ground and bringing the wooden sword to his throat.

The loser yielded, and my mother called the winning boy over. He wiped himself with a towel before bowing to my lady mother, a beaming smile on his face. His shaggy blonde hair outlined his face and made him stick out from the others, though his skin was just as tan as everyone else.

"Introduce yourself," my mother commanded.

He glanced up at me, his brown eyes full of hope. "I am the son of Lord Yan, Olan, at your service, my ladies."

She elbowed me.

"It is a pleasure, Olan, son of Yan. I am Sarana, daughter of Lady Tremane," I said, exactly as rehearsed.

He kept his head low until my mother clicked away on her high heels, leaving me alone.

"So, Sarana. What brings you here?"

I sighed. "I'm here to meet prospective husbands," I said, though the decision was not mine.

He beamed. "Do you want me to introduce you to some of the other men?"

I shook my head. "I'm scared."

He grabbed my hand. "It's okay! I'll be there. Come, they're nice!"

So he led me around the courtyard, introducing me to all the other boys. Some were younger than me, some older. None were what I wanted. I really just wanted to go play with Mr. Muffins, but mother said I had to wait.

As I bade farewell to the last boy, Olan led me to a corner, behind a bush. "Where are we going?"

His hand gripped mine firmly as he pressed against the wall, revealing some cracks that were just wide enough to slip through.

"Want to go on an adventure, Sarana?"

"Mother would be displeased."

"Come on, you'll have me there! I'm the best swordsman around."

I held onto him tightly as we squeezed into the damp crevice, his skin pressing against mine. His eyes were full of determination, easing my nerves and allowing me to breathe through the anxiety.

So I stumbled behind him out the other side, and to a hillock upon which sat a single tree surrounded by monoliths. I gazed up through the orange-peppered canopy to see the evening's pink and purple streak through the sky.

He grappled his way up the tree with a few grunts and kicked an orange down at me.

"I come here when I think," he said, swinging down with his own bounty in hand. He peeled it gently and took a bite, the juices flowing down his chin. I giggled, watching him chew.

"You like to be alone?"

He nodded. "No one else understands it, but I like being different."

"I like your hair."

He smiled. "Mm. It makes me stand out. I'd rather blend in sometimes. It's easier to be different when you can slip into cracks and disappear. Captain is probably looking for me already." His smile disappeared, and he grabbed a stick to poke another orange down to the soil. He picked it up gingerly and placed it in front of one monolith.

"What do they mean?"

He crouched down beside the orange. "This is where my mother is buried."

I thought about my mother. She seemed so strong; always there. To think one day she would be gone. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"It was a few years ago. It's okay now, I guess."

I sat beside him, in front of the grave, and put an arm around him. He looked at me. "What are you doing?"

"Comforting you?"

"I've never... it feels nice." His head fell to my shoulder and I could feel the rise and fall of his breath against me.

"Do you want to be friends, Olan?" I asked after a while of silence.

"Okay. Let's be friends."

A few nights later, once Eliza had tucked me in and my usual insomnia had taken root, I heard a tapping at my window.

I rushed over, pulling the curtains aside to find Olan waving at me, his customary beaming smile on his lips. He climbed into my room as soon as I opened the window, and handed me an orange.

"Apologies for the intrusion, but I heard a rumour you haven't been sleeping well."

I crossed my arms. "Maybe so." I was tired and not in the mood for his adventures.

"I can sing you a lullaby."

"I'm a big girl now, Olan. I don't need lullabies to fall asleep."

He frowned, his big brown eyes churning with thoughts, only partially visible in the moonlight. "Then what do you need?"

I paused, smiling as I peeled the orange and moved over to my desk. "Stay with me?"

"Alright." He smiled, leaning against my wall, gazing around my room. "So this is what a lady's room looks like? It's nice."

"Thank you." I took a bite of the orange, giggling at the taste. Mother made me eat 'healthy,' not wanting such sweets to tamper my palette.

He stayed silent until I finished it and went into my bathroom, wiping my face and hands with a damp cloth.

"So, Olan, are you going to just stand there?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Am I not supposed to? You asked me to stay."

I sighed, walking over and hugging him. His breath paused, before he let out a big sigh.

"You're warm, like a teddy. Come."

I pulled him into bed and fell asleep much faster with his heartbeat surrounding me.

That was how we started. I'd spend every second I could steal away with him, and I quickly got to know the other prospective knights. Olan was the best at sparring, but his sore lack of etiquette often usurped his spot at the top of the class.

"It's stupid," he said, chucking a rock from his perch up in the tree.

"It's only fair."

"What's fair is that I can beat Mak and Edgar two on one, and they still beat me for the top spots." His face was turned in an uncharacteristic frown.

"You just need to work on your etiquette. Come," I said, holding out my hand. He dropped down to sit next to me. "How do you greet a lady?"

He bowed his head, reaching for my hand, which he kissed.

"And what if she's on horseback?"

"I kiss her foot, I know this, Sarana. It's stupid."

"So I've heard."

"Olan!" a voice came from the ridge, where he was supposed to be training. Captain had his hands on his hips as we ran over. "How many times-" he pinched his nose. "Just get back in there. My lady, back to your mother."

I pouted, but waved goodbye to Olan as he returned to his etiquette lesson. I found Mr. Muffins stalking a bird, but scooped him up in my arms as I fully disobeyed Captain's orders, instead going to a hidden spot to watch Olan train.

He was such a pretty boy.

Later, as soon as Eliza finished with my hair and left, I opened the window and waited. The night breeze drifted in until Olan joined me, shutting the window and winking. "Sorry I'm late, my lady."

I laughed. "How many times must I tell you to drop the formalities?" He smiled and picked me up, twirling me around, my nightgown flowing.

My face was flush with dizziness as he dropped me to my bed and sat beside me. "Fine, if you insist." He reached into his bag, pulling out an old tome. "I... umm, I read this. On my own." I opened it, agape at how far his vocabulary had come in just a few short years. "Olan!" I hugged him. "This is incredible! I'm so proud."

His face was alight as he collapsed backward, his hair splaying out in a circle around his head. I leaned back onto an elbow to twirl my finger through his locks. "You're going to be such an amazing knight one day."

He blushed, but stayed silent.

"Whenever I need an escort I'll request you to bring me. That way we can be together more."

"I doubt if my father will allow it, but alright." He rolled onto his side to face me, tossing his bag onto the floor. "What are you going to become? What kind of lady will you be?"

"I don't know. I'm told I'm supposed to be married, but that thought scares me. Boys are gross."

He laughed. "What of me?"

"You're different." His eyes twinkled, but he stayed silent for a while, choosing instead to gaze up at the ceiling.

Finally, he spoke. "Are you tired yet?"

I nodded. It had been a long day of meetings and schooling. He helped tuck me in then crawled in behind me, his warm body supporting my fear of the night. "Goodnight," he whispered into my ear as he brought his head to rest on my shoulder.

I always slept better when he was there.

One day, I awoke with an awful stomach cramp. Olan was at my desk, reading by candlelight, but hurried over when I groaned.

"Sarana?"

"I..." I grimaced as a wave of pain hit me.

He climbed into bed and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "Do you need the doctor?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine. It might be..." another wave stopped my words.

He held me tight and stroked my back. "Can I help?"

"Just... be quiet."

He mimed stitching his mouth closed and sat in silence as I ached.

After a few more waves, he gasped. "Sarana? Is that..." he pointed to my bedsheets, which had grown soaked with blood. "I'll go get the-"

I grabbed him, holding him close. "It's okay. It's something girls go through when they reach a certain age."

"Oh." He glanced away, but I was in too much pain to notice.

After a moment, he helped me out of bed and changed the sheets, then tucked me in tight.

He crawled in next to me, holding me as I whimpered.

The next day, I awoke to find him snoring next to me. He'd only ever slept the full night once before, but I absolutely did not mind.

I poked him awake after a few moments, and he got up to help me change.

"The maids can do this," he said.

"No, I don't care about you seeing me like this. You're like a sis...ter..." I trailed off, hoping not to offend him, but he just smiled.

He wetted some cloths from my adjoining bathroom and helped wipe the dried blood from my groin. I blushed as he cleaned me, but he never made me uncomfortable, only focusing on an area until it was spotless.

"Can you..." I looked at him; naked, while he was dressed.

He smiled and stripped. We cleaned each other in my bath, and eventually he returned to the barracks.

A month later, he climbed through my window again, and held me close. "Sarana," he whispered into my ear.

"Yes?"

"Why do only women bleed?"

"It is our body signalling that we are ready to get pregnant."

He held me tight. "Why is your body so different from mine?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your body is beautiful and delicate, but mine is hard and coarse."

"Are you jealous?"

He looked away, but I grabbed his chin and forced him to return my gaze. His brown eyes were so beautiful. "Hey, it's okay. You can be pretty, too."

"You think so?"

"Come."

I led him by the hand to my closet and helped him change into one of my gowns. It looked a bit off, but he smiled, twirling around. "Thank you," he said, his voice barely more than a breath.

"You're really pretty, Ollie."

He looked at me. "Can I call you Sara?"

I blushed and nodded.

Years passed like that, the two of us at each other's side. His body became as familiar as my own, and he would often complain as he got bigger and broader.

I watched Ollie duel, his form impeccable after all these years. Even Captain could only go a few rounds before starting to lag behind. His stamina and ferocity were legendary. Mother rushed to my side. "Sarana, come."

