

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-four notches marred the trunk of the silver birch tree. The narrow lines curved upwards like arrows, aiming for an empty sky. Between the bare branches, pops of blue and orange poked through the early dawn.

I held the hilt of my father's deer bone knife, a gift from when I was ten years old. The blade always looked far too small in his hands, calloused from years in the print shop. It was strange to see him with a weapon in the first place. The same man who baked custards each Sunday and donned a pair of spectacles, though they always fell down the bridge of his crooked nose. The bark splintered as I pushed into the wood. Drops of yellowed sap trickled out the fresh lines as if the tree bled.

"Twenty-five," I whispered into the shadows that lurked in the forest. The woods were quiet-- not even the wind threatened the silence. I traced the marks with my fingers and counted aloud, reciting the years like a prayer to the old gods.

A notch for each birthday I never had.

My father didn't believe in them, so it was as if I had been born without one. I mustered the courage to ask him about it when I was seven years old. While he hardly drank, my father consumed enough that night that he was catatonic. He forgot my question afterwards and I never pressed him further. I decided I didn't need a birthday; I survived so far without one, after all.

Until a summer day a few years back. I was scouring my father's desk for spare composition paper. Between tattered pages coated in candle-wax was a birth certificate for one Iris Kore Diggory. Born in the village of Korinth on the twenty first day of March; a day where light and darkness were balanced equals. The first day of spring.

Nature offered few signs that winter was ready to yield. The chilled air pricked my skin, pinkening the hollows of my cheeks whenever a gust of wind blew across my face. I was thankful for the olive, wool cloak I grabbed on my way out of the cottage. Though the black breeches and tunic, a shade of soft gray, were warm enough, it was teeth-rattling cold this morning. I knew the day would warm. Early March days often did as winter and spring fought for dominance. Winter seemed to be winning this morning.

I trailed my fingers along the golden clasp of the cloak, the only thing I had left of my mother. While I couldn't remember the lines of her face or the warmth of her smile, glimpses of her remained like ghosts. Yet the memories felt hollowed, intangible, that even I couldn't quite trust them. Like birthdays, her existence was never something I discussed with my father. The lining of the cloak was black, embroidered with vines and flowers of bright orange, soft blue and lilac. *My little sunflower.*

Year after year, I tried the cloak on at the first sign of frost. It swallowed me whole until my seventeenth winter. I was still a gangly, thin thing then, and the hem dragged through the mud when I walked. It fit me even better now, hugging the curves I'd grown into. Whenever the cold struck so harshly that I thought I'd never thaw, I'd glance down and take a peek at the lining. I'd run my hand along the vines, tracing their lines and picking at the threaded petals. A promise that no matter how deep the darkness clawed the earth, spring would always follow.

"Happy birthday, Iris ," I said before patting the gnarled trunk of the birch tree as if greeting an old friend.

[625 words]