

He's still. His chest is barely moving, the only sign that he's still alive.

"Oriké!"

He doesn't respond. His eyes don't open. I can hear a malicious cackle resounding in my ears.

"Oriké! Oriké!"

Nothing. I can almost feel him slipping away.

*"Oriké!"*

Tower  

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of  

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Mistakes

By Laleh Ghodsian

## My world changed

I can't tell the difference between the wind's howls and my own. Running is hard, my boots sink into the snow and hinder my progress, but I'm too angry to allow myself to be slowed.

"Myrioé!"

My hand lashes out and digs into the bark of a nearby tree, leaving a gash. I ignore her voice and the warning in it. My nails are far too sharp, I can almost feel the claws.

*"I'm sorry, Myrioé, but this is unacceptable. You're getting unreasonably upset about this. Just go for a walk, calm down, and we can discuss this later."*

My chest burns with the injustice of it all. The bitterness, the indignation, the embarrassment, all fueling the fire of my rage. I despise being berated. Just because they're older, they think they're better than I am. They think I'm beneath them. I can feel my face curling into a feral snarl. The fur sprouts, and I can feel my bones breaking and reforming. All four paws hit the ground and I'm flying. The forest blurs past me, I see nothing, I hear everything. I can hear the wind gently rustling the bare branches above me, the soft pattering of a squirrel's paws on the barren ground. A woodpecker boring its way into a tree, the gentle ripple of a stream that runs nearby. I can smell the cold, the freshness of the snow, and the sharp tang of the pine needles from the few coniferous trees that stand in this forest, among all the barren deciduous ones. The world seems so much more alive now, when before it looked frozen, empty and dead. The snow no longer hinders me. I race through it, leaving slashes ripped through the banks. I've always loved how powerful my paws are. So much stronger, so much faster than my weak nymph hands and feet.

I change course to where the forest is more covered and the snow is thinner. My paws thrum against the springy floor of dead leaves and pine needles. My wolf has always been fast, much too fast for my mother's chickadee to keep up with me. It was always my father's eagle that had to catch me when I'd go tearing off into the forest. All those years ago, in Lan'tiasa. Of course, I'd moved away from home as soon as I possibly could. I much prefer Dhal'yan over Lan'tiasa. I much prefer Karhisha over my parents.

My eyes catch a glimpse of a few birds perching in the trees above me. They are thin and small, with scraggly feathers. Winter gets to everyone, even the animals. But still, they let out frail chirps as they see me streak beneath them. Keeping positive, as I should be.

But I've never been particularly good at that. Breathing the fresh, cold air of the forest helps to temper my anger, but I can still feel the fire, the fury burning in me. I have never been good at staying calm, or controlling my temper when I do get angry. I've been told so many times to keep my inner peace, been taught so many calming mantras. But my fire always annihilates everything in a storm of rage, making me forget everything, including the consequences.

I'm not keeping track as I run, I don't know where I'm going. I hardly care. Freedom is intoxicating if you've been deprived of it for most of your life. To run as far as I want with no one chasing after me is a liberty that I haven't had for long. Only two years, since I moved out when I was twenty. I moved to Dhal'yan and I've lived with Karhisha ever since.

Karhisha...

My running slows as I think of her. She was the one who called after me when I ran off in a rage. She's probably worried about me. I feel a spark of guilt break through the haze of my anger. She had tried to defend me, like she always has. It was pretty selfish of me to run off like that, wasn't it?

The memory of why I ran off surges to the front of my mind, and my anger rears up again. There was no way I could have known what the right way to plant it was, I had every right to be angry. The anger feeds adrenaline into my limbs and I'm sprinting again, not paying attention to where I'm running.

My only warning is the cold sunlight gleaming off of ice, when suddenly the forest breaks away. I can't slow my paws, they keep running. I race out onto the frozen lake, my claws digging in to keep me from sliding. The icy expanse stretches out before me, looking as solid as the ground. Memories flash through my head, of times when I was younger, up north.

*"Come on, Myrioé, you can do it!" My mother called out to me, already gliding around on the ice.*

*"Don't push her, Tadhari." My father laughs.*

*I step carefully onto the icy lake, my feet slipping and sliding. I take a step, lose my balance and clutch onto my father for support.*

*"Don't worry, Myrioé," says my father reassuringly, "the ice is strong enough to hold our weight. It won't break."*

It won't break, he told me. How wrong he was.

My claws don't catch on the slick, icy surface, or perhaps I land with too much weight on one step. My paws slip and I'm sent crashing down on the surface of the lake, with no one to clutch onto this time. The only warning is a soft crackling sound before the ice beneath my head shatters and my muzzle is plunged into the freezing water. My paws scabble against the quickly fragmenting ice in an effort to drag my head out. I gasp for air and shake my head, scattering the water from my fur. Twisting on my paws, I turn and try to lunge back to the shore. My ears, too keen, hear the sound of the ice cracking and splintering beneath me. For a split second, my eyes widen as I feel the world fall away.

Before I plunge into the water.

My paws flail wildly in an effort to keep my head above the surface. I have never been the best swimmer, but I never thought it would matter that much. I never thought my life would depend on it. I feel a stinging on my side, but I can't afford to look down. My paws try in vain to find purchase on the icy surface of the lake. I can feel my bones breaking as my transmutation form slips. My legs kick into the water, pushing my head up. I reach out onto the ice with my hands, ignoring the searing pain that comes from the cold. But it just melts under my palms, becoming slippery, nothing to grasp on to. I kick out with my legs to push my head up again, but I can feel my resolve failing. The initial panic gives way and I start to feel the freezing water all around me. My fire is dwindling, and my strength with it. I try to grip the jagged, icy edges of the hole to hold myself above water. But the edges are sharp and slick and my hands slip easily. The cold creeps into my bones and my brain becomes foggy. Unprompted, a memory flashes to the front of my mind. Back in Lan'tiasa, in the north, someone taught me to swim, in a small lake.

*"And always remember! If you get tired when you're swimming and you can't make it back to shore, just flip over and float on your back! Just don't forget to raise your arm so someone can come find you and get you back safe!"*

Normally, the memory of that sickeningly sweet, cheery voice would make me angry. But I don't have the energy for that. I pull my legs up to the surface and try to float on my back. The hole is small enough that there isn't quite enough space for all of me, so my legs have to be tucked under the ice. But at least I can breathe. I take deep breaths, my lungs feeling like they can never be filled. The freezing air sends stabbing pains through my chest. My body feels numb, I'm exhausted. The water around me is so cold, it feels like heat is searing my skin. It creeps in and chills me to my core. I can

feel the fire in my chest go out like a snuffed candle. I feel cold and empty, staring blankly at the white sky above me. Fog fills my mind, I close my eyes. Darkness creeps in on me, cold and bleak, with a terrifying sense of deadly malice. I can hear a voice echoing in my head, I can't tell what's real and what isn't, I can almost feel hands, warm hands. They're grabbing my arms and pulling me up, maybe the hands of death, coming to take me away. I don't have the strength to resist. The cold around me changes, from a wet and constant cold to a brutal, searing cold. I feel like I'm being shaken. My chest feels empty, like something's missing. I can almost feel warmth, light though it is. Maybe it's my time. The darkness clouds my mind. I see nothing. I feel nothing.

*I'm sorry, Karhisha...*

## *Because of you*

The first thing I notice is the warmth. Concentrated on my side, spreading throughout my entire body. Such a contrast to the consuming cold, which is all I can remember. The glow on the inside of my eyelids is red and warm, suggesting light. But they're too heavy to open. My body feels less numb, but my limbs are exhausted and I can't move them. I let myself sink back into sleep, darkness filling my mind again.

When I float to consciousness, the warmth is still there. The heat seems to feed the energy back into me. I open my eyes slowly and immediately squint at the bright, warm light. When my eyes adjust, I find myself staring up at a wooden ceiling. The room is lit by a warm, amber glow. I turn my head toward it to see a blazing fire crackling in a stone fireplace. I push myself up onto my elbow and realize that I'm on a long couch with soft, maroon cushions under me.

*Where am I?*

An odd noise sounds behind me and I whip my head around. The door opens and a tall man walks in.

"Hey. That took long enough."

My brow creases in confusion and I glance around the room, desperate to make sense of my situation. The lamps in the room are dark, the only light flooding from the large fireplace. Besides the couch I was laying on, the only furniture in the room was a small desk and chair in the corner. It all seemed very well built and intricate. Almost fancy.

"Y-you're a human..." I say, noticing the man's rounded ears.

He smiles and tilts his head at me.

"And you're not."

It's a statement, not a question. I keep quiet, looking at the ground and brushing a loose strand of my short hair out of my face. I can't even imagine the state it's in after that ordeal. I'm sure my little braid is long gone. For the first time, I notice that my boots are off and sitting on the ground beside the couch, as is my corset. Feeling self-conscious, I bring my hand to my stomach, then recoil as pain glances through me.

"You got pretty beaten up..." the man tells me. "Some pretty bloody bruises. I bandaged you up, but it's probably still sensitive."

I reach under my shirt and I feel the bandages wrapped around my torso. I look quickly up at the man, my eyes meeting his. His eyes, a deep green, are so different from the eyes of any nymph I've ever met. There's so much depth and knowledge in them, but also a certain weight, a battered exhaustion.

"I'm Oriké," he says. "I pulled you out of the water."

I blink for a couple seconds, before the memory rushes back. The ice shattering, the freezing water, the cold extinguishing my fire. I quickly bring my hand up to my chest. It feels cold, hollow and empty. I take a deep breath and look back up. Oriké is watching me, his eyes narrowed with concern.

"Thank you..." I whisper, blinking back tears. "I'm Myriocé."

He lets out a soft huff of laughter and smiles at me.

"That's definitely a nymph name."

A small smile creeps onto my face.

"I guess it is..." I admit, twisting my hands together.

I turn my head and stare into the fire, watching it twirl and crackle. Something occurs to me and I look quickly back at Oriké.

“How long have I been out for?” I ask, worriedly.

“It’s only been about six hours since I brought you back here. It took a while to carry you here from the lake though... I was afraid you might not make it since you were so cold...”

I think about the other nymphs at Dhal’yan, about Karhisha. They’re probably looking for me, probably worried. But the image of the council swarms to the front of my mind and I don’t really want to go back, not yet. I look up at this stranger, who has been so kind, who saved me from what was almost certainly certain death.

“Do you mind if I stay here for a while? Just while I recover...”

He looks shocked, but almost delighted at the request. He nods slowly.