"But I wanna watch Ollie! He's doing so good."

"The Prince is here."

I went silent, having almost forgotten about our royal visitor. An idea sprang to mind. "Ollie should meet him. He could be part of the royal guard someday!"

She paused. "That is not a bad idea. Bring him to the main hall at once."

I waved him over, and grabbed his hand. He snagged a towel as we went, questioning me, but eventually just let me lead him until we spotted the guards bearing the royal insignia.

We reached the main hall and rushed over to where my lady mother and a few important-looking men stood. Among them, a boy around our age: the Prince.

"Apologies for my tardiness, my Prince," I said, bowing. Ollie bowed beside me. We were both somewhat sweaty from the run, and my mother looked mortified.

She took over. "This is my daughter, Lady Sarana Tremane, and the star pupil of our knight school, Olan, son of Lord Yan."

The Prince seemed disinterested in Ollie, instead fixing his gaze on me.

The older men steered my mother away, talking about some kind of politics, leaving the Prince with us.

"So, what is it like being a Prince?" I asked, trying to break the silence.

He looked at me. "Quite pleasant. You'd like it in Omangarep."

I nodded, unsure of what to say and feeling exposed in his gaze.

Next, it was Ollie's turn. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Prince Fanal. What brings you to the Southfold?"

"Meetings. Tell me, Lady Tremane, what is your favourite part of living here?"

I glanced at Ollie. "I haven't given it much thought. The fresh fruit is delectable. Ollie- Olan can get you some, if you are interested."

He sighed, his eyes flashing with some unknown emotion. "It is surely as sweet as you."

I stayed silent, somewhat frozen, and he frowned, looking at Ollie, before walking away.

What? Ollie mouthed at me, to which I shrugged. He dragged me to a side room where we could have some privacy, though it was cramped and his body was pressed against mine. "I think he finds you attractive."

It was my turn to return the "what?"

"You must have seen it. He was staring right at your breasts. He probably felt threatened that I'm your friend." He flexed his arms, though it didn't do much in the crowded space.

"You're talking nonsense."

"Believe me. You have the same look in your eyes when we pass by a maid in the halls." I blushed, pressing my face to his chest so he couldn't see.

"You're talking nonsense," I repeated, though this time he just huffed a laugh.

Later that month, his beard began to grow in.

Ollie watched me, a smile beaming across his face, as I galloped up next to him and dismounted Darling. She gave a whinny as he petted her, and I hugged him.

He pulled away after a moment, scratching his face. His whiskers and stubble made him look much older than the 15-year-old he was, but I didn't mind. He was still the same, under the extra muscle and hair.

I tended to Darling's coat as he pulled off her saddle and fed her some grains. Her mane matched Ollie's hair, a fact I always relished as I brought the brush up to stroke through her tangles. "How was your day?"

He shrugged. "The usual. Took down Edgar and Fascen pretty easily. Mak's a bit more tough, but there's a reason I'm the top of the class." He flexed his arms, and I laughed.

"Of course, my big strong Ollie can't lose."

"Except in manners. I may have told Captain where he can shove his pork cutlet after he insulted my oranges." He put his hands behind his back, puffing out his chest in his usual Captain imitation. "It is unbecoming of a knight to take offense at anything but the worst of offenses," he said, his voice taut and high. "A knight must be able to stay stern and fair when faced with the mockery of the masses." His impression broke. "I swear, he's a poet."

"Not as much as you."

"No, he's worse than me. I write my poems down where none but you can read them. He's very vocal about his proclivities."

I shook my head at his vocabulary, leading Darling out to the field so she could go play. "You are incredible. You remember when I sat you down and taught you how to spell your own name?"

He nodded, scratching his face again.

After a moment, I spoke up. "Is it still bothering you?"

He let out a long sigh. "Yeah... but why? I should be grateful. I'm growing in earlier than some of the others."

I reached over to squeeze his hand. "It's okay."

"No, it's..." he sighed, letting the thought hang. "Can I visit you tomorrow night? I have something for you."

"Oh? What is it?"

He smiled, though the usual twinkle was far from his eye. "Surprise." He squeezed my hand and dashed off as the afternoon bell rang.

I waited patiently in bed as he climbed through the window, basket of goods between his teeth. But he wasn't the only one with a surprise tonight.

He slunk over to the bed and opened the basket, handing me a package.

"What's this?"

"It's called an Angel Wing. It's crystallized sugar."

I pulled out the thin tablet of sugar and brought it to my lips. With a crunch, it exploded in my mouth, a far more concentrated sweet than I was used to. I started giggling.

He leaned in close and took a bite of the other side. "It's good, isn't it?" he said, chewing. His voice was growing deeper, though it was so subtle I missed it at first.

I nodded, reaching out to feel his face. The fuzz was still becoming thicker. He pulled away.

"I have a surprise for you," I said, hopefully distracting him.

His eyes sparkled. It was something I hadn't seen in a while. "Oh?"

I pulled the razor out from the folds of my dress. "I'll help you shave."

"Oh, Sara..." his eyes welled up. There was the Ollie I knew.

"Come, get undressed. I know your legs are bad too."

He stood before me in nothing but a loincloth, but it was nothing I hadn't seen before. I slathered him with cream, loosening his skin and allowing the razor to glide gently across him. As I worked, he slowly grew more calm, until his eyes were fully closed. His legs were first, then his arms and chest and armpits, and finally his face. I pulled him over to my mirror, and as I washed off the remaining cream, he admired his now hairless body.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I... the Angel Wing seems like such a pitiful gift."

"Your presence is gift enough, Ollie."

He smiled, spinning around in the mirror. He turned to me. "Have you started growing hair?"

I nodded. "A little, though not as much as you."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"It's natural."

He shrugged. "It doesn't feel natural."

We collapsed together in my bed, and he nuzzled up next to me. I had to admit, his hairless skin felt far better beneath my silk sheets.

Finally, it was time for him to go, and he retreated to the window, now beaming.

He didn't return the next day.

I waited until the evening of the second day, yet heard nothing. So I hiked up my skirt and headed down to the barracks.

"Captain, where is Ollie?"

"That baby? What do you want with him?"

I ignored the jab. It was unusual for Captain to be so hostile, even if the sentiment was common among the younger boys. "Where is he?"

He glanced away upon hearing my tone. "Should be in the other barracks. Training's done for the day."

I shoved open the door, passing several of the other boys as I scanned the beds. Nothing. With a shoulder, I pushed into the back room, and gasped.

Ollie was tied up, naked. I hurried to free him, noticing that bruises covered his body and lashes scarred his back. He didn't meet my gaze when I hugged him, nor did he react when I cut him loose and dressed him.

"Let's go, Ollie. You can stay in my spare room tonight."

A hand clamped down on my shoulder. Mak, the biggest of the knights-to-be, stood in my way. "Where are you taking our dear Olan, Sara?"

I bit my tongue. Ollie was the only one who called me Sara. "Out of here. He's hurt."

He grabbed Ollie's hair and yanked his head around a bit. "Not hurt enough. Are you the one who convinced him to be a hairless freak?"

"He's not a freak." I had to be careful. A few other boys were crowding around, and it didn't seem like they were on my side.

Mak let Ollie go and leaned down to stare me in the eyes. "Maybe you're the problem. You want a little girlfriend to play dress up with?"

He reached out for my chin, but Ollie hit his hand away. "Back. Off." The sparkle in his eyes was gone, replaced with a soulless ire.

"What are you gonna do, bitch?"

I grabbed Ollie's hand and tried to push through the crowd, but Mak stopped me.

"Mak, c'mon man, let her go," Edgar said.

"Yeah, this is taking it a bit far, don't you think?" Fascen added.

"You just wanna let these prissy bitches get away with this?" he shouted. He reached out towards me and Ollie lunged. They were on the ground in an instant, and Ollie quickly wrangled Mak's limbs and pinned him down.

"You fucking faggot-"

He bit Mak's throat, blood spraying out onto the stone floor.

I screamed.

Captain came in and wrestled Ollie to the ground as he spat out blood and laughed at his choking opponent. A doctor turned up a few minutes later, but it was too late for Mak; he died there.

Lord Yan protected his son from imprisonment or death, so they sent him away to another knight academy a few days later. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

Mr. Muffins passed away a few months later, and I was fully alone. I continued with my lessons, but even my teachers could tell I was off. Ollie was my other half, and I rarely slept anymore, knowing I'd never again feel him against me.

The years passed, and I learned how to cope. I could fake being happy or being alive, despite the empty husk I had become.

No one got close anymore. I used to consider the boys my friends, but I avoided them now, even when Edgar tried to apologize for Mak.

The years wore on, my bed empty and cold. I tried to comfort myself with anything, but nothing worked.

I missed the brown eyes. I missed the blonde hair.

One day, I found myself sitting next to my mother as the other lords and ladies of the Southfold sat at our table. They'd come to discuss business that barely concerned me. I sat in silence, prodding my meal as they ate and talked and laughed at inane adult jokes. As the conversation wore down, my mother beckoned me into a room with one of the ladies, leaving us alone.

She sat across from me, her long brown hair complimenting her freckled face. She was decently attractive, and I watched her watch me.

"Lady Sarana, are you going to sulk your entire life?" That caught me off guard. I knew not even her name, yet she knew me?

"What? Why?"

"You may feel as though everything is bleak, but life goes on. My son would be willing to take your hand."

My chest tightened. I wasn't ready. "Do I have to?"

She smiled. "No, but he is a nice boy. Treats ladies with respect." She tilted her head. "What happened to you?"

I wasn't about to tolerate any more questions from this stranger. "Who are you?"

"Lady Fallbrook, my dear. You may not remember, but I was like an aunt to you before I married my husband. You were so cute, running around with that lad... what was his name?"

The air was dry in my throat, but I managed to croak it out. "Olan."

"Yes. You called him Ollie, no?" She sipped her tea. "You were cute together. Shame."

"Is there something you want?"

"No, I suppose not. Just... don't give up hope yet, please?"

I faked a smile and excused myself.

Lord Tray was the next adult who deigned to speak with me. He sat across from me, his eyes flitting around the sitting room. "What do you think of Pallas?"

I supposed then that all adults seemed to have difficulty starting conversations with me.

"Their continued hostility to our policies has made it... challenging to consider them a viable trade partner."

"War is coming," he said, his voice dark. "Now, I would appreciate an answer not ripped from your textbook."

That made me smile. He'd called my bluff. "I have little respect for the way politics have worked these past years. Marriages and contracts are hardly a way to forge trusty alliances." I paused, gauging his reaction. "That being said, Pallas is weak and its people ineffectual."

He nodded. "I happen to agree." After a long moment of him examining me, he continued.

"You are going to receive many marriage proposals over the years. I suspect you've gotten some already." I nodded. "So often do political unions end in horrid affairs. Just be careful.

And be careful who you talk to. Many do not share our beliefs about the state of the government."

"The bloat is too much," I said, and he laughed, nodding. I had to admit, I liked him more than Lady Fallbrook.

"You are a wise young woman. Lady Tremane is lucky to have you as her successor." He stood.

"Don't go and marry off your lands to some lordly boy." I smiled, for once.

"I won't, my lord."

"Good girl. You have a bright future. Don't waste it."

More years passed, and I turned from a girl into a young woman. I wondered how Ollie looked. Had he continued to shave? Had he grown out his hair?

Life was dull for every moment I didn't spend thinking of him. Life was dull in my lessons, dull when I was forced to sit through meetings. A few of the lords and ladies of the Southfold became good friends, but even their political banter through the war wasn't enough to distract me from my grief.

My mother was worried, at first. She tried to find me a betrothal, or to get me to smile, at first. But eventually she seemed to resign herself to my decision to be alone. Her hopes faded as my life whisked away into darkness.

One day, when I was twenty, my mother burst into my room. The colour had left with Ollie, but everyone was now used to the grey palate I'd chosen. "Darling! Lady Ger has invited you to a ball in Vallinias." My heart skipped. That was where Ollie had been taken.

"Now, I know you're not interested, but-"

"I'll go."

"I think this would be a good opportunity-" she froze. "What?"

"I'll go." I had to try. But would he even want me?

She clapped her hands. "Wonderful! Your fiancé will be so delighted" My brain stuttered. "I'll make the arrangements," she said, fleeing. My brain caught up to me in an instant and I chased her into the hall. She turned around as I caught up to her, her expression sheepish. "Mother."

She sighed. "Fine. I... know your stance on marriage, but I couldn't say no." Her voice dropped. "He's the Crown Prince. It... he won't take no for an answer."

I fell against my door, the breath not seeming to fill my lungs enough. I gasped, again, and she came over to stroke my hair. With a hiss I batted her hand away and retreated to my room. She was right, of course. There would be innumerable repercussions to turning down a royal offer, but I couldn't just... marry him. Could I?

So I found myself packed onto Darling with a ballgown, several changes of clothes, and an escort of the men I hated so much. At night, I curled up and cried next to my mare, wishing Ollie were there to escort me, to protect me. As the days until I arrived crept closer, my buried grief clawed its way to the surface, intermingling with the fear of meeting my husband-to-be.

Ollie was the only solution. I ran laps in my mind, wondering if I could find him. How I could find him. He was surely still a knight in training. Perhaps he'd been squired?

I tried to quiet my mind, failing each time. By the time we reached Vallinias, I'd only slept a few hours.

They ushered me into the keep and hid me away in some small guest room until the ball tomorrow. I had until tomorrow.

Morning came and I still hadn't slept. My first task was to find a magister. One came into my sight as I paced the halls and I cornered him instantly.

"I need your help finding someone."

"My lady, did you sleep last night?"

"Unimportant. Olan, son of Lord Yan. Where can I find him?"

"The name does ring a bell." He paused. "Do you mind if I break my fast?"

"Yes. Find him for me and you may eat whatever you want."

He nodded meekly. "Come then, my lady. I am Magister Sola."

"Lady Sarana. Now, bring me to him."

He led me down the halls of the keep until we reached a library. He scanned the shelves, withdrawing a book entitled "Residents of Vallinias - 1598."

"That's a bit outdated, don't you think?"

"Hm, no, I was right. Lord Yan passed away a few years ago. His son," he pulled out the next volume, "seems to be working at Kaltren's School of Squires, down the road. Teaching." He paused, reading the ledger. "Wow, such a young professor."

He put the book away. "Now, may I eat?"

I stayed silent, unable to process his last question.

I did it. I found him. He was here, in Vallinias. With me.

The magister crept away, but I didn't care. I found Edgar and commanded him to lead me to Kaltren's. So, we went. Down the road, to the school. Out front, several boys were fencing. My eyes welled up as I watched them spar. We were so close, at last. I needed him. I wanted him back.

Edgar paused. "My lady?"

"Keep going," I managed to choke out. "I'm fine."

We headed over to the instructor, who paused the lesson upon our approach.

"Can I help you, my lady?"

"I am looking for Olan. He is supposedly a teacher here," I said, and Edgar visibly recoiled.

"Hm, yes. May I ask why?"

"I must speak with him."

He bit his lip. "He doesn't speak much, I'm afraid. He's not teaching today, but I can provide his address."

As we reached the road again, turning left down a side street, Edgar stopped me. "My lady, what are you doing?"

"Something I should have done long ago."

"B-but..."

"Lead the way Edgar."

So, we followed the directions. Each additional step deepened the pit in my stomach. Would he still want to see me? Would he yell? Kiss me?

Finally, we reached the small thatch-roofed house. Edgar stood at my side, hand on the pommel of his sword. "You remember what happened last time we saw him? What happened to Mak?"

"That was Mak's fault. And as I recall, you stood by."

He bowed his head, and I knocked on the door.

A shaggy beast opened it, the huge man towering over me. His dark eyes were haunted, his shaggy blonde hair unkempt and his beard wild.

But it was him.

"S-Sara?"

He fell to his knees, still bringing him only slightly below eye-level.

I wrapped my arms around him. "It's really you."

His breath was fast against my chest as I held him to me. Neither of us said anything for a while.

"You came."

"I did." I turned. "Edgar, leave us."

"But-"

Ollie's stare was enough to scare him off, and we embraced alone at the end of the row.

Finally, he stood and we went inside.

His house was small for him, but easily large enough for me. I felt like a kid again, in his presence. But... it had been a long time.

"Ollie-"

"Sara, let me go first." He paused, pulling out a knife and slicing us some bread. "I'm sorry."

"Ollie-"

"Sara." He handed me a plate. "I don't know if I can be around you."

"What? Why?"

"You remember what happened. You were my other half. And I... I can't do this."

I reached out to him. "Can't do what?"

He tossed the knife at the wall, leaving it stuck like a dart. "Any of it! You were the only part of my life that mattered, and now you're here. And obviously, you're going to become like that again. But I can't marry you. I won't make myself watch you bed some rich hooligan." He looked at me. "You're married already, aren't you?"

I paused, unsure of how to answer. "Ollie..."

"Sara. You were the love of my life. You just understood me. But now..." his face scowled and he slumped into a chair. "I won't let myself. Not again."

I was nearly in tears. I'd expected something, but not this.

"Now we're both adults. We can control what we do." My eyes brightened. "Come back with me! You can take over. Captain was injured last year, and we haven't yet found a replacement."

"Ha. You saw Edgar's face. I'm not welcome."

"We can change that."

"And what if I kill someone else, did you think of that? There's a reason I only work around children. They don't rile me up like my colleagues do. Sara, I've done terrible things."

"Let me help."

"No."

My heart cracked a little. I'd hoped everything would be back to normal, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

"At least let me shave your beard."

His flaming eyes turned on me for the first time ever. "Don't you fucking dare."

"Ollie..."

He swallowed his rage. "I think it's time you go, Sara. Our relationship is dead. Let it go. Let me live my own life."

"Please, I need you..."

"And I needed you. But I don't anymore, so please leave. Don't make me ask again, please." He put his fingers to the bridge of his nose and I wanted to reach out, so desperately. But I forced myself not to.

"Goodbye, Ollie." There was more, so much more I wanted to say, but I couldn't. He was too broken. I needed something else.

I met Edgar up the street and returned to the keep for lunch. As we ate, I tried to think of anything, but nothing came. I was hopeless.

In the evening, as I readied myself for the ball, a knock came at the door. Prince Fanal stood there, wearing an elegant brown suit. "May I come in?"