“Sure. I’ve got plenty of space. The house is way too big for just me, and I’m the only one in it. I have lots of guest rooms, I just put you in here so the fire would warm you up. Do you think you can walk?” he asks me, tilting his head again.

I push myself up gingerly and slide my feet into my boots. I don’t dare to try putting my corset on over the bandage. I carefully get to my feet, my corset held in one hand. I wince as pain lances through my side, but it’s not unbearable.

“Yeah. I can walk.” I tell him, smiling through the pain.

He nods at me and turns toward the door, leading me out of the small, warm room. The hallways have wooden floors and lanterns on the walls. Everything has the same well-built and almost fancy look as the fireplace room. As we walk past a large window, I look outside to see the sky is completely dark, save for the stars and the crescent moon. Oriké was right, I had been out for a while. He leads me up a staircase and through more hallways, before opening the door to a room.

“You can sleep here,” he tells me. “Tomorrow I’ll show you around the place a bit more.”

I nod gratefully at him and walk into the room.

“If you need anything... my room is down the hall, take a left, the second door.”

*How big is this house?*

“Thank you...” I say, smiling at him.

He closes the door behind me, without a goodnight. I look around the room, taking in everything. It’s lit only by a few lamps on the bedside tables. There’s several, tall windows along one of the walls, which presumably let in a lot of light during the day. Tucked into one corner is a small bookshelf, packed with more books than it seems to have been intended to hold. I kick off my boots and put my corset down on the bedside table. I crawl into the bed and curl up, wincing as pain shoots through my side again. It feels very different from the beds I’m used to, but it’s comfortable.

*Is this how humans live?*

Though I slept for six hours, I’m unreasonably tired and I don’t have much time to contemplate the question before I’m drifting off.

When I wake the next morning, the light in my windows tells me that it’s still very early. The first thing I notice is that the pain in my side has gone down considerably. I sit up and gently touch my side. The sharp pain has gone away, leaving an aching soreness. I carefully swing my legs over and slide my feet into my boots. I pick up my corset and weigh it in my hand, but decide it’s better to leave it off for the day. I quickly make the bed and head out of the room, leaving my corset on the bedside table. The hallways are eerily quiet as I walk slowly through them. The only sound is the soft pad of my boots on the wood. I find the staircase we went up last night and I slowly walk down it. I have no idea where Oriké might be, or if he’s still asleep. But it feels weird to go to his room to check,

so I continue to wander about the house. I find a room that's probably the kitchen, with cabinets full of food. It feels wrong to take anything, despite how hungry I am, so I opt to leave instead. After wandering for a while longer, I find a large, ornate door stuck in a wall of a long corridor. It seems out of place, like it was added after the original layout of the house was set out. A large painting hangs to one side of it, but it does little to distract from the oddly placed exit. The wood of the door itself is carved with a picture of wings wrapped around a large tower. Unable to contain my curiosity, I try the handle- it's unlocked. I slip into a narrow passageway and walk down it, the soft pad of my boots echoing, before I reach another door. I hesitate for a second, feeling a little intrusive. After all, this is someone's house. But I know so little about humans, I've never had this kind of chance to learn about them. So I smother my guilt and open another door, emerging into a round room. I see a desk in the middle, another door on the side opposite me, and walls that are lined with shelves, stacked on top of each other. I notice that the walls are stone now, a curious thing to me, since nymphs never build out of anything but wood. I look closer at the little shelves and my brow wrinkles with confusion when I see what's stacked in them.

"Letters?" I whisper to myself, confused.

I notice for the first time, as my eyes leave the letters, that there is a staircase indented into the wall, winding up around the round room. Again, unable to deny my curiosity, I start up the stairs. I hear rustling noises above me, which further peaks my interest. I'm breathing hard by the time I reach the top, but I almost forget it in the haze of awe. I emerge into another round room, atop the first one. With several tall, arched windows around it, the room is brightly lit. It takes me a moment to notice that the windows have no glass. They're more like spaces in the walls. But that isn't the most surprising thing. Filling the large round room, perched on pieces of wood that stick out of the walls, are dozens and dozens of owls. All sizes and colours, all looking down at me as I enter the room. I freeze and lock eyes with one with grey feathers and wide, yellow eyes. It lets out a small sound, almost a chirp, and tilts its head at me. The other owls in the room echo the sounding, hooting and chirping at me. I move slowly to the center of the room and sink to my knees. I hold out my arm and tilt my head, making a soft clicking sound with my mouth. I remember being told once, by some nymphs whose transmutation forms were owls, that owls respond well to soft clicks. The one with the grey feathers makes a soft clicking sound in return and leaps into the air, gliding in a circle before alighting on my shoulder. I smile and a small laugh escapes my lips. The atmosphere becomes a lot friendlier.

The minutes seem to bleed away as I sit there with the owls, talking to them. Their intelligence can't match that of a human or a nymph, but they're much smarter than most animals. Their bright eyes seem to understand everything I say.

"I've never seen them mind anyone as well as you."

I start, swinging my head around to look at the staircase. The owls hoot and scatter, the ones near me flying up to perch near the ceiling.

"Oriké!" I cry, my eyes wide.

He laughs and grins at me.

"It's true. It's always such a hassle for me to get them to do anything." He tells me, shrugging.

I take a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart, a side effect of being startled. I turn to Oriké, a realization dawning on me.

"You're a Deari-vådare!" I say, my eyes narrowing.

He blinks at me.



“A what?”

I sigh, realizing he wouldn't know Maeidh's words.

“An Owl-keeper. Someone who receives and sends letters by owl?”

He laughs and nods.

“Well, yeah. I'm an Owl-keeper. I've never heard it said like that before, though.”

I blush, realizing my ignorance. He beckons me and starts down the staircase again. I bid a quick goodbye to the owls and follow him.

“Sorry if you couldn't find me today...” I say, realizing it must have been a bit confusing.

“It was fine. I only checked a few rooms before I heard the owls freaking out. Then it wasn't hard to guess.” He pauses and glances at me over his shoulder. “You know, they really seemed to like you. I bet you could get them to listen to you much better than I can.”

I shrug and shake my head.

“But you're their master, they're more used to you...” I trail off, realizing that doesn't mean anything.

He shrugs again and we reach the bottom of the tower.

“I'm having some...company today,” he tells me. “So there'll be another person around.”

I smile and shrug.

“That's fine. I can stay out of the way if you need me to!”

He shakes his head.

“No, it's fine. You can come meet him if you want, I just wanted to let you know.”

I'm curious about this mysterious person, so I follow Oriké down to the front double doors and we go outside. I squint my eyes against the bright light from the sun, and I look around. A long, wide fence encloses the house, which seems even bigger from the outside. Around to one side, I can see a huge, beautiful garden. Seeing as it's the first time I've been outside in an open space, and my bandaged side feels better, I resolve to try to transmute. I think for a second on how to do it. I've always let the fire drive it, but now, for whatever reason, the fire is gone. I close my eyes and listen to the birds, trying to let calm fill me. Calm, laced with fear. I can feel my bones breaking and reforming, as they always do. But something seems different this time, something's not right. The fur that sprouts is short and smooth, instead of coarse. My neck is longer, my body sleeker, and when I look down, I see small cloven hooves instead of paws. My eyes go wide and I swing my head up as I hear Oriké exclaim in shock. Thoroughly shocked myself, I slip back into human form and sit on the ground for a second, reeling.

“Woah. Oriké, where'd you find this girl?”

I look up, confused, at the unfamiliar voice. Another man walks through the open gates and comes to stand beside Oriké, his blue eyes wide with shock. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up to his elbows and he's not wearing a vest, unlike Oriké. He has thick, dark brown hair that spills out from under his brown top hat and a much more casual way of standing than Oriké.

“I pulled her out of a lake, believe it or not.” Oriké says, his voice light despite his shock.

I get shakily to my feet and hug myself.

“You okay?” The newcomer asks, genuine concern in his voice.

I nod slowly, before lifting my head up. Two pairs of eyes, green and blue, meet mine.

“What did you two see? You didn't see a wolf, did you?” I ask them, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“I saw a doe...” Orike says, the confusion evident in his voice.

“Yeah, me too. A deer.” The other man says.

“Oh...okay...” I trail off, trying not to show how shocked and scared I am.

Oriké seems quick to change the topic, but my head's still spinning. I don't know what's happening.

"Anyway...This is the company I was talking about..." Oriké begins, turning his green gaze to the stranger.

"Dakihel." The stranger says, tipping his hat to me before holding out his hand. "Dakihel Lheône."

As I shake his hand, I notice that it's rough and calloused. I wonder what type of work he does. Lost as I am in my thoughts, I almost forget to introduce myself.

"Oh-sorry. I'm Myrioé. Myrioé Allôdhra." I tell him, my face flushing with embarrassment.

A loud screech resonates from the tower and Oriké looks up immediately.

"Dagne! Okay, you two talk amongst yourselves. I'll be right back, I just have to deal with this."

He takes off running back into the house. Dakihel looks at me and bursts out laughing.

"Your face! It's priceless!" He cackles, his face screwed up in a grin. "He does that all the time, he's just an idiot. Don't mind him."

I can't help but giggle a little myself.

"What was that word he said?" I ask him, tilting my head. "I've never heard it... or heard *of* it before."

Dakihel blinked at me, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Dagne? It's...like a swear word, you say it when you're angry or frustrated about something... You seriously don't know swear words?"

I smiled and shrugged.

"Not any human ones, at least."

"Huh."

He pauses for a second, looking up at the sky, clearly deep in thought. His top hat teeters on the edge of falling off his head and I have to resist the urge to reach out and catch it.

"So... how long do you think you're stayin' for?" He asks me, casually. "Oriké seemed to think it would be a month... but he tends to exaggerate."

My face flushes pink and I wrap my arms around myself.

"No, no! I was only thinking to stay a few days, just until I recover and I get my bearings..."

Dakihel laughs and nods.

"That's cool. You'll probably be seeing a fair bit of me, I come around a lot to keep the dork company."

He starts walking away and beckons me.

"Come on," he calls, "come see the garden."

I follow him around the house and pause for a moment as my eyes take in the wilderness of plants that make up the garden. It clearly hasn't been kept up for quite a while, but it's obvious that someone once took great care to make it beautiful. All manner of exotic plants are overgrown, far outside their original plots. They seem to be suffering a little, unattended in the bitter cold and snow, but it's clear to me that with a little care, it could be a beautiful garden once again. I'm itching to be the one to try. Dakihel turns to me and smiles.