Despite the feeling in my gut urging me not to oblige, I couldn't say no to the Crown Prince, nor my fiancé. He stepped in, glancing around my room. "Your quarters in the royal palace will be much more grand, I promise you that. Of course, they will be mine as well," he laughed. Upon seeing my steely reaction, he cleared his throat and went on. "I did not mean to interrupt your preparations for tonight's ball, but I felt the need to inform you that your presence is required in Omangarep on the New Moon of Marotul."

A lump grew in my throat, but he went on. "We are to announce our union soon, as well as the end of the war." He leaned in, whispering. "But don't tell anyone. It's a surprise!"

He turned to leave. "I suppose I'll leave you to it. Will you require an escort?"

I quickly shook my head, an idea forming in my mind.

"Good. I look forward to our dance." I gagged at the thought, but the idea in my mind held back my vomit. After his shoes had clicked away down the hall, I dashed out, down the road, to Ollie's house.

He knelt in the garden, turning to me when he heard me coming. I fell into his arms; unable to hold back the tears anymore, he hugged me as I cried.

"I need your help."

He led me back inside, brought me out another glass of water, - which I devoured - and gave me a minute to breathe.

"So?"

"I'm engaged. To Fanal."

He sucked in a breath. "And?"

"And? I can't marry him! You know me better than anyone."

"I knew you," he corrected, "and I meant it more in the way of 'what can I do?' I mean, he's the Crown Prince."

"Come with me. At least escort me to Omangarep, and then we'll see what happens. At the very least, that will give us some time to come up with a plan."

He stayed silent for a while, examining me.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll take you."

"Thank you. Meet me in the courtyard tomorrow morning." I reached out, but let my hand fall. He smiled at me, and that was enough.

As I returned to the keep, the dance was already underway. I spotted Fanal from a balcony, avoiding the main ballroom chaos, but he managed to locate me and made his way up.

I tensed as he appeared behind me. "Not in a dancing mood? I must say, you look ravishing." With an internal cringe, I turned, sporting a massive fake smile. "Unfortunately, my feet are still sore after yesterday's voyage."

He raised an eyebrow. "You walked?"

Dammit. He'd caught me. I sighed. "No, it's just... the crowds. They stress me out."

He reached out his hand. "I'll be right there with you. There's no need to fear." If only that were true. But I obliged, taking his hand and allowing him to lead me to the centre of the dancing masses.

His hand fell to my hip as a slow song came on, though my brain hardly registered it through the panic overwhelming me. He hummed along with the song as he led me in step, though he didn't seem to notice how stiffly I moved. Ollie would have noticed.

After a few minutes, we switched partners, and I found myself face-to-face with a beautiful woman only slightly older than me. She flashed me a smile as I twirled around her, my movements suddenly more graceful now that I didn't have to hold my breath. As the song switched, I leaned in, taking my shot. "Would you like to go somewhere more private?"

Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, but she nodded, and I led her back up to my balcony. She took a seat on the bench, and I plopped down next to her, kicking off my heels.

"Apologies," I said. "Crowds stress me out and my feet are sore."

She smiled, taking off her own shoes. "Me too. They're quite intimidating. Dancing with men is always so scary."

"Like you wouldn't believe."

We stayed silent for a moment, watching the dancers. I saw Fanal search around for me, but he gave up when some pretty thing in a blue dress approached him.

"Are you engaged?"

She shook her head. "I have a few men courting me, but I don't feel a connection. You?" I shrugged. "It's an arranged marriage. I am less than ecstatic about it," I said, pausing to choose my words carefully.

"I'm sorry. Did you at least have some fun beforehand?"

I leaned closer to her. "I'm hoping to." Fuck it. I leaned in, wrapping an arm around the back of her head.

She moved her head, making me meet her neck as she gasped. Glancing up, her face was full of fear. I pulled back immediately, reaching down to my shoes.

"I'm sorry. That was reckless. I should've--"

"No, it was... interesting. But I am not into women. You are gorgeous, though. I would probably be excited by you if I were."

I smiled, turning away. "Excuse me, please."

I fled to my chambers, catching my breath only once the door was locked. Of course, that was stupid of me. Why had I tried that? I shook my head, my exhaustion soon overcoming me. I stifled a sob, but found my fears easing as I pictured meeting Ollie tomorrow. Despite that catastrophe, I fell asleep with hope, dreaming of the morning.

Three camps greeted me as I stepped out of the keep in my travelling clothes. The royal guard, surrounding Fanal as he waved to me from atop his stallion; my own men, waiting and nervously shuffling from side to side; and Ollie, the source of their discomfort.

As I approached, Edgar came over, his hand on the pommel of his sword. "My lady... what is he doing here?"

"He is escorting me to Omangarep for a meeting with the Prince." He glanced over to Ollie.

"You will return to my mother. She may have use of you." Fanal rode over just as I finished talking. Edgar protested, but was silenced by my fiancé's - I gagged at that thought - presence.

"Is this your escort? They seem strong and trustworthy." I faked a smile up at him, but shook my head.

"My escort is over there." I gestured to Ollie, who raised an eyebrow at the Prince. He shuddered, clearing his throat.

"Very well. Your steed is ready. I will see you in a few days."

I nodded. "Are you walking as well?"

He shook his head, chuckling almost as though my question was stupid. "I brought my mage. He will teleport me there. Saves plenty of time."

"Then I will see you upon my arrival." I turned to my men. "Edgar, check in with my mother upon your arrival."

He nodded, gathering up my men and heading back southwards as I beckoned Ollie over. He lumbered towards us, his brown leathers contrasting with the shiny golds and silvers of the royal guard. Ollie stood near eye level to Fanal, even atop his stallion. I mounted Darling, putting enough space between Fanal and I to let me breathe.

The taste of dew on the breeze and Ollie's presence beside me as we left allowed me to pretend, even for a moment, that I was on just another adventure from our childhood. But even as I told myself a tale of Ollie rescuing me from the clutches of Vallinia the terrible, I couldn't shake the reality that he was practically walking me down the aisle.

Still, he was back beside me.

I was wearing my travelling garb, not the ladies' robes I was accustomed to, but I always felt more comfortable around Ollie in casual clothes. I felt more comfortable blending in, in general.

We headed out before noon, travelling southwest to avoid the steppe. Silence held us together, and I decided to let him be the one to break it.

As the evening rolled around and we continued on our trek, the lake of the Southfold stretching into the distance beside us, he cleared his throat.

"This trip is going to be really boring if we don't talk."

"I suppose."

"Why me, Sara? I asked you to stay away."

"Because I want you back in my life. Even if we're not what we used to be. I will not just give up on you."

He stopped. "Sara."

"Ollie." I urged Darling closer to him. His muscles bulged beneath his clothes, his sheath perfectly adorning his hip.

"I want you."

I raised an eyebrow. "How?"

"I don't know. I just... it used to be easier, to pretend that we were sisters."

"Oh." I took a moment. "What?"

"I'm done pretending. I am a man."

"Is that why, your beard?"

He nodded, his throat tight.

"Ollie." He was in so much pain, but I didn't know how to help him.

"I can't lose you again, Sara. It almost killed me. It did kill a part of me. I don't hope anymore."

I looked at the ground. "I know. I died a bit too."

He shook his head. "So, I'm your bodyguard. I won't hold you like I used to."

"Okay," I said. It wasn't okay with me, but I wasn't going to push him. We had nearly two cycles of travel to go, and this was good progress. Even if we weren't the same as before, I could help him.

We set up camp along the lake, under a small copse of trees. It reminded me of the hillock, when we were young. I crawled up under my sleeping bag and watched him. He didn't try to sleep. He just sat, his knees tucked to his chest, gazing out over the black waters, one hand sifting through my mare's coat.

After I tossed and turned for a while, I went and sat next to him.

"How do you sleep, these days?"

He shook his head. "I don't. Not anymore. Not since..."

I reached out to put my arm around him, but paused. "Can I..."

He nodded, and I fell against his shoulder. We sat in silence, and he shook, sobbing under his breath.

"You don't need to hold back around me."

But he didn't say anything.

I awoke with my face on his chest, his stomach rising and falling in the morning sun. "Ollie," I whispered, and he groaned, sitting up and going off to pack up the sleeping bags we hadn't used. I wished for a moment he'd stayed with me for a while, but stretched my back and allowed that thought to slip my mind.

We set off without a word, and I resolved once more to let him stew until he decided to talk. It didn't take as long today.

"Sara?"

"Mm?"

"How have you been?"

"What do you mean?"

"Since I left."

"You already know how I was."

"I think I need to hear it."

I took a deep breath. I'd never truly been honest about it, but he was the only person who ever understood me. If I could be honest with anyone... "The colour was gone from my life, Ollie. You were... well, you said we were sisters? Going back to being an only child was like losing my betrothed in childbirth."

He said nothing.

"How about you? We never talked after..."

He looked down. "I don't know. It feels good, Sara. To talk like this, again. But I'm just going to suck you down into the darkness with me."

"Believe me, I have nowhere further down to go."

He sighed. "I don't know if I can trust you won't leave again."

I took a moment. "Like I said. We're adults. When I leave, you can come with me."

He paused, looking me over. "Okay. I'll talk."

We plodded onwards, and he took a few moments to organize his thoughts. "Of course you remember the last day we spoke."

I nodded, silent.

"Well, I went back to the barracks after you shaved me. It was okay, at first. I could hide everything but my face. They teased me a bit, especially Mak, but when we went to shower, they noticed I was hiding a little."

He wouldn't meet my gaze, so I stared ahead, parallel. "At first they dragged me in, all in the name of fun. I fought back, playfully, I guess. I trusted them." He stopped talking, and I didn't push him. I let him collect himself, and he started up again.

"And then they noticed. And they started teasing a bit more. And I thought, 'it's okay, it's all just fun between brothers.' But they didn't stop. When I tried to push them off, they got violent. And-" he clutched his chest.

I reached out, and he fell into my embrace, Darling stopping in her tracks. "Shh, it's okay. You don't have to say anything else."

"No," he choked. "I'm so close. You almost know everything. I've wanted to tell you this for so long, and now I can't get the words out."

I dismounted and pulled him down so we were at eye-level. "Look at me. Take a breath, don't think, just look. I'm here."

After a while he calmed, my fingers stroking through his beautiful hair.

His voice was so quiet I almost couldn't hear the three most important words I maybe ever would.

"They raped me."

His eyes were dry, and he stood to start walking again. He seemed emotionless, but I could tell he was sobbing internally. I walked alongside him, Darling padding silently behind.

"It's okay."

"They beat me, they took me, for the full day. And I just kept thinking about how you were sleeping alone."

I reached out and squeezed his hand.

"And the next day, until you came and I killed Mak." He stared upwards, my tiny hand still dwarfed in his. "And the worst part is that I don't regret it. He took me first. I can still taste him, when the memories are bad."

"Ollie."

"Please stop. Just... hold my hand for a while."

We walked until dusk, and he lit a campfire, the lake glittering in the distance. We'd begun curving northward, and were well on our way to Omangarep.

The fire twinkled in his eye.

"Can we ever have what we once did?"

I stared into the fire. "I don't know, but I hope so."

"Me too."

The next day we talked of nothing much, but I didn't want to pry. Even just talking of my soggy boots from the morning dew made me feel better, since it was with him. And my presence seemed to ease him as well.

We were both lighter, his demons seeming further away now that we were together.

Around noon, we reached a camp. Several travelling merchants and soldiers had staked out some stalls and tents, and we took a moment to refill our supplies.

We sat at the centre, watching a man play the violin after we'd shopped and rested. Ollie couldn't sit still, watching every move someone made towards or around us. I tried to calm him with a hand on his shoulder, but he didn't seem to notice.

After a song or two we headed out, and I held his hand again.

"Was that bad?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. We could've left immediately."

"But you wanted to watch the show. You were so eager, I couldn't-"

"Ollie, I don't care about the show. Tell me when you get uncomfortable."

He nodded, then started to smile.

"What?"

"You're looking out for me."

I rubbed his shoulder. "Of course I am. You're my... sister, you said?"

His throat tightened, and he fell silent for a moment.

"Ollie, I'm sorry if that-"

"You're really pretty," he said, ignoring my statement. "You asked once if I was jealous? I am."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I can't talk now. Maybe when we camp, okay? It's a lot."

"Okay. We'll talk then."

So we walked, talking about nothing. A few times I pried, but his pained answers made me apologize and back off.

Eventually, though, we made camp off the Main Southfold Road, finding a small cave to hide away in.

"So?"

"I've been thinking."

"About?"

"Me."

"Are you sure you want to talk about this?"

He looked away, then nodded. I wasn't sure, though. He seemed... off.

"First, how are you feeling?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Fine?"

"You just, you were sobbing yesterday."

"I know. But you're finally back." He stared into the fire, the embers flickering in his eyes.

"You were the one person I trusted, and I need to get this off my chest. It's been consuming me."

"Okay, you know you can tell me anything."

He bit his lip. "You mentioned the other day, about my beard?"

I nodded. He'd always hated his facial hair, so I wondered where this was going.

"Will you shave it for me?"

I bit my lip. Last time, this ended poorly for both of us. "Are you sure? I will do it if that is what you truly want."

"I need it to be you, Sara. I can't do it myself."

I reached into my pack and pulled out my razor, creeping over to sit in his lap. The light of the fire wasn't ideal for this, but it would suffice. I slathered his face in cream and dragged the blade along his skin.

He made me stop once or twice to catch his breath, panic clear in his eyes.

"It's alright, Ollie. We can stop."

"No. Keep going."

Finally, I withdrew and handed him my pocket mirror. Tears formed in his eyes.

"I found a book, some time ago," he said, his voice quiet.

"Oh?"

"It told the story of Amazonian warriors. You know some of them are born men? When they reach the age of eight they undergo a transformation to turn into women."

"Oh. Oh, Ollie, what are you... oh. Are you-"

He nodded. "I don't know if it's possible, but I need to try."

"Ollie, transformation isn't going to solve your problems."

"No, not what we talked about yesterday. This isn't about that. Heavens, life seems so possible now."

"Ollie, take a breath. Talk to me."

"This is something I've wanted ever since we had that talk after your first period."

"Ollie."

He shrunk. "You don't like it, do you?"

"It's just not a decision to be made lightly."

"Sara, I've always known I'm different. I could be me. Me, really me. And we can be together."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" He stood, pacing, rubbing his chin. "You know me. I'm not normal. I want to be different. More different."

I shook my head. "Come here. Let's sleep like we used to, and we'll talk more later." He bit his lip, but obliged, climbing in next to me. I dropped my voice to a whisper. "I don't need you to be different. I just need you to be you, Ollie."

"Call me Olivia, please."

I rolled over, but his dark eyes were dead serious. I always suspected something, but this was more intense than I ever imagined. "Okay. I like this plan, a test run. Let's give it a shot." Even despite his outburst, sleeping like this unwound a bruised part of my soul. His eyes were so beautiful.

So I fell asleep in his arms, thinking about what his words meant. Was he genuine, or just snapping from over sharing his trauma? Regardless, I would be there to help him through it.

Day four. If we travelled fast, we'd make it to Omangarep by nightfall. The sky was overcast and dreary, nothing but a mirror for his mood. He didn't seem as depressed as before, but he'd trusted me with an intimate detail and I rejected him, even if only partially. Had I been wrong to do that?

"Ollie," I started, to which he raised an eyebrow. "Uhh, via. Would you like to discuss it?"

He sighed. "Do you want to actually listen?"

I took a moment, then nodded.

"Okay." He stared off ahead of us, crossing his arms and rubbing his forearm. "I said what I mean last night. I want to transform. This body is tainted by memories."

"You'll still have those memories."

"But it'll feel like a different person. Because they didn't do that to my mind, they did that to my body."

"What about our memories?"

"It's not the same; those aren't going anywhere. Look," he stopped walking to face me, atop Darling. "You're never going to get the old Ollie back, but is Olivia not enough for you?"

"I don't know Olivia."

He grabbed my hands. "You always have. I've always been her, deep down. And I think you know that, which is why you're so scared."

"I'm not scared," I pouted, but I knew he was right. I sighed. "Okay, my meeting is tomorrow. How about we talk afterwards?" I paused, looking down at him. "We'll look into this, alright?"

He beamed. "Thank you." His eyes started to well up. "It feels so good to have you back in my life. If I can transform, maybe I'll take you up on that offer, to go to the Southfold and take Captain's position."

He seemed lighter, now that I knew everything about him. He was different, laughing and pointing at goats as we passed by the farmsteads that lined the way to Omangarep. A few horse-mounted guards passed, and he barely even flinched.

As we reached the gates of Omangarep, he stopped to give me a hug. "Thank you, Sara. You've always been my best friend."

"Olivia," I sighed.

"I have more to say, if you'll listen."

"Of course. But let's find an inn first." We flagged down a guide and he led us to an inn in exchange for a Mane.

We docked Darling in a stable, drank some light booze, and retired early so Ollie... Olivia could get his thoughts off his chest.

"Okay," he started after a long breath. "I think I've decided on how to transform, and I want your opinion."

I nodded, jittery about what he would say. This decision was what would let me know whether he was serious or floundering in trauma.

He wrung his hands together, also nervous. "You remember how you used to dress me up like a doll?"

I nodded hesitantly.

He nodded. "I want to be a girl, like you. I want to look like I was born a girl."

"So, what does that entail?"

"I don't know, a feminine face, breasts, wider hips. Less body hair. Maybe bangs."

"Bangs?" I almost laughed, then pictured it, and realized he would look... no, she? Would look good with bangs.

"You'll look gorgeous."

He nodded. "I hope so. I want to keep my height and muscles, mostly, but I want to be like a sister to you. An actual one, as opposed to this gross hairy monster."

"You're only one of those three," I joked, then bit my tongue at my stupidity.

He shook his head. "Sara, please. Be honest."

"Okay. We'll go tomorrow after the meeting and do some research. Maybe there's a transformation specialist in town."

He nodded. "Want to sleep in these arms for the last time?"

I crawled into the small bed, wondering what it would be like to sleep in his... or her arms after she changed. After a minute, I started laughing.

"What?" he whispered.

"Imagine if I'd agreed to let you go when you told me to."

He kissed the back of my neck, sending prickles across my skin. "You always seemed to know me better than I did."

My eyes opened, and I rolled over to face him. "What about downstairs?"

"I'm thinking of keeping it, but I'm still mulling it over."

"Are you a virgin?" He didn't respond, and I realized. "Oh Heavens I'm so sorry, I should've-"

"No, I am. Never had any sexual experiences except what we did together, which doesn't really count."

I shook my head. "Yeah, I don't think it does either. So, two virgins, still, after all these years."

He paused. "You never took anyone?"