"When Oriké's dad lived here, he kept up the garden. Trimmed it, watered it, kept it beautiful. Oriké sucks at gardening though. So it's kinda fallen into disrepair. Plus, it's all covered in snow now..." Dakihel tilts his head at me, switching topics at light speed. "So, did he *really* pull you out of a lake?"

I squeeze my eyes shut to keep the memories from flashing through my head again.

“Yeah, he did. I owe him my life...”

Dakihel throws his head back and laughs.

“Better not let him hear you sayin’ that. He doesn’t need you to feed his ego any more.”

I blush and look at the ground. He reaches out and pats my shoulder reassuringly.

“You’re lucky, Myrioé. But believe me when I say, you may not wanna stick around here too long. He can be a bit of a handful on occasion.”

I blink at him, confused.

“He seems perfectly lovely so far...” I say quietly. “Besides, I owe him. He saved my life. I can’t forget that...”

Dakihel chuckles and smiles at me.

“I know. He’s a really great guy, to be honest. He’s my best friend and I love him bunches. Just...make sure you know what you’re getting into, Myrioé...”

He spins on the heel of his boot and walks back towards the house, disappearing inside. I find a spot between the flowerbeds and sink to the ground. My mind is spinning, with thoughts of the new people I met and what Dakihel said about Oriké. And most of all: why, for the first time in my years of transmutation, had I not turned into a wolf?

## *I was saved*

Despite the snow that coats the ground, the sun is incredibly bright and the skies are clear. My wounds hardly hurt at all anymore, not after three days. It feels comforting to have my corset wrapped around me once again. The plants feel cold under my hands as I gently pick through them, trying to figure out what's planted where. It's hard to decipher with the snow coating the ground, but I'm able to get a general layout of the garden.

"How's it goin'?" Dakihel calls to me, his voice teasing.

He's lounging on the steps of the house, his top hat sitting beside him to reveal his tousled, dark brown hair. Oriké is somewhere inside, working, like always. I stand up and smile at Dakihel. Though I've only been here a short while, I've come to like the two humans a lot more than most of the nymphs in Dhal'yan. But with each passing day, I feel more and more guilty about staying away so long. I realize Karhisha must be freaking out wondering where I am, probably Narhiel as well. I get up out of the flower beds and walk towards the steps.

"It's going alright so far..." I tell him, dusting off my shirt. "It's hard to tell what's going to bloom until spring, though."

The door opens and Oriké strides out, tired and worn. He always looks like that after he's been working.

"He finally emerges!" Dakihel teases, standing up and opening his arms. "How's work?"

Oriké rolls his eyes, but his eyes lighten and he's smiling.

"It's fine. I still have another report to write, I just came out to say goodbye to Myrioé," Oriké says, turning his green gaze to me.

Dakihel swings his head around, looking shocked.

"You're leaving?" He asks, sounding surprised and almost... hurt.

I lower my eyes to the ground and nod. I almost feel guilty to leave them. I've really come to like the two humans, and I love spending time with the owls. But the thought of the other nymphs wondering where I am always hangs over me. I know I can't stay much longer.

"Yes... My wounds are pretty much healed now and I have to be getting back home. The other nymphs don't know what happened to me and I'm sure they're worried," I tell him, raising my eyes to look at him.

"But... do you even know how to get home from here? You might get lost!" Dakihel flounders, his eyes flicking between me and Oriké.

"I showed her a map and she figured out how to get home from here..." Oriké tells him, shooting his friend a pitying gaze.

Dakihel's gaze drops and his shoulders slump, ever so slightly. I walk forward and place my hand on his shoulder, reassuringly.

"Oriké asked me to come by sometimes to help take care of the owls." I tell him, smiling.

"Yeah, they're a handful for just me." Oriké supplies, trying to comfort his friend.

"And I really do want to try to fix up this garden when spring comes. So I'll be around. You aren't going to be rid of me that fast."

Dakihel raises his head and smiles at me, putting his hand on my shoulder as well.

"Guess I ended up liking you a bit, huh?"

I smile and Oriké laughs. I realize I'm really going to miss these two, even though I've only known them a few days.

"Well, bye then..." Dakihel says, smiling at me. "See you around."

I smile back and he steps away, dropping his hand off my shoulder. Oriké comes down the steps and tilts his head at me, grinning.

“I’m really glad I pulled you out of that lake,” he says sincerely, his green eyes meeting mine.

I smile back at him, my heart warming with gratitude.

“Me too. Thank you for everything.”

It seems like hours passing before I finally tear myself away and start off through the gates, waving and calling promises to come back soon.

I walk until I’m out of sight of the house, deep in the woods. I let myself slip into my transmutation form, letting my bones break, feeling the fur grow.

*It was just an anomaly, I’m sure. I’ll be back to normal now...*

*Right?*

But when I look down, I see cloven hooves once again. No strong, grey paws like they’ve always been. I take off running, bounding through the trees, the gait so much smoother than I’m used to, so... unfamiliar. I bolt through the forest until I spot what I’m looking for. A small pool of water, once a pile of snow. I skid to a halt beside it and look down. I see a small, young doe staring back at me. Pale tawny fur, small delicate hooves. Wide, silver eyes stare back at me. Just like my own. Just like the wolf’s. I let myself slip back to human form, shaken to my core. The world spins around me and I close my eyes until it steadies. I push myself to my feet and start walking towards where I think Dhal’yan is. I’m barely paying attention to where I’m walking, my mind is whirling.

*Why is this happening?*

*What’s wrong with me?*

My mind spins in circles until I start to recognize the trees and foliage around me. I push my thoughts away and trace the trails I know so well until I see the first treehouse, marking my arrival at the village.

*“Myrioé!”*

I see a flash of white and tan before I’m enveloped in a tight hug and barely able to breathe. I manage to extricate myself from the embrace and I turn to see a pair of angry brown eyes glaring at me.

“Hi, Karhisha...” I say tentatively.

“Where the *hell* have you been?” she explodes at me. “I’ve been worried sick looking for you, are you okay?”

I cower before her fury, dipping my head down. After a while, she pauses and looks at me closer.

*“Are you okay? I’ve never seen you take a beating like that without something to say.”*

I pause and look up at her, blinking. She’s right. Before the accident, I would be burning with a plethora of indignant and angry retorts. But not anymore. I just feel empty, letting her throw the anger at me.

“Yeah, I’m... fine.”

“Myrioé!” another voice calls.

I turn around, a smile growing on my face. Another body slams into me, enveloping me in a hug. I’m momentarily blinded by thick, blonde hair, before I’m released to see a grinning face and another pair of brown eyes.

“Hi, Narhiel!” I say, cheerfully.

“Where’ve you been?” she asks, her eyes narrowing curiously.

I can hear Karhisha snort behind me.

"I'd like to know that myself," she says, her voice thick with annoyance.

I see another nymph nearby shift into her transmutation form and bound away. It reminds me of the deer, and I step away from my two friends.

"I can talk later," I tell them, almost dismissively. "I have to talk with the council."

I walk away before they can ask anything else, my eyes on the big pavilion where the council meets. I can feel the heat of their stares on my back, but I don't look back. I climb the stairs slowly, winding up the tree, until I arrive at the pavilion.

"Ah, Myrioé."

I walk up the final stairs and into the middle of the pavilion. The five council members sit around me, regarding me with mixed stares.

"We're glad to see you. Your friends, Karhisha and Narhiel, were quite concerned about you. We would have sent out a search party tomorrow, had you not returned."

*Yeah, right.*

The sudden surge of bitterness surprises me. I haven't felt negative emotions like that since the accident. The five council members are sitting around me in chairs-- or, thrones would be more accurate. They stare at me with stern, suspicious, almost judging looks. I run their names through my head. Alaynia, Galiet, Edhvan, Istalia, and the oldest one is... Heaphria, I think. I look at the ground. I can't take the heat of their glares. But I realize that showing weakness won't help my case, so I look up after a second, to meet the oldest council member's eyes.

"Where have you been, Myrioé?" she asks me, tilting her head.

I pause for a second. Part of me doesn't want to tell the truth. I don't want to reveal that I've been staying with Oriké, with humans. It feels like a special secret that I don't want to spill, especially to them.

"I just...wanted some time in the woods to help myself cool off." I tell them.

It's not my best lie, but I'm on the spot.

"And where did you live for *three days*?" Edhvan inquires.

I quickly realize that I look far too clean and groomed to have been living in the woods for three days. I run my options through my head, thinking hard and fast.

"I found an old nymph treehouse that had been abandoned," I say, "and I slept there."

Alaynia speaks up, her brown eyes much warmer than the rest.

"And if you were in the woods for three straight days, why do you look so clean?"

I curse in my head, trying not to let it show on my face.

"I cleaned myself up once I got back," I say, tilting my head at her. "Before I came here."

Relief washes over me. They seem to accept that. The oldest council member looks at me once again.

"Why did you come to see us? Simply to let us know you were back?"

I blink, before remembering the real reason I came to talk to the council in the first place. The reason I had left my friends in such a hurry.

The deer.

"No...There's something else..." I trail off, not knowing how to begin.

"Well, out with it," another council member, Galiet, says.

"Can transmutation form ever... change?" I blurt out, my eyes wide.

There's a shocked silence and the council members exchange worried glances. Alaynia speaks up again.

"It's... not common. It has only happened once before..."

"Why?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before opening them again.

"Because mine changed."

The shocked silence returns, and more concerned glances are exchanged between the council members. They're even more worried this time, which does nothing to quell the pit in my stomach.

"Your transmutation form...changed?" Istalia clarifies, her eyes full of suspicion.

I nod and wait in silence, afraid.

"Well..."

They don't seem to know what to say. I don't know why I expected them to be helpful in the first place. I decide to take matters into my own hands.

"Who else's transmutation form changed?" I ask them. "Are they still alive?"

"Oh yes," Galiet tells me, "it was only about ten years ago."

I take an eager step forward.

"Who are they? Can I talk to them?"

Another set of worried glances are exchanged.

"She... lives on the outskirts of Dhal'yan. She... doesn't talk much and she would probably be very angry with you if you came to talk to her."

I consider this for a second. Yet the fear and confusion remains much too strong, I have to know.

"Where can I find her?"

The walk through Dhal'yan has never felt so long. It isn't a big village, by any means, but I'm so anxious to get to my destination, to find out what exactly has happened to me. At long last, I reached the house that Heaphria had described to me. It's built very low down on the tree, the staircase only winding up a short ways. The windows are dark and vines of ivy curl down the sides. It's nowhere near as well maintained as almost every other house in the village.

*Goodness, someone lives here?*

I walk carefully up the stairs, often having to jump because many of the steps are broken and clearly haven't been fixed in a long time. I get to the door and hesitate. The council members said that she hates talking to people. They said she would probably get angry at me. But again, I'm too curious and too afraid of the unknown to let my questions go unanswered. I raise my hand nervously and give the door a few soft taps with my knuckles. I wait a few moments, but there's no answer. I raise my hand again and rap on the door, harder.

"Yes? What do you want?" an angry voice shouts from within.

The door unlocks and swings open. A nymph woman stands before me, her copper hair streaked with gray and an angry look plastered on her face. Despite the warnings I've received, the hostility is still a sharp, shocking blow. I take a step back.

"M-my name is Myrióé," I stutter.

She leans against the doorframe and frowns at me.

"And?" she demands.

"A-are you Calíétha Chadha?" I ask her.

"What of it?"

"The council told me to come talk to you... They say you're the only other nymph whose transmutation form has changed," I say, quietly.

The angry look slides off her face and her eyes widen. She takes a step back.

"Come in," she murmurs.

I follow her through the door and close it behind me. The house is chilled and dark, with thick vines of ivy twisting down the walls, just like the outside. I'm not sure if it's a design choice or an overgrowth. Though, judging by the state of the rest of the house, it's probably something she hasn't bothered to clean up. She invites me to sit down and pours me a cup of tea. It's cold. I take a sip to be polite. She sits down across the table, but her eyes are fixed on the wall opposite me.

"So, the council told you to come to me, hmm?" she mutters.

I nod slowly, deciding against telling her that they had actually advised me against coming.

"They say you're the only one whose transmutation form has changed... besides me."

Her gaze is somber as her eyes slowly travel over to meet mine. Her eyes are almost the same shade of brown as Karhisha's. I try not to think about how hurt she must have been when I just left after being gone so long.

"What happened to you?" Caliétha asks me, her voice hushed.

I take a deep breath and I tell her my story. About how the ice broke, how I fell into the water and almost froze. I leave out Oriké as much as I can. For some reason, I'm still reluctant to tell people about him. There's a silence after I finish, which she breaks with a soft sigh.

"Let me explain something to you... Myrióé, right?"

I nod quickly.

"Every nymph has something that drives their being. Something that fuels them throughout their life. Your transmutation form is connected to it. Some call it your soul, some call it your animal spirit. The second is more accurate. It's what fuels a nymph's personality, and because of it, it determines their transmutation form."

My eyes widen as I listen to her. I never knew this... Why had I never been told?

"When some part of this... animal spirit... changes? Your transmutation form changes with it. Because a part of you changed, and you're no longer who you were."

I feel like I'm falling. I never knew that just falling into a lake could change you so fundamentally.

"So... what happened to you?" I ask her, cautiously.

There's silence and I panic.

"I mean, if you don't mind me asking, I'm sure it's very personal and I don't want to intrude and-"

"No..." she looks at me and the corner of her mouth turns up.

Almost a smile.

"I'd like to tell you... There's very few people who know..."

I sit in silence as Caliétha takes a deep breath, her eyes closed, preparing to tell her story.

"My transmutation form was once a beautiful red cardinal. I loved flying, I loved the freedom. But then I fell in love with a human."

I blink and wait for a few seconds, but she says nothing more.

"And that did it?"

She opens her eyes and shakes her head.

"There's a lot more to it than that... He left me after he found out I was pregnant with my son."

My eyes widen with shock and I blink a few times. The look of sadness on her face is so deep, it looks engraved there.

"I tried to raise my son here, among the nymphs, but he never fit in. He had blue eyes and his ears were just slightly too round. He grew very angry. He could never get the respect and adoration he



felt he deserved. Only ridicule and discrimination. Eventually, he left too, when he was only thirteen. That was my breaking point.”

We sit in silence for a while. I think of my own parents, whom I left too. Caliétha doesn't cry, she just stares blankly at the wall behind me.

“So...” I begin, afraid to break the silence, “if it used to be a cardinal, what is it now?”

She sighs and gets out of her chair. Her skin twists, I heard her bones break, I see her shrink to the ground. I let out a shriek of fear and jump backwards, knocking my chair over. Coiled on the floor before me, hissing, is a massive king cobra. The tongue shoots out, tasting the air. I can only stare, shocked, imagining the elegant, beautiful cardinal that it used to be. I think of the wolf, and of the small deer.

*I got lucky.*

## *From darkness*

“Myriolé!”

I roll out of bed immediately, knowing she’ll come poke me if I don’t.

“What?” I ask, blinking open my eyes.

I shriek and jump back, having opened my eyes to Karhisha’s face much closer than I expected.

“Karhisha!”

She laughs and steps back, running a hand through her short, light brown hair. I roll my eyes at her and start to get dressed.

“You going to the tower again today?” she asks me, casually.

Of course I told her, eventually. I can’t keep things from her for long. She was surprised and a little bit suspicious, but once I started going regularly and coming back unharmed, she got used to it.

“Yeah, I’m going,” I tell her, pulling on my green top.

She sighs and tilts her head at me, pulling her white dress over her head.

“You’ve gone almost every day for *three weeks*,” she reminds me. “Can’t you take a day off and just chill?”

I tighten my corset around my waist and contemplate it for a second. She’s right, I do go almost every day.

“But... I like it. I want to go.”

Her eyes are full of suspicion, but she smiles at me.

“Okay. Just don’t stay too long, I don’t want you walking in the forest late at night.”

“Okay, mom,” I tease her, pulling on my boots.

She reaches over to mess up my short hair, and I yell at her. Before long, I’m out the door, down the winding stairs and walking out of Dhal’yan into the forest. It’s a long walk to the tower, but I’ve memorized the way by now. I follow the trails and avoid the lake as much as possible. I still don’t like looking at it. Sometimes I’ll meet Dakihel in the mornings, going up the hill to the tower. Not today, though. I knock on the door, and then go to check on the garden. It usually takes Oriké a while to finish up whatever he’s doing and come to the door. I pick through my plants... *the* plants, gently looking over each of them. The weather has warmed in the past three weeks, and most of the snow has melted, revealing many more plants than I had originally thought. Still, there was little to do until spring when they started blooming and had to be pruned and moved around.

“Myriolé?”

I twist around to see Oriké coming down the steps toward me. My face lights up at the sight of him and I do nothing to stop it.

“Hi!” I greet him, my voice almost a chirp.

He raises his eyebrows at me and tilts his head.

“Hey.”

We walk into the house together and he immediately goes back to his study. For some reason, I feel strangely lonely, even though it’s the same routine as always. I turn and head down the same hall I had walked down on my first morning here, which led to the tower and the owls. I let myself in and climb the stairs to the top. Even though I’ve done this so many times, I’m still short of breath when I reach the top. The owls hoot and chip when they see me and the large gray one, who I’ve started calling Ignia, soars over to land on my shoulder. I smile and gently stroke her feathers.

“How’s everyone today?” I ask them, knowing I won’t get an answer.

I go around, cleaning up the owlery. Every now and then, another owl will soar into the room. I take each of the letters as they come and stack them by the stairs to take down with me when I'm done, before giving some water to the newcomer. Eventually everything looks in order, so I say a quick goodbye to the owls and start down the stairs. Their hoots and chirps follow me all the way to the bottom of the tower, where I drop the letters on the desk and look up at the little shelves lining the walls. It seems a little rude just to leave them here for Oriké to deal with later, especially when he already has so much to do. I pick up the stack of letters and go about sorting them on the shelves, in alphabetical order like they should be. I'm much too short to reach some of the higher shelves that only Oriké can reach, so I take the chair from the desk to stand on. I feel a little guilty about standing on the fine, wood finish with my dirty boots, but I've already started and I hate quitting a task halfway through. Just as I'm finishing I hear a sound behind me, a key turning in a lock. I turn to see a door opening. Not the one that leads into the house, but the other one, which I learned leads outside.

"Hi, Dienya!" I call, stepping carefully down from the chair.

She waves at me as she walks in, hoisting her bag higher on her shoulder. She knows me at this point, they all do. Almost every time they come to get the letters, I'm in the tower.

"I just finished sorting the newest bit!" I tell her, brushing the dirt off the chair and replacing it at the desk.

"Thank you so much!" she says, smiling. "That makes it a million times easier for me."

She goes over to the shelves and starts placing the letters in her bag. I help her, taking them down off the shelves.

"When Hakhan came two days ago, there were too many for his bag, so here's a few extra today," I tell her as we work.

She nods and smiles at me as she takes the last letters down.

"Good to know! Thanks for the help, Myrioé!"

She turns and heads back out the door to the outside. I lock the door behind her before heading back into the house. The hallways are all familiar to me now, despite how similar they all are. When I arrive at the library, I'm surprised to see Oriké already there. He's sorting through some books on a table by the window.

"Hey," I call softly, wincing at the echo.

Even though it's not a conventional library, I still feel like I should be quiet. Oriké looks up at me, a slight grin on his face.

"Hey. How are the owls?"

I walk over to him slowly, my eyes wandering to look at the books that line the bookshelves.

"They're good. They're all fed and the owlery is cleaned. And Dienya came to get the letters just now." I tell him, my eyes returning to him.

"Cool. Thanks."

He looks back down to his book sorting, silence falling over the library. For some reason, my eyes linger on him a bit too long before I force myself to look at the books again.

"What are you doing?" I ask, casually.

"Sorting these books to see which ones I want to keep and which ones I'll send to the library in town. I don't need all of them." He tells me, not looking up.

I'd been surprised to learn that there was a human town, Antash, not far from the tower, though in the opposite direction from Dhal'yan. I had learned it was where Oriké had grown up and where Dakihel lives now. Though, he spends most of his time at the tower with Oriké.

Almost as soon as I have that thought, I hear someone holler and the door of the library flies open. Dakihel sails into the room and narrowly avoids slamming into a bookshelf.

“Dakihel!” I cry, unable to keep myself from laughing. “Be careful!”

He picks up his fallen top hat and runs a hand through his hair.

“Don’t sweat it, Myri, I’m fine.”

Oriké snorts in annoyance and returns to sorting his books, but not before rolling his eyes at Dakihel. I can’t help but roll my eyes too.

“I’ve told you not to call me that.” I say, trying to keep the smile off my face.

“Awww, but it’s so cute!”

I roll my eyes at him again and Oriké sighs angrily.

“Can you two take this outside? I’m trying to focus here.”

I immediately look at the ground and back away, whispering apologies. But Dakihel takes it in stride. He laughs and turns around.

“Alright. When you’re done being so stiff, come hang out with us.”