"Like I said, no one wanted me. Well, plenty of people wanted me, but no one really cared about me. It was just about my tits for the guys who tried."

"You do have nice tits."

"Jealous?"

"I'm going to ask the transformer to use yours as reference."

"Ew!" I shouted, though it was partially in jest. He hadn't seen my tits in years, but he could probably draw them from memory.

I woke up a few times throughout the night, consumed with doubts and fears of what might happen. Would he be prettier than me? If anything, that would be a positive. I knew I wasn't much to look at.

Would he realize how desperate I am? That was a real fear. If he conquered his demons, maybe he wouldn't need me anymore. He was grown. He didn't need a big sister.

But finally, morning came, and when he rolled over and kissed my cheek, my doubts were washed away, even if only a little.

We ate breakfast quietly, savouring each others' company until it was time to go.

The palace was grand. More than I could have possibly imagined. Each hall was filled with tapestries and ancient statues of horse lords and kings and queens, paintings and sculptures lined each wall. The building was a work of art in and of itself, with twisting passageways that felt like walking through a museum.

Olivia's mouth hung agape as we followed a guide to the meeting chamber. He pushed open the door to reveal a high-vaulted room with a ceiling made of glass. The room sparkled as the sun echoed through the crystals placed strategically around to fill the space with an ever present glow.

Fanal ran over, a huge smile on his face. "Welcome to your new home, Lady Tremane!"

I shuddered, but mostly held back my reaction. "It's lovely."

He flashed another smile. "Walk with me, Sarana."

Prickles shot up my spine as Fanal said my name, dropping the formalities. Olivia looked on as he placed a hand on my hip and guided me away from her.

"We're a bit early, but the meeting should commence in a few minutes. In the meantime, I simply wanted to warn you that I will be announcing our betrothal today, and that you should be on your best behaviour."

I nodded, sticking out my chest and filling my lungs with faux-courage.

"Good luck."

He headed off to greet some ambassadors, a few familiar faces among the crowd. Just then, footsteps approached behind me. I turned to find a massive orcish woman with elegant piercings and long flowing hair standing before me. "Lady Sarana?"

I nodded, bowing my head, slightly.

"I am Lady Duke, from across the waters. I represent the interests of Ullar Fargolt." I was surprised to hear of an ambassador from the orcish capital, but I was still very interested to meet her. Non-humans were a rarity even in the diverse crowds of Omangarep.

"Of course, my lady. I apologize, but I do not recall your name. It has been a long voyage from my home."

She let out a deep laugh that shook my bones, waving off my apology. "Oh, like you wouldn't believe. I've been ferried up and down the coast these past few years. Haven't been home for more than a month since the war began."

"I'm sorry."

"What for? You must've been a child when it started." She smiled. "Worry not. It's a good life." She paused. "You're engaged?"

I nodded. "I thought it was supposed to be secret, but he doesn't tell me much."

She examined me for a moment. "You don't love him," she said, matter-of-factly. "Marriage should be for love." I averted my gaze as she stared deeper at me. "But you do love someone. Hm." Fanal called the meeting to order in the background. "We will discuss more later."

Fanal sat me at his side. Olivia was crowded to the back, with the other servants, and once the other nobles took their seats, he was ushered away. I was alone.

"Welcome, gents and gentleladies," the Prince began, standing from his seat next to me. "I have summoned you here for no small matter. We have reached a peace treaty with Pallas." A few claps shot up around the room, though one voice came through.

"How?"

"They surrendered. We've been butchering them on the battlefield recently, and we made a final push which shattered their forces."

"What are the terms?" a woman asked.

He turned his gaze to me. "One of my younger brothers, Prince Jaran, will marry into their royal family, and we will spare them. Of course, we will control their commerce and laws, though they remain publicly a separate entity."

Finally, a lord who I recognized, Lord Tray, spoke up. "Is Jaran alright with marrying a Pallian dog?"

Laughs and more celebrations shot up, but I wasn't focused on much, simply trying not to vomit at the thought of being perceived as his wife.

"Here's the catch: Jaran is a stallion from my stable."

Tray's eyes went wide. "They're marrying an actual horse?"

Fanal nodded, laughing. "Oh, it's delightful, isn't it? Those who keep our brothers and sisters as nothing but beasts of burden will end up being ruled by one? It's delicious."

My stomach roiled more. No one deserved that. Even Tray, who'd balked me with his disdain for the Pallians over the years, seemed aghast.

"I have another announcement," Fanal said, turning to me. He nodded, and I stood, legs wobbly.

"Lady Sarana Tremane and I are engaged. I expect your full support," he said, turning back to the assembly. "We require unity as we overtake the Pallian culture and mold them into servants."

More claps went out, though Lord Tray and a few others who knew me stayed silent. They knew my struggles, my casual hatred of Omangarep's royal proceedings, my unwillingness to choose a suitor.

Lord Tray intercepted Prince Fanal as the meeting adjourned, allowing Lady Fallbrook to usher me out. Olivia caught up with us and we fled to Lady Ger's room, the Fallbrook guards standing by.

She wrapped me in a hug the instant we were alone.

"Did you know?"

I shook my head. Olivia was standing silently as Lady Ger released me. "Oh, what a horrid turn. Sure, we won the war, but you, my dear... what will you do?"

"I don't know." It all bubbled up in an instant, and I started sobbing. Olivia held me tight as Lady Ger paced. Lady Fallbrook entered, leaning against the desk across from the bed upon which I sat.

"We'll flee," Olivia said. "We can go to... the Orcish Kingdom, maybe. I've heard they accept refugees."

I cried into his shoulder. "I just want to go home with you."

"It's not safe," Lady Ger said. "Good lord. The entire Southfold is going to collapse because of this. Why? Why would he do this?"

Lady Fallbrook spoke up from the corner. "He can maintain the guise of control while actually crippling the South. He wants to amass power in Omangarep. He wants it all."

I sniffled away my tears. "Can we... would you fight for us?"

Lady Fallbrook shook her head. "We would lose. Maybe, if the war were still ongoing..."

"What about Pallas? We could send an envoy."

"Darling, I've looked at the statistics. They're running on empty. Their soldiers are exhausted and dying by the second. Plus, we'd have to get through the front lines to send a message, and Fanal isn't going to just let that happen." Lady Ger turned away, towards the window. "Face it. You need to go. Take your... oh Heavens is that Olan?"

Olivia nodded hesitantly.

"Take your... friend... west. Across the river. Reach the other shore and you'll have a moment to breathe."

Lady Fallbrook sat next to me, resting her arm on my shoulder. "Now, my dear. I would recommend staying far from the Wastes. Ollie would survive, but you would not. Not without his help, at least. The Orcish Kingdom is your best bet. If you can go far enough, asylum in the Queendom of the Giants would work as well. Anywhere but the Human Kingdoms."

I nodded, slowly mustering my courage. Olivia was at my side. I could do this. We could do this. Just then, a knock came at the door. Lady Duke stood in the doorway, leaning down to peer into our gathering. "I hear this is where they're planning the coup?"

The two ladies paled while Olivia snarled. I put a hand on her arm. "It's alright, let her in."

She ducked through the door and stretched up to her full height. Heavens, she was massive. Even now, I felt my thoughts grow hazy while gazing at her strong hands. But I needed to focus.

"Can you get the two of us passage to the Orcish Kingdom?"

She bit her lip, then nodded. "Though, if you're going against the royal family, I'll have to meet you in Remarga."

"That far?" Lady Fallbrook said.

"It's where our boat is. I've got sailors, not soldiers."

"And what of the Scarni gang?"

Duke laughed. "Oh, you won't have to worry about that. They rarely bother us."

I sighed, clinging to Olivia. Lady Fallbrook sighed, too. "Very well. My men can escort you out of the city, but you must find your way to Remarga on your own."

"Thank you, all of you."

"Of course, my dear," Lady Ger said. Despite the fact I often found her overbearing and annoying, her cloying kindness was welcome now. With a plan set, we headed off to wait until nightfall.

We ate dinner quickly and quietly, back at the inn. "Olivia?"

He replied with a questioning sound, mouth full.

"Would you like to do some research on transformation before we leave tonight?"

He nearly spat out his soup, but choked it down with effort, nodding the whole while. "Yes, please. I'd love that."

So we gathered our things, prepared to meet Lady Fallbrook's men as soon as it was time, and headed to the city registry. I rifled through some files until I landed on the registry of mages. "Let's see... Abjuration, Alchemy, no... Q, R, S, T... Teleportation... Transformation, here."

I handed him the slip of paper. "There's one right down the road. Do you want to go now?"

He grabbed my hand, barely letting me return order to the various files and boxes before we were out that door and knocking on another.

The place was small and brick, the entry obscured under thousands of pictures of people of various races, of all colours and sizes: elves and dwarves and orcs and humans, all lining the walls. The woman inside beckoned us deeper, and we sat across from her in her living room at a round wooden table. It was cramped and dry, but Olivia was shaking.

"So, husband and wife?" the transformer asked.

"Friends, actually. I'm going to sponsor him."

She scrunched up her face and stared into his eyes. "Bigger cock? Hair colour?"

"Actually," his eyes dropped.

"He wants to be a woman," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, a trans woman, hey? Much more common in Pallas, but I get a bunch here too." She reached over to grab his hand. "You're going to be gorgeous, darling. Other than feminization, what do you want?"