I leave the library as quickly as I can, with Dakihel following behind me. I keep walking, all the way out the front door, and we sit down on the steps.

“He forgets himself sometimes when he’s focused. Don’t let it get to you.”

I look at the ground and force a smile.

“I know. It’s fine.”

But I can’t help feeling a stab of rejection and hurt.

The rest of the day seems to pass in a blur and before I know it, I’m leaving for home. Dakihel left a while ago, throwing me a concerned look before going. Sometimes I feel like he’s more observant than I give him credit for. I didn’t talk to Oriké much at all today. I know he was busy, and I was working on the garden too. But for some reason, my chest feels heavy and my feet drag as I walk home. I go slower than usual, so it’s nearly dark when I get back to Dhal’yan. I hurry up the stairs and get inside just in time to see Karhisha’s stern face.

“It’s almost dark…” she reminds me, her forehead creased with worry. “What took you so long?”

I shrug and take off my boots.

“I just wanted to walk and think about some things,” I tell her, trying my best to be nonchalant.

I head to bed early tonight, curling up under my blankets and trying not to let thoughts of Oriké float up in my mind.

*Everything’s dark.*

*I can’t tell where I am. Maybe in a room? A hall? It looks more like a void.*

*There’s darkness all around me, smothering me. No matter which way I turn my head, I see blackness. Everything seems fuzzy.*

*All of the sudden, a light springs to life behind me. It illuminates the area around me, a small circle. It’s a yellow light, but it’s harsh somehow. I turn around slowly to find the source of the light. But I don’t see it.*

*Instead I see him standing there.*

*His head is slumped down, his eyes are closed. I can almost see a silhouette behind him, holding its hands up. A cruel, white smile.*

*The silhouette lifts its hand, his hand lifts. His head lifts up, his eyes open. It falls to the side, his face blank and slack-jawed. My eyes widen in fear, I don't know what's happening. It continues to move him, manipulate him. The silhouette gains more form, but I still can't tell who or what it is.*

*More people are appearing around, their faces twisted in mockery. Expressions of cackling hatred, on every side. The silhouette moves faster, twisting and turning in circles around me. My eyes are wide, locked onto him. I can't look away. The laughing gets louder. Laughing, mocking. Mocking his suffering. My eyes tear up and I want to close them. But I can't.*

*Suddenly, the silhouette vanishes and he drops to the ground, a crumpled heap. I run to him and drop to my knees beside him. I reach down and shake him, gently.*

*"Oriké?"*

*I roll him over and I can see his face. His eyes are wide and blank, staring at nothing. His face is slack and his mouth is open.*

*The tears start to spill down my face.*

*"Oriké!"*

*The cackling gets louder. It seems to pound in my ears.*

*"Oriké! Please, please no..."*

*The tears come faster, I'm sobbing now.*

*"Oriké, Oriké, no!"*

*Now I'm screaming.*

*"Oriké! Oriké!"*

*I can only hear the laughter and my own heartbeat.*

*"Oriké!"*

I jolt awake and my hands fly to my face. My heart is pounding and I'm covered with sweat. One look out the window tells me that it's still dark outside. I don't know what time it is. I can hear Karhisha's soft breathing from the other room. She's still sleeping.

*What was that? Was that a warning? Did something happen to him?*

I can't get the thought out of my head. I try to lay back down, but it spins around in my mind and my fear only builds. I realize I won't be able to sleep unless I know.

Being as quiet as I can, I slip my boots on and run out the door. I'm down the steps, on the ground, into the forest. In my hurry, I don't see the cougar's brown eyes watching me.

I let myself slip into my transmutation form, and I'm bounding through the forest, a tawny blur. My hooves move faster than my paws ever did. The air is chilly, but I hardly feel it. I know the shortest way is by the lake, so I swallow my apprehension and turn south. I keep my eyes on the path, off the lake. I tear through the forest at breakneck speed, arriving at the house much faster than I ever have. I slip back into human form, stumbling as I do, running up to the door. I pound on it without thinking, my hands fists, my eyes brimming with terrified tears. After what feels like the longest minute of my life, I hear feet coming down the stairs. I realize all of the sudden how odd it is for me to have come in the middle of the night and be pounding on the door like this. Suddenly terrified, I leap off the steps and run into the garden, hiding behind the shrubs where I can still see the door. The handle turns, the door swings back and there he is. My heartbeat calms and my tears stem, but I don't dare move to wipe them away.

*"Hello?"* he calls, clearly confused.

After a while, he turns and goes back into the house, closing and locking the door behind him. I don't go back immediately. I sit in the garden, in the dark, my limbs weak and my face streaked with tears.

*What just happened?*

## *By your light*

I try my best to act as normal as I can throughout the day. Oriké makes no mention of the nighttime knock and I don't bring it up. Dakihel isn't here today, so it's just the two of us. After I tend to the owls and check the garden, I join him in the library. He's sitting in the cove by the window, with a book in his lap and a pair of reading glasses perched on his nose.

*I didn't know he wore glasses... He hasn't worn them before now...*

I resolve that they're probably just for reading. Remembering what happened last time I was in the library, I take a book off the shelf and curl up in a chair to read, making no noise. The book is interesting, a history book. It's a history I know, about when humans first came to Ke'aphra, about the Gahiel Agidan and about the peace treaty, Sitheil. Still, it's interesting to read it written from the human perspective, which is something I haven't read before. They seem to downplay the bloodiness of the Gahiel Agidan, much more than the nymphs ever did. They make the slaughter of the nymphs seem much more justified and downplay Kahr Lueqen's role in the violence. The only thing that seems consistent is how much Rahu Lueqen is revered and respected. Both humans and nymphs seem to feel the same way about it. Appreciate how much he did for us. But there's almost no mention of Nadiëka Orthoa. Sad, really.

"What are you reading?"

I almost jump out of my seat as I hear the voice beside me. I had been so absorbed in the book that I didn't notice Oriké coming up beside me. He tilts his head at me, a small smile on his face. I notice that his glasses are gone.

"Well?" he asks again.

I close the book and show him the cover, my eyes wide.

*Will he think I'm weird for reading a history book for fun? Do humans do that normally?*

He reads the title, gently takes the book from me and flips through it. I jump as he closes it with a snap and hands it back.

"History books have never been my favourite. But I have to admit that this is an interesting one," he says, looking absentmindedly at the book's cover.

I get up out of my chair, gripping the book in my hands. I look around at all the books in the library, all on their shelves, all different colours and sizes.

"Have you read all the books in here?" I ask him, my eyes drifting back to his face.

His eyes wander to look at the books as well, but in a much more calculating way. Like he could be counting them, or cataloguing them. Or, maybe that's just the way his eyes always look. That's how they seem to me, at least.

"Not all of them, but I'm trying to work my way through them all. Sometimes I get pretty bored here by myself, so I've read a lot of them. Some of them I can't read though, they're in a different language."

I nod slowly, my eyes wide and fascinated.

"My father has read all of them. He worked his way through them all when he lived here," he tells me.

He looks strangely tense as he says it. I try not to let my brow crease with worry.

"Was he the Owl-keeper before you?" I ask quietly, looking at the ground.

There's a quiet pause, a tense silence. My heart starts to pound.

*Was that a bad thing to ask?*

"Yeah."

I look up to meet Oriké's eyes. They're faraway, thinking.

"He was."

I nod slowly and we stand there for a while. When I can't bear it any longer, I turn on my heel and walk to the bookshelf to put away my book. When I finish and turn back, he's seated at the table in the corner. He picks up his book again and replaces his glasses on his nose. For some reason, I want to just stay and read with him. But I figure it's better to leave him be. I check on the owls once more before coming back down to say goodbye.

"I'm going to head home for today," I tell him, standing by the door of the library.

"Mhmm." He says, not taking his eyes off his book.

"Bye..."

I wait for a few seconds, but he says nothing. I walk slowly back to Dhal'yan, trying to keep my feet from dragging. For some reason, I feel a sinking feeling in my chest as I walk. A heavy sadness.

*Why do I feel like this? I don't need him to say goodbye to me...*

I let out a long sigh and keep walking, avoiding the lake at all costs. It still feels like a bad omen.

"Myrioé!"

I'm almost back to Dhal'yan when I hear Karhisha's voice call out to me. I swing my head around, looking for the short brown hair and white dress.

"Over here, silly!"

I spin around to see her standing behind me, grinning broadly.

"Hey..." I say, tilting my head and trying to keep myself from smiling.

"How was your day?" she asks, tilting her head the same way as mine.

"It was good," I tell her, smiling and straightening my head.

I can tell by her face that she's just making small talk. There's something else she wants to talk about.

"What's up?" I ask her.

Her eyes narrow in suspicion, but she's still smiling.

"Well, I'm glad you asked. I wanted to talk to you," she tells me, turning around and walking away. "Let's walk."

We find a small clearing, surrounded on all sides with trees, and sit down on some rocks in the middle. She looks straight at me, her face serious.

"Where did you go last night?" she asks me.

My eyes widen as shock rips through me. She had been asleep, I heard her. How could she have seen me go? Did someone tell her?

"W-what do you mean?" I stutter, shifting away from her on the rocks.

"Don't play dumb with me. In the middle of the night last night, you left the house, you went running into the forest in your transmutation form."

"How did you see me?" I ask, my voice quiet.

"Well, you aren't exactly the stealthiest. You woke me up bumping around the house. I went to the door as you ran off and watched you go."

There's silence for a while, Karhisha looking at me with her warm, brown eyes.

"Hey, let's head home," she tells me. "It's getting dark."



I nod and we get up off the rocks. The walk through the forest is silent for the first while, just listening to the chirping of the evening birds. Until I hear the question I know is coming.

“Why?”

“What do you mean?” I ask her, trying to avoid answering.

We’re almost back to Dhal’yan now and the sky is quickly darkening. Karhisha almost walks into a tree several times because her eyes are constantly fixed on me.

“Why did you go?”

I stop walking and hug myself. The memory of the dream flashes up in my mind and I blink back tears. Karhisha is looking at me, her brow creased with worry.

“Myrioé?”

Something in me breaks. I swallow the lump in my throat and everything comes pouring out. I tell her about the dream, how real it felt. How convinced I was that something had happened to him, how I had to make sure he was alright. A few tears slide down my cheeks and drop onto the ground.

“Oh my god...”

She steps forward and wraps her arms around me, hugging me tight.

“Myrioé...”

I’m silent. I swallow back the tears and take a deep breath. I refuse to cry about this. Karhisha eventually releases me and steps back.