He took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Nothing. I want to still be big and strong, but feminine, too. Is that okay?"

"Honey, it's more than okay."

"Oh, and I want to keep my penis."

"Want me to make it a bit more feminine?"

"What?"

"Softer, mostly. Different smell. Quite nice, actually."

He nodded, and I rubbed his back.

She turned to me. "A word?"

She led me to a back room, searching through some cabinets. "So, you're going to pay for this?"

I nodded.

"It's fairly cheap. It'll only cost..." she counted on one hand, "two hundred Manes."

"Okay, I can do that."

She bit her lip. "I'm going to give you some advice."

"Okay?"

"She's fragile, your friend. And you not seeing her for who she truly is, well it isn't helping. Have you noticed her flinch when you called her 'he?'"

I shook my head. Did he... she do that?

"Just... Heavens, I always forget how troublesome you people can be. Call her she, treat her like a girl. It'll be easier once I transform her, but good lord you should've been doing that all along."

I nodded slowly. "But... she... has been through a lot of trauma. I want to make sure she's not taking this too fast."

"She can always get a refund. You don't look like you're strapped for cash. And trust me, darling. Only a few trans folks come back, and that's mostly just for touch ups."

I thought it over for a second. "Okay. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I'd take her shopping later if I were you. Watch how she beams."

We headed back to find a very worried-looking Olivia.

"It's okay," I said, rubbing her shoulder. "I've got the money." I handed the transformer a bank receipt good for two hundred Manes, and she got to work on the spell.

Twisting energies I'd only ever seen performed by our court magician flew across the room, scattering papers as a symbol weaved itself through the air.

rrup phren rotlavikel kin phteer rhen pithil kinna, the woman whispered.

Olivia's form shifted and morphed, glowing brighter until I had to look away. When the light finally died down, I was looking at a different person, though her eyes were the same.

She smiled, tears brimming, and looked down. Her face was clean-shaven, smaller and more delicate. Her hair was longer and freshly washed, but still the dirty blonde I always loved.

She stood about an inch or two shorter, but she still towered over me, and I leapt into her arms.

She hugged me tight, then let me go as the transformer brought out a mirror.

As I stood next to her, I realized she smelled different. Stronger, more delightful. Like sweat mixed with berries, rather than the overpowering musk she'd had before.

"Oh Heavens you're gorgeous," I whispered as we exited her shop.

She was almost crying, but it was time to go.

The cover of night and Lady Fallbrook's guards escorted us to the West gate of Omangarep, silent and unseen. With a heavy pack of supplies on my shoulders and Olivia's presence beside me, I readied myself to be on the run, officially. Once we left Omangarep, it would be a challenge to avoid the main roads and get to Lady Duke's ship so Prince Fanal couldn't follow us.

As we reached the gate, footsteps rang out all around. Olivia stepped in front of me as dozens of royal Omangarepian guards surrounded us and Prince Fanal rode to the forefront atop his massive white stallion. Lanterns illuminated the square, and both peasants and merchants fled, not wishing to serve as onlookers to the coming storm.

"Out for a midnight stroll, my darling?"

Olivia's teeth were bared, her hand on her pommel, but even she couldn't fight this many men.

Captain Creat, the leader of Lady Fallbrook's men, stepped forward. "Lady Fallbrook can explain—"

"Lady Fallbrook explained everything adequately. She is in custody for treason." Prince Fanal examined his nails. "Lay down your arms, surrender my fiancée, and you may go."

The square was silent save for the singing of metal as Lady Fallbrook's men drew their blades. Olivia followed suit, but I held her close.

A grin split his lips. "I'm sure your replacement will be more cooperative." As Fanal opened his mouth to give an order, a soldier with a lieutenant's Hoof whispered up to him.

"Fine, fine. Arrest them. Alive, please," he muttered.

The fight was over in less than a minute. Most of the injuries were light, with Lady Fallbrook's men tackled and brought down rather than rammed through with pikes, but even the worst of them could be healed by a cleric.

Olivia stood beside me, glaring at the soldiers, daring them to approach, but I put my hand on her shoulder and forced her to lower her blade. "I will go willingly if you let me keep my aide."

His eyes flickered from her to me, then he sighed. "Fine. Let's go." He snapped his fingers and off we went, back to the castle. Olivia was bristling, but I stroked her arm and forced her to wait.

The once-grand halls filled the pit in my stomach with acid, and the luxurious room the Prince dumped me in felt more like a prison than a home. I sat on the bed, trying not to shake.

A few minutes later, Fanal entered. He sat across from me, lounging at my desk and examining me again. "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

The gall- "No you're not," I spat.

"I truly am. I suspect I would do the same, in your place. But I'm not in your place, and you need to learn how things go around here." He leaned in. "You will not jeopardize my right to the crown."

He turned to leave, and as he opened the door, I spoke up. "May I visit my aide?"

He sighed, rolling his eyes, then nodded.

He gestured to the guards, and they led me a few doors down the hall. As soon as the door shut behind me, I fell into Olivia's arms. They felt amazing, only fuzzy instead of covered in hair, but still as strong as ever.

Her face was steely, but I could tell she was scared.

"What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"I don't know. I'm hoping Lord Tray and Lady Ger are still here and can help us. If not..." I hugged her tighter. "We'll figure it out."

She nodded, kissing my head. It was good to be back in her arms, my hackles finally lowering now that I was safe, if only temporarily.

"You probably need to go back soon," she mumbled after a few minutes.

"I know. But I need you for a bit longer."

"Okay." We stayed like that until I felt myself drifting off and it grew too dangerous to risk Fanal catching us.

I slept alone, though sleep is perhaps a strong word for the tormented dreams that plagued me that night.

Come morning, I had a full schedule. Luckily, Fanal allowed me to bring Olivia along with me to my various meetings throughout the day. First up was a dress fitting. I met an older woman in a shop surrounded by multicoloured fabrics. Olivia brought Darling over, and the woman compared her colour to various swatches, eventually clicking her tongue in satisfaction as she made me undress.

I blushed as Olivia's eyes crawled over me, even though she'd seen it all before. Eventually, when she realized I knew she was staring, she blushed and glanced away. Everything felt different now that she looked like a woman. All those memories from when we were young were recontextualized. Had she wished I was staring at her instead of the maids when we were younger?

The woman commanded me to relax, and it was only then I realized how tense I was. Olivia was finally within reach. The real her, one I could cherish and love how I always wanted to, and I was engaged to someone else. The Crown Prince of all people.

I was incredulous, thinking of how the two children sitting on that hillock all those years ago would turn into us.

Finally, the woman dismissed us, and I got dressed, and Olivia brought me to my next appointment, an exercise coach.

I sighed upon seeing the woman, and despite the fact she was exactly my type, she couldn't hold a candle to Olivia. This was going to be a problem.

She worked out with me, building up a sweat just like she always had when we were younger. Her concentration face was the exact same, though softer and looking more like I wanted to kiss it.

Finally, it was time for dinner. Olivia was dismissed, leaving me to eat alone with Fanal. I swallowed a few bites, realizing the portions on my plate were minuscule.

"Fanal?" I asked, my voice soft.

"Yes, my dear?" he replied, sending a shiver through me.

I took a breath so my voice wouldn't quake, but it still did, slightly. "Why is my meal so small? I am used to much larger sizes."

"You must fit into your wedding dress, after all. After the ceremony you may return to eating more sizable meals."

"Oh."

The rest of the dinner was silent, despite his attempts to talk to me.

Once I'd retired to my room, collapsing next to Olivia, I could finally relax. She was in only an undershirt and shorts, and she rolled over to crush me beneath her grasp, hugging me close as I sighed away the day's troubles. Oh no.

Being in her arms was exciting in a way I'd never felt with her before. Her abs pressed against me, her muscles shifting with each breath she took. I let out a soft whine, unsure at what exactly, and she pulled back.

"Was it that bad?"

I shook my head. "No, it's nothing." I quickly changed the topic. "How are you feeling? We haven't talked since..." I stroked her arm.

She smiled. "I'm finally me. It feels fantastic, like the weights of the world are suddenly mine to lift and toss and do what I want with." She paused. "Do you believe me now?"

I nodded. "I do. I see you, Olivia."

She turned towards me. "Thank you. You've always been the only one who got me. Want to cuddle?"

I tensed up, realizing that my initial instinct was right. I wouldn't be able to go back to normal with her.

"Olivia-"

"Yeah?" she flexed, experimenting with her new body, and I had to choke back a groan.

I took a breath. "I have something to say."

"Oh." Her confidence dropped. "Is it about what you and the transformer talked about?"

I shook my head. "I don't know... I mean, no, it's not about that. But I don't know how to say this."

"Just say it. I can take it."

"You're gorgeous."

"You said that before. Sara, are you okay?" She came over, reaching out to stroke my shoulder. I yelped at the touch.

"Yeah, I mean, no. It's just... seeing you like this..."

"Is this too much for you?"

"No! Well, maybe. Just listen, dummy. I... was never really attracted to men. You got close, a few times, but it was really just the maids when I would sneak into their baths to watch."

"I remember you telling me about them. What's this- oh, I think I see. Go on."

"Yeah, I mean. I don't want anything to change between us, but seeing you like this... this is what I've always wanted. You're what I've always wanted." I looked away. "So, Olivia, will you kiss me?"

"I'll do way better than kiss you."