“Let’s go home.”

I nod and we start walking again. The forest is quiet and dark, I feel the same. We quickly arrive home and Karhisha makes me a cup of tea. She looks at the ground for a minute, while I take a sip, before looking up at me again.

“You know... those dreams usually mean something...”

I tighten my grip on the mug of tea, refusing to meet her eyes.

“They usually mean that person is important to you...”

“I mean, of course he’s important, he’s my friend...” I say, still not meeting her eyes.

She lets out a long sigh and I finally look up to meet her eyes.

“Let’s go sit outside.”

I pick up my mug of tea and follow her outside. We sit down on the porch swing just outside the door and look around at Dhal’yan. After a minute, Karhisha turns to me.

“That dream was pretty intense... Are you doing okay?”

I pause for a moment, thinking. I remember last night, running through the forest. How scared I was that the dream had been real, how terrified I was that something had happened to him. I never really feel that way about my friends... Except Karhisha of course.

*Am I okay?*

My vision blurs and my eyes are suddenly flooded with tears. They spill down my face, unbidden, and I wipe them away with the cuff of my shirt.

“Myrioé...”

I know it’s coming. I curl my head down and tuck my knees up. The cuffs of my shirt are soaked with my tears. I don’t want to hear it, because I know the answer. I’ve always known, I think, but I’ve never let myself think it. My heart pounds and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“You love him, don’t you?”

The tears keep coming, running down my face, one after the other. I can feel myself nodding, even though I don’t want to. If I can’t keep it from myself, there’s no way I can keep it from her. Her arms wrap around me again and she hugs me tightly.

“Myrioé... It’s going to be okay.”

I take several breaths in and the tears slow. I scrub at my face, clearing my vision. Karhisha draws away, but she leaves a hand on my back. I stare blankly out at the peacefully sleeping village around me, unaffected by that which just shattered my world.

“Oh god...”

## You gave me

The next day, I walk to the tower slowly. My feet drag through the dirt and my head hangs. Part of me doesn't even want to get there, but I don't want to go back to Dhal'yan. I wish I could just walk forever. I don't want to face Oriké, not now... Not after last night, after what Karhisha made me realize. I don't know if I ever want to face him again. But I don't really have a choice. I have to go. So, I force my feet to keep walking forward, one step after another. One by one. My heart jumps in my chest as I break through the trees and start walking up the hill toward the house. I pause for a second, looking up at it, as though seeing it for the first time. Even though I've been coming here for almost a month, I've never stopped to appreciate how beautiful it actually is. I'm always too eager to get inside. But not today. I tilt my head at it and see it in full for the first time.

The whole thing is really quite beautiful. Whoever designed it was a very skilled architect. The house is made of dark wood, stretching up three stories. The windows are tall and arched, decorated with something that shimmers in the sun. The big gates are standing open, their curly design melding perfectly with the rest of the fence.. The house is on the very edge of a cliff, which plummets down a hundred feet on one side. But, on the other, it gently slopes down a grassy hill to the forest's edge. I begin to walk up the slope, my eyes on the tower. It's tall and elegant, the dark stone meshing perfectly with the dark wood. The top has arched holes in it, so that the owls can fly in and out. I have a fleeting wonder if all the other Deari-vådare houses and towers look the same as this one, or if they're different. We never studied the towers much in classes, only the fact that they exist. My thoughts are cut short as I reach the door. I take a deep breath and reach out to knock, but before I can, it swings open. I bite back a shriek as I find myself face to face with Oriké, wearing a confused expression. He takes a startled step back and pulls the door fully open.

"Oh, hi..."

I blink, the words catch in my throat. I can't look at him, so I drop my eyes to the ground.

"You're late today... I was about to come look for you." he tells me, his voice cautious.

I can't make myself look at him, but I manage to get some words past the lump in my throat.

"Hello."

I brush past him and walk into the house. I don't look back, I don't know why. Usually I can't take my eyes off him. But not today. Today I can't even bring myself to look at him. I walk quickly down the hall to the familiar, carved door. I push it open and start up the stairs. I pray he isn't following me, I don't want to talk to him right now. I can't talk to him right now. I get to the owlery and sink slowly to the floor, letting the owls hop close to me.

*What's happening to me?*

I stay with the owls for a long while, much longer than I normally would. Their presence is so soft and comforting, I can't help but feel calmer. But, I finally realize that I've been here far too long, so I stand up, sending them all fluttering in different directions. I trudge slowly down the stairs, wishing they could go on forever. They don't.

"Hi, Myrioé!"

I almost trip as I hear a voice call out behind me. But it's not Oriké's. I turn around slowly, trying to calm my racing heart and chase the blush from my cheeks.

"Hi, Hakhan!" I reply, forcing my face into a smile.

I must have not seen him when I came down the stairs, preoccupied as I had been. He hoists the bag higher on his shoulder and frees one hand to wave at me.

"Are you here to get the letters?" I ask him, tilting my head.

“Nope!” he replies, “Already got ‘em!”

He pats the bag that is slung over his shoulder with his free hand and brushes his blond hair out of his eyes.

“I’m surprised you didn’t hear me, I knocked the chair over by accident when I was getting the ems.”

My eyes widen and I clench my hands into fists. Hakhan tilts his head at me and smiles. I sense the lack of hostility and relax.

“Guess you were distracted, huh?”

I nod slowly and smile at him again. Only slightly forced this time. He smiles back and waves once again.

“Well, I gotta go deliver these! See you around, Myrioé!”

He turns around and leaves through the door to the outside. I take a deep breath and head back into the house. I walk quickly through the halls and out the front door, praying I don’t meet Oriké on the way out. I must be lucky, because the halls are empty and quiet and I get through them without incident. Once I’m out in the garden, I take a deep breath. It’s so hard to work with this fear hanging over me all the time, but I don’t know how to get rid of it. Shaking my head angrily, I bend down to tend to the garden. Under my care in the past month or so, many of the plants have started growing better and many even showed signs of blooming. The weather is warming and most of the snow is gone, but it’s still very wet, so there isn’t much need to water them. Regardless, I always like to come out here and talk to them and be around them. Nymphs have always believed that company helps plants grow better. Humans have always been skeptical, but our plants always turn out better, so there’s no need to argue it.

I leap to my feet as I hear the front door open and Oriké walks out, looking around. His eyes land on me and my heart pounds as he walks toward me, smiling slightly.

“There you are, Myrioé. I’ve barely seen you all day.”

I’m silent for a second, my eyes wide, staring at him.

“That’s because... The owls needed more attention today because... There was more..” I flounder, tripping over my words.

I can’t let him know I’ve been trying to avoid him. He’s too curious, he’d ask why. And I... can’t tell him.

“Can we talk for a bit now? I’m done most of my work for the day.” he asks me, tilting his head.

My heart catches in my throat and my eyes flick up to the sky. I’m relieved to see that it’s the brink of sunset already.

“Sorry,” I tell him, “but I have to get going. Karhisha always wants me home before dark.”

He looks confused and almost...hurt? No. He wouldn’t be hurt by that. He shrugs and steps back.

“Guess we’ll talk tomorrow then?” he asks.

“Sure, sure.”

I turn on my heel and walk out of the gate. I know it’s rude, but I can’t wait to get away. I don’t look back, or wave. I walk into the forest, but I don’t transmutate. I just walk, and walk, and walk. I try to keep my head from spinning, but it does it on its own.

“What’s wrong with me?” I whisper to myself.

I break through the trees and I find myself, for the first time since the night of the dream, on the shore of the lake where I fell in. It’s almost difficult to envision it frozen over, icy white. I try to guess where it was that I fell in by looking at the treelines on either side. It takes my mind off of

things, but it's not very successful. The whole lake looks the same. I let out a long sigh and sit down on a rock by the shore. The sky looks like it's painted, red, pink and orange. I can see the last rays of light disappearing on the horizon, leaving the sky a light purple and blue.

"Why is it so beautiful?" I wonder aloud.

I pause for a second, then laugh to myself.

"Why are some things so beautiful?"

My thoughts land on Oriké again and I smile sadly. He's so perfect. I don't even know how or why I think that. I could give a million reasons. His hair, his voice, the way his whole face scrunches up when he's focused, the way his eyes sparkle without him wanting them to, the way he yells at Dakihel and teases him but is always smiling slightly after. But none of those are the real reason why.

I look out over the lake. It's dark now, much darker than before. I'm sure Karhisha is worried and upset, but I can't bring myself to worry about that right now. The light of the moon sparkles off the water. I laugh to myself again.

"I'm really in love with him, aren't I?"

I can't stop thinking about him, I can't keep my thoughts straight around him, I can barely even look him in the eyes anymore. But... the thought of losing him scares me half to death. I know I can't keep pushing him away and ignoring him like this, because if I do I'm going to lose him. I can't do that, not after that dream showed me how important he is. I have to calm down, I have to act normal. I know this love is doomed to be unrequited. Maybe if I just crush it down, it'll go away... I can't let this ruin our friendship, I know that now. I won't let it. I get up and walk down to the water's edge, dropping to my knees. I look at my reflection, tilting my head at myself. Same wide, silver eyes. Same short, brown hair. Same green top, brown corset. Same round nose. But inside, everything's different. I'm a deer at heart now. I don't need to let my emotions control me anymore.

"Tomorrow, I'll act normal. We can be friends. I won't let this change anything. Not ever.,I promise myself.

I stand up and take one last long look at the lake. The lake that changed my life. The life that he saved. He *saved* me. I owe him more than wrecking our relationship because I can't control my emotions.

I turn and walk back into the forest, back towards Dhal'yan where I'm sure Karhisha is waiting and freaking out.

"Nothing's going to change."

## *A reason*

The walk to the tower the next few days seems so much easier. I walk by the lake, since it's faster. It doesn't scare me anymore. I've come to terms with everything that happened. It's been almost a full week since the dream and things are back to normal. As long as I keep my feelings crushed into a ball, holding them in my chest, nothing has to change.

But today, something is different. The atmosphere is tense, the whole house seems on edge. I find Dakihel in the hall, his face not looking playful, for the first time.

"Hey, Myrioé," he sighs, shooting me a tired smile.

"Hi, Dakihel... What's happening?" I ask him, worried.

He shrugs and sighs again. His eyes wander past mine and look out the door.

"He just has days like this. He's in the study but... I wouldn't go in there if I were you," he warns me, his blue eyes sad.

He walks off and I look up the stairs, towards where I know the study is. Despite Dakihel's warning, I want to go check up on Oriké. But I know I should go take care of the owls first. So I head to the tower as quickly as I can and make sure everything's in order. The owls screech to greet me and flap around me as I clean and set the food in order. As I'm leaving, I wave a hello to Ashna, another letter deliverer, but I don't stop to talk. I walk back into the house, heading up the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible. I don't know where Dakihel went, but I hope he's cheered himself up somehow. He looked bummed and I've come to care about him a lot.

"What did you do, Oriké?" I whisper to myself as I walk down the hall to the study.

I hear the sounds of paper rustling, boots walking on wood and heavy things being put down. I hear a thud, followed by a yelp of pain. I feel a pang of pity and worry, and raise my hand to my chest. I take a deep breath before knocking softly on the door.

"What is it?" A voice snaps from within.

I turn the handle and push the door open slowly, stepping into the room. Oriké is standing there, leaning on his desk and looking over several large pieces of paper.

"Hey..." I say softly. "Dakihel said you were upset, so I just wanted to check in and make sure you were okay."

He lets out a long sigh and walks around the table, dropping into the chair behind it. He pushes the pieces of paper forward for me to read as I walk up to the desk.

"I have to write a report to the government in Ejuin." He tells me, massaging his temples.

"The human capital?" I ask.

I'm overall very uneducated about humans and their culture, but no one could live in Ke'aphra and not know about Ejuin. It's the center of commerce, trade, industry, seafaring and basically everything else. Ambitious nymphs who want to live an academic life move to Ejuin to be educated.

"Yeah," he tells me, "and one to Antash as well."

I pause for a second, wracking my brain. I remember that Antash is the human town closest to Oriké's tower. The place where all the letters that come here are for, that Dienya, Hakhan and Ashna deliver to.

"That sounds stressful..." I say, reading over the papers.

One of them is a commission sent from Ejuin, that all Owl-keepers have to write a report about the state and functionality of their tower to the government of their nearest town, as well as to the government in Ejuin itself. The other papers all look like drafts of Oriké's reports. Most of them

have large lines slashing through them, or are partly crumpled. When I look up, I see Oriké glaring at me over the tops of his reading glasses.

“No *kidding*,” he snaps, lashing his hand out to grab a pen.

I recoil slightly at the venom in his tone, but walk closer to the desk. I’m still determined to help him.

“Well, you know better than anyone what the state of the tower is. And I can help, I can tell you how the owls are doing, they’re all doing very well. Dakihel hangs around here all the time, he can help. And you can ask Dienya or Ashna or Hakhan about the tower’s organization and-”

He cuts me off with an angry growl.

“Myrioé, you’re not *helping* me!” He yells, his eyes full of anger.

I step back, my eyes wide. I feel tears spring into them. I feel like I’m falling.

“Just... Go away.” He says, turning his head back to look at his papers again.

I say nothing. I can’t hear anything, my heart is pounding in my ears, my breathing is heavy. I back out of the room, pulling the door shut as I leave. My whole body feels numb as I walk through the halls and down the stairs, I can hear his words echoing in my ears. Not helping. Not helpful. Not useful. Useless.

I throw the door open and break into a run. I don’t know where Dakihel is and I barely care. I’m running, my feet are hitting the ground. But I feel like I’m falling, I’m surprised my feet keep hitting the ground. Falling through space, falling through the earth. Falling through ice.

I keep running, not letting myself think. Eventually, I can feel sharp pain stabbing through my chest and I slow to a stop. I take deep, gulping breaths. I want to cry but I can’t. I just keep breathing. When I recover my breath enough to look around, I see that I’m at my tree. A tree that I discovered a while ago, a short ways away from the tower. A lone tree on a hill. Something about it reminds me of myself. I take a few steps, but fall to my knees and all but crawl to the base of the tree. I lean against it and look out over the hill, out into the forest.

*I tried my best and I’m not good enough...*

“Hey, Myrioé.” A soft voice says from behind me.

I whip my head around to see Dakihel standing there. He has no top hat on and his sleeves are down, the cuffs dirty. He’s smiling sadly at me.

“Hey...” I say, my eyes returning to the ground.

“Mind if I sit with you?” he asks, tilting his head at me.

I shrug, but I’m smiling. I would honestly like the company. He sits down and leans against the tree beside me, following my gaze out towards the forest.

“I’m guessing he yelled at you too?” he asks, still not looking at me.

I’m silent for a second and tears bud in my eyes. I turn to look at him and he turns to me. Silver eyes look into blue.

“Did he yell at you?” I ask him, a little surprised.

Dakihel smiles sadly at the ground and rolls his sleeves back up.

“Yeah... He actually does it a lot. But that’s just the way he is when he’s stressed... You just have to give him space.”

We sit in silence for a minute and I gather my confidence. All of the sudden, I turn to Dakihel and wrap my arms around him. My eyes tear up and I start sniffing.

“I’m so sorry, Dakihel. You don’t deserve that...”

He seems surprised for a second, but then he relaxes and hugs me back. I bury my face in his shoulder and try to swallow down my tears.

“You’re a good friend to him, Myrioé,” he whispers, hugging me tight. “You don’t deserve that either.”

Eventually, we release each other and I scrub at my eyes with my sleeve. The dark green cloth is dyed darker by the tears. I stare out into the forest again for a long while.

“You love him, don’t you?”

My eyes widen and I freeze in shock. My eyes are fixed on the trees, watching a sparrow fly. I don’t look at him.

“I can see the way you look at him...”

I still don’t move, staying silent.

“It’s the same way I look at him.”

Shocked out of my stillness, I whip my head around to look at him, my eyes wide. He’s smiling at me, in an apologetic way. I look down at my hands, my mind spinning. I don’t know how to feel.

“You’re...” I trail off, not knowing what to say.

“Yeah... Been in love with my best friend for years and I’m too chicken to say anything about it. Pretty pathetic, huh?”

Despite my shock, I start shaking my head.

“It’s not pathetic, not at all... It’s hard to confess like that when you’re afraid of ruining a friendship...”

I reach out and hug him again. He pats my back and chuckles.

“It’s fine, I’ve gotten used to keeping it to myself over the years.”

“But he... He’s not...” I trail off again, my mind spinning.

“No, I’m pretty sure he isn’t...”

We sit in silence for a while, watching the birds fly against the slowly darkening sky. Dakihel reaches out and takes my hand.

“Just... Be careful, okay? He’s not one to be super into... love.”

I nod slowly, still resting my head on his shoulder. He takes a deep breath and turns to me.

“He would never say it, so I’ll say it for him. I’m really glad you came when you did, Myrioé. I think you’re really good for him.”

My heart warms and I hug Dakihel again.

“You’re good for him too. He’s lucky to have had you supporting him for all these years.”

We sit together until it’s dark and he walks me halfway back to Dhal’yan.

The next morning, I walk to the tower with a spring in my step. Talking to Dakihel encouraged me.

*Maybe I’ll tell him today. Maybe today will be the day...*

I head up the hill at a brisk walk, not stopping to admire the cliff today. The sun shines down on me, and that has to be a good sign. As I come through the gate, I stop to admire my garden. In the recent sunshine, some of the buds have started to peek out and little spots of colour are starting to pop out. Another good sign, it has to be. I walk up the stairs and knock on the door. After waiting for a while with no answer, I try the doorknob and find it unlocked. Deciding to try my luck, I push the door open. The main hall is empty, so I start for the tower. Hopefully I’ll run into Oriké later.

“Myrioé!”

Or now.

“I’m glad you’re here. I want to introduce you to someone.”



I turn around and walk over to him. My footsteps slow as I see a woman standing next to him. Tall and slender, dressed in a formal outfit, her black hair pulled up in a short ponytail. Her piercing eyes are bright blue, almost clashing with the dyed red ends of her ponytail.

“This is Alydia,” he tells me.

She smiles at me, but only with her mouth. Her eyes are calculating, sizing me up. She’s almost as tall as Oriké, with her tall, heeled boots.

“She’s my girlfriend.”

## *To go on*

*Girlfriend...*

*My girlfriend...*

I feel like I'm falling. Falling through space, falling, falling. No matter how hard I try to grasp onto something, everything slips away. With more effort than it has ever taken me, I force a smile onto my face and nod at Alydia.

"Nice to meet you," I say, beaming.

My voice sounds sickly sweet and I want to gag. Alydia smiles at me and nods. She says nothing. She turns to Oriké and strikes up a conversation. He turns away from me, he's not paying attention, he's not caring. I back down the hallway slowly, making no noise. As soon as I'm out of eyesight, I turn and run. I run to the tower and I run out the door that leads to the outside. I see no one. I briefly wonder if Dakihel's here. Then I also wonder if he knows about Alydia. I don't know what's a worse thought. That he doesn't know and he has to feel this disappointment too, or that he did know and he led me on and made me think I had a chance.

*He wouldn't do that to me... Would he?*

I barely care anymore. I run down the hill and into the forest, letting myself slip quickly into deer form. My hooves thrum against the ground, the trees are a blur. I can tell the vegetation from the empty space just well enough to not run into anything. The deer is silent, but I'm crying inside. Crying and screaming. I dash through the forest at breakneck speed, weaving through everything. The wind whistles, screams in my ears. Echoing my own. Before I know it, I see trees that are terribly familiar and I find myself on the outskirts of Dhal'yan. I know Oriké will be confused when he finds me gone, but I can't bring myself to care. Not right now. I slip out of my transmutation form and walk slowly through the streets. I hate it when people see me cry, so I hug myself and swallow back the tears. I draw a few stares, but I avoid much notice as I make my way back to the house. I drag my feet slowly up the stairs and knock on the door. Karhisha opens it, the smile on her face quickly fading when she sees me.

"Myrioé? What are you doing back so early?"

I look up at her, my face tearstained. She steps forward and envelops me in a tight hug, rubbing my back.

"What happened?" she asks me softly.

I shake my head angrily, sending tears flying. I don't want to tell her. It seems stupid, petty, to be this upset over something so inconsequential. I have no right to be upset about it. She looks at me, worried.

"Hey, let's go for a walk, 'kay?"

I nod silently. She puts on her boots and we start off down the stairs. It's only midday, so most of the nymphs are out and about, wandering Dhal'yan on their various business. Karhisha turns and we walk into the forest. I realize we're heading the opposite direction from the tower and a few more tears run down my cheeks. Karhisha just seems to know exactly what's wrong, without me having to tell her. Eventually, the forest opens up into a small clearing. The sky is clear and blue above us and the meadow is filled with flowers. A small smile creeps onto my face, unbidden. Karhisha sits down in the grass and motions for me to sit down next to her. I heave a sigh and drop to my knees, scrubbing the tears off my face. I lay back in the grass next to her and stare up at the small, wispy clouds. I've always liked looking at the sky. It reminds me how small and insignificant our

lives really are. It helps to put this whole situation in perspective. Karhisha takes a breath beside me, so I answer the question before she can ask it.