She leaned forward, and just as our lips were about to meet, a knock came at the door. I let out a grunt of frustration as Olivia sighed and went over, opening it to reveal Lord Tray with a set of steaming tea.

He set the tea aside and embraced me briefly. When he met my gaze his eyes were dark and cautious, completely unaware of what he'd interrupted. "Fanal is suspicious. He knows we are friends, just like Lady Fallbrook." He took a breath. "War is coming to the Southfold. You need to leave or you will become a pawn for both sides."

I took Olivia's hand, the flirtatious mood completely gone. "How? We tried leaving, and it got Lady Fallbrook caught."

He smiled, pouring me some tea. He leaned in, his voice a whisper. "Under the tea set. A gravity scroll. It will break your fall should you jump from the window."

I smiled, sipping the tea. "Thank you. Make sure my mother is safe."

"I will do my best, though I suspect we've already lost." He stood up straight, smiling. "You've grown into such a magnificent woman. You two will be happy, away from all this bloodshed. Good luck, Sarana."

"Thank you, Lord Tray. Good luck to you and our people."

We were too tense to try anything else, and once night fell, Olivia crept to the window and used the scroll. She tested it by leaping off the bed first, then, satisfied, grabbed me and leapt out the window onto the streets below.

We landed quietly and snuck in the shadows until we reached the gate. Merchants came and went, though a few guards stood by and would surely recognize us.

"Any ideas?"

Glancing around, her eyes landed on a pile of hay nearby. "Not one you'll like."

With a quick cast of flint against steel, the pile caught fire. We stood by until people took notice, running to grab the guards' attention. In the chaos, we slipped through, into the night.

"They didn't search you?"

"None of them wanted to get close." She bared her teeth in a mock growl, but started smiling once she saw my face.

With Olivia's hand clenched in mine, we left the city behind.

The ground was sturdy beneath my feet, despite my head ringing with worry. The jingle of Olivia's mail and the crunch of our boots on gravel were the only noises beneath the bright moon's glow.

As the sun rose above, we crept off the road and into a clearing a few hundred meters away.

Olivia curled up on the ground, and I lounged beside her. "Thank you," I murmured.

"Hmm?"

"You weren't sure about helping me, but now you're here. It feels like the world is right once again."

She smiled, resting an arm across me. I realized we'd left Darling, but we couldn't very well go back for her. She'd be fine, though. It was sacrilege to harm a steed.

I found a comfortable nook in Olivia's side and quickly found the sleep that had evaded me the past few days. Her breathing was the lullaby that always let me relax.

Night turned to day turned to night again.

Eventually, we reached Remarga, the main dockyard of Omangarep. The smell of fish and the sounds of gulls filled our senses as we passed the city and headed to the shipyard. We made our way across the various docks, past dozens of sailors, occasionally ducking to avoid guards. As we spotted Lady Duke's ship in the distance, an orcish sailor fell in step with us, though he kept his distance. Olivia bristled, but calmed as I put an arm on her shoulder. As we reached the final stretch, however, a pair of Omangarepian guards stepped in front of us.

One raised his eyebrow. "Greetings," he said, eyeing Olivia and her sword.

"Good day. May we help you?"

Before I could get in another word, Lady Duke appeared behind them and slammed their heads together, creating an awful clang. "Sorry. Let's go." Other guards were beginning to converge as she retreated back up the gangplank.

I grabbed Olivia's hand and led her up to the main deck just as a flash of light appeared behind us.

Whirling around, we found Prince Fanal staggering to one side, one hand on his gut, the other on a royal mage's shoulder. He whispered to them and they bowed their head briefly before he cleared his throat and stood tall.

"Lady Duke. Return my wife and I'll forget this treason."

As he talked, sailors ran to and fro across the deck, getting the ship ready to depart. An orcish woman wearing long brown robes appeared next to Duke.

"They never learn," she whispered, to which the Duke laughed.

"No. Let's teach them, shall we?"

The brown robed woman nodded before casting a quick incantation. As the sails unfurled, the insignia warped to reveal the three claws of the Scarni gang, and Lady Duke grunted as a trio of scars carved their way down her face. Her jaw jutted outward and her clothes shifted, a sword appearing at her side.

Gasps shot up from the crowd of guards below us as they witnessed the transformation, and Olivia seemed equally shocked. Sailors tossed small black balls down into the crowd, causing smoke to shoot up and obscure our escape as they began to row.

Olivia grabbed my hand, but didn't move. I wasn't sure what to do either. On one side were pirates, the other Fanal.

Before we got far though, the smoke dissipated and the mage standing beside Fanal cast a glowing chain that flew forward and tangled around the ship. Everything lurched, and grappling hooks latched onto the rails to allow the gathered guards to begin the ascent to reach us.

Fanal's voice boomed, much louder than before. "Return my wife, pirate scum. I have enough resources to hunt you to the ends of the Wastes!"

Duke paused from kicking an encroaching guard into the waters below to bellow, "she doesn't want to marry you, you creepy gremlin!"

Olivia drew her sword as an Omangarepian guard tried to tackle me, and she cut him down easily. She carved our way through the fighting, and while the orcish sailors parted to let us pass, the guards of Remarga died quite easily beneath her blade.

We reached the door towards the back and headed below deck. No one seemed to follow us, and we caught our breath despite the violent clanging coming from above.

Olivia wrapped her arms around me, wiping off her sword. She was still tense, ready, in case someone dared to venture down below, but no one came.

Finally, an immense crash sounded, and the ship jolted forward. A few more splashes sounded out, and Olivia guided me back to the deck.

Duke stood, wiping blood from her face as the wizard beside her offered her a towel that wasn't covered in guts.

Sailors chucked dead soldiers over the edge, and gathered their own wounded. I let out a shaky breath, but I knew we weren't out of the fire yet.

"Duke!" I said, approaching. Olivia stood at my side. "Care to explain?"

She sighed. "You haven't figured it out? I guess humans are just a little dull." She cocked her eyebrows, a smile flashing across her face. "Just kidding. Welcome to the Cudgel! Flagship of the Scarni gang."

I nodded along. "So this is why you said we'd be safe from the Scarni. You're a member."

She scoffed. "Member? You-" she gestured to the scars on her face. "I'm Rusha Scarni. The leader." She turned to the wizard at her side. "You told me they put me in the books! I swear. Do none of them even know what I look like?"

The wizard shrugged, leaning a bit closer as Scarni wrapped an arm around her.

She sighed. "Whatever. You're safe now."

As if on cue, a flash of light appeared behind me. Once more, Fanal stood there, though this time, he was alone.

He rocked back and forth for a moment before rushing over and vomiting over the side of the ship. As sailors converged on him, he raised his hand, wiping his lips clean. "Wait! I'm unarmed and alone. I just came to talk."

Olivia stepped between us as he approached, but a gentle touch made her relax. He was right: he posed no threat.

"What do you want?"

He looked at me, face red and hollow. "Please come back. I need you. Everything hinges on our marriage. Without you as a hostage-" he paused. "I mean, loyal servant of the crown, how will we get the Southfold to fall in line? Thousands of people will die because of your selfishness."

"Maybe you should try negotiating," Scarni said, and a few sailors laughed. He glowered at them.

"I'm not going to marry you." I pressed myself close to Olivia. "I love her."

He scoffed. "Of course you're a dyke-" before he could finish, his mouth was bleeding and Olivia's fist was pulling back from his face. It took me a moment to realize what had even happened.

"Sorry," she said as he whined.

"No, be my guest." I rubbed her back, and she let out a long breath. "You deserve it."

"You're making a mistake," he said, his mouth full of blood and teeth as she grabbed him by the collar of his shirt.

"Maybe. But you don't get to call her that," Olivia said, and tossed him overboard.

A few sailors cheered, but her eyes were sombre. I wrapped her in a big hug just to let her feel me for a bit.

Eventually, she spoke up after a deep breath. "So, Rusha, are you going to keep us captives?"

She laughed. "Of course not. You're both free women. The plan is to drop you off at some coastal orcish town. Or the wastes, if you'd prefer."

I shook my head. "We need some time to figure out."

She shrugged. "That bull of a woman can pull her own weight, so take all the time you need."

I practically dragged Olivia down to the barracks, but Rusha stopped us. "Take our bedroom tonight, okay?"

I nodded, and we collapsed in the Captain's quarters. The bed was soft, and even though the room was cramped, it was cozy.

Olivia held me close, her warmth pressed up against my back. "Hey," she said eventually. "Hi."

She snickered. "That's all I get after kicking your ex's ass?"

"Please don't call him that. Just... I need some time." She kissed my forehead, hugging me tighter.

"I think we both do. What do you want to do, for the time being?"

"I want to get to know Olivia. Sure, I knew you before, but you're so much more vibrant, now. You're beautiful." I kissed her collar. "I love you."

Tears caught in the corners of her eyes, threatening to fall. "I have loved you for years, Sara. But... I couldn't do it as a man. Now, I get to do it as a woman."

I nodded against her. "I should've known."

"I should've told you what I was thinking. You probably would have helped me transform back when we were teenagers had I told you what I felt."

I nodded. "I would've tried."

She rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling, and I snuggled up closer to her. "We both could have done so much more differently. But... we're together. That's what matters, right?" I nodded, tucking myself beneath her arm. "That's all that matters."

It was just me and her. And that's all I needed.

Thanks for reading! As always, feedback and suggestions are much appreciated. You can find my website and all my other work [here](#).