“He has a girlfriend, Karhisha.”

There’s a long silence. I don’t look at her face, but I can picture it. Concern, badly concealing wide-eyed shock. She takes another breath and the silence continues.

“Myrioé...”

I sit up suddenly, tears budding in my eyes. I stare at her, my eyes pleading, begging for an answer.

“Why do I feel like this, Karhisha?” I ask her, softly, the tears slowly trickling down my face and falling into the grass.

“What...what do you mean?” She asks me, her face confused, clearly concerned by my lack of sense.

“I have no right to feel this way. We’re not that close, he doesn’t owe me anything. He has no reason to tell me any details of his personal life, or any choices that he makes. I had no reason to know about her...”

I pause, taking a deep breath. I scrub the tears off my face with the sleeve of my top and let out a long sigh. I turn to face Karhisha, her face is creased with worry.

“So why do I feel so sad and rejected and... betrayed?”

Karhisha leans forward and wraps her arms around me, hugging me tight. I lay my head against her shoulder, staring blankly into the woods. I’m so out of it, I wouldn’t have heard her speak, if I hadn’t been so close.

“Because you love him, Myrioé...” she whispers to me. “That’s what happens when you love someone. You start to care about everything so, so much more.”

I laugh a little, without meaning to. I draw back and look at her, smiling despite everything. She smiles back and I’m surprised to see tears in her eyes as well.

“When did you get so wise?” I ask her, jokingly.

She punches me lightly and laughs.

“I’m not wise, just wiser than you!”

I shove her and lay down in the grass, staring at the sky. She recovers from the shove and lays down beside me. We stare up at the clouds together, watching them roll by in the gentle wind.

“Do you think you’ll go back tomorrow?” she asks me, still staring at the sky.

I turn my head and look into the forest. Everything’s dark, but I can see spots of light shining through where there’s breaks in the trees. A small sparrow flies up with a bunch of twigs in its mouth and weaves them into the small nest shape that was already there.

“Yeah... I’m going back.” I tell her, my resolve strengthening with the words. “I can’t give up just because of some silly little thing like this. I’ll deal with it.”

I sit up and Karhisha sits up with me. She turns to me and smiles, seemingly reading my mind, like she always somehow does.

“You won’t let her beat you.”

I go back the next day, and every day after. I tell Oriké I left because I was feeling sick, and I apologize. Still, I find myself being a bit colder to him now. I don’t go to see him in the library, or in his study. I stay mostly in the owlery, or out in the garden where he doesn’t go. I see Dakihel a few times, but we don’t really get a chance to talk. He doesn’t seem to be avoiding Oriké, which only makes me feel worse for doing it myself. But I can’t help it, I don’t know why. I can’t tell him why, because I have no good reason, but I’m angry with him.

The strange thing is, though, it's not the anger I'm used to. Not a raging fire that burns up and consumes me. No. It's cold and dark and twisted. A bitter jealousy that rears up in me whenever I see Alydia. And I see her all the time now. It makes me wonder why I didn't see her before. I don't ask Oriké about it and I haven't been able to drum up the courage to talk to Alydia herself. Whenever I see her, the wave of wicked envy grips me and I feel sick to my stomach. I don't know why I feel this way and I hate it. But avoiding both her and Oriké seems like the best way to avoid it. So I do. And for several days it works. But eventually, to my immense surprise, he comes looking for me. I don't know how many places he looked, but he finally finds me in the owlery.

"Myriolé?"

I look up with a start, the owls flying away from me in a panic. My heart drops when I see him and the cold, black claw of anger grips me. I try not to let it show in my eyes.

"Hi, Oriké."

When I'm talking to Alydia, I'm able to fake sweetness. In fact, my voice is sickeningly sweet. But not with him.

"Hey..."

To my horror, he comes over and sits beside me on the bench. I stare straight forward, out the window of the tower. I try not to feel the warmth radiating off of him. I never realized before how much warmer humans are than nymphs. He's so close to me.

"I haven't seen you around much, Myriolé." he starts, turning to look at me. "You haven't come to the library to talk to me and Dakihel."

"The owls have been keeping me busy..." I say, still not looking at him. "And the garden is taking a lot more work now that it's pretty much spring."

He nods slowly and looks out the window as well.

"I understand... But you could have come by to say hello..."

I almost think I hear a trace of... disappointment? But I must be imagining it. He turns to look at me and I try not to see his green eyes in my peripheral vision.

"Are you doing okay, Myriolé?"

My heart catches in my chest. Of all the things I expected him to say when he came up here, this was not one of them.

*Why do you care?*

I barely keep from saying it aloud. I take a deep breath, trying to wash away my bitter, envious anger.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

There's silence and for a minute I feel that old feeling. The fear that I've done something wrong and messed something up.

*Gods, why do I still care?*

Karhisha's words from a few days ago echo in my ears and I sigh to myself. Oriké tilts his head at me, the barest traces of concern in his expression.

"You've been acting a bit... odd lately. I'm... a little worried about you."

I almost stop breathing. My eyes are fixed straight ahead, I don't look at him. I try not to let myself hyperventilate. Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I calm myself and turn to face him. Looking at his bright green eyes is almost harder now.

"I'm... sorry to have worried you," I tell him, wringing my hands together.

He smiles slightly at me.

"It's alright. I worry a bit too much about everything, I think. Are you sure you're okay?"

All of a sudden, I do feel okay. I look up at him and smile, the first real smile I've done in days.

"Yeah. I'm good," I tell him, gazing into his eyes.

There's a tense pause before he gets up and brushes the dust off of himself.

"Alright, I'm glad."

He pauses before going down the stairs.

"Maybe come by the library tomorrow? Dakihel and I miss spending time with you."

I nod slowly, still genuinely smiling.

"Yeah. I will."

He runs his hand through his hair and starts off down the stairs. As he leaves, the owls slowly soar down from their roosts and land near me. Still smiling, I reach out to pet one.

I spend most of the day in the tower or out in the garden, like the past couple of days. But before I leave, I poke my head into the library and tell Oriké that I'm going. He looks up from his work and smiles.

"Bye, Myrioé."

I turn on my heel and walk out of the library, heading down the stairs. As I approach the door, I hear the click of heels on the wood. I turn to see Alydia standing at the top of the stairs. She says nothing, simply stands there regally. But her sharp, blue eyes pierce into me with unbridled fury. Taken aback, I turn around and head out the door.

I leave the house, feeling much better than I did when I arrived, but with a dark cloud hanging over me. Like an odd sense of impending doom.

## Day after day

The sunlight wakes me in the morning, streaming through the window. For the first time in a while, since before that encounter with Alydia, I don't wake feeling like a dark cloud of dread is hanging over me. I roll out of bed and dress myself quickly, combing out my short hair and twisting part of it into its little braid. The sun is shining brightly.

*It's going to be a good day.*

I greet Karhisha, just waking up, as I sail out the door. I wave a hello, a bright smile on my face. She seems confused by my oddly chipper attitude, but must be happy to see me happy, because she smiles back. I head down the stairs, two at a time, and almost fall over when I finally hit the ground. I steady myself quickly, before spinning on my heel and starting off at a brisk walk. I weave through the trees, walking by the lake to admire the sun sparkling off of its surface. A breeze flows across it and tousles my hair, cool but not cold. Winter is fading fast and it's pretty much spring already. I can see the buds on the trees and a few flowers poking up here and there. The sun shines down on my face and I close my eyes, soaking up the warmth. I walk a few steps before I trip over an unseen root poking out of the ground. I crash down into the soft dirt and roll over once. Once I come to a stop, I open my eyes as I stare up at the sky.

"Ouch," I say to myself.

I sit up and I see the root I tripped over, the tiniest thing on the path before me. Sudden laughter bubbles up within me and I let it out, a wide grin on my face. Once I recover, I push myself to my feet and dust the dirt off my clothes.

"Well, that was stupid."

I take a deep breath and continue on towards the tower, keeping my eyes open this time, but whistling happily.

When I arrive at the tower, everything seems perfect. The sky is a bright blue and I can see the silhouettes of a few owls against it, flying into the top of the tower. I head up to the house and let myself in, as I do all the time now. With Oriké not there in the hall, I check the library. But I open the door to empty silence, nothing but the books on the shelves. I figure he must be in his study. I turn and head for the tower, not wanting to bother him. Climbing the stairs still robs me of my breath, but I'm greeted by happy chirps as I arrive at the top.

"Hi, everyone!" I greet them, waving.

Once they're all tended to and happy, I say my goodbyes and head back down the stairs. I wrack my brain to remember who's turn it is to get the letters today, but it doesn't end up mattering. The shelves are all empty when I reach the bottom and the door firmly closed. They must have come to get the letters while I was up with the owls, whoever it was. Shrugging, I turn and head back into the house. I assume Oriké is still working in his study, so I decide to go work in the garden. However, when I come out into the hall, I'm surprised to see a few baskets sitting there. Tilting my head curiously, I go over and open one. Inside are some fine china plates and a few unlit candlesticks.

*What's happening?*

I jump back with a start as I see Oriké coming out of a door that I know leads to the kitchen, carrying something wrapped up in a towel. He carries it over and places it gently in another one of the baskets.

"Hey, Myrioé. How are you today?" he asks me, looking up from the basket as he closes it.

"I'm alright," I say, shrugging and smiling. "How about you?"

He half smiles and gestures to the baskets around us.

“I’ve been hard at work, but I’m pretty good.”

I look around at all the baskets, confused. I can’t tell what’s in them, besides the one I looked in.

“What’s all this for?” I ask, looking back at him.

“I planned a little picnic date for Alydia.” He tells me. “So this is all the stuff for it.”

My heart drops like a stone and I try not to let it show in my face. I turn and lift the lid off of one of the baskets, trying not to let the twisted, jealous rage break through. I’m surprised to see a plate of biscuits, still steaming, sitting in the basket covered by a towel. I turn to him, crushing my feelings down.

“Did you cook all of this stuff?” I ask him, genuinely surprised.

He lets out a little laugh and looks down at the basket.

“Yeah. I actually love cooking, believe it or not.”

I look at him, slack-jawed with shock. He laughs and shrugs. After a few awkward seconds, I turn to leave.

“Oh, wait, Myrioé,” he calls after me.

I turn back and wait, looking at him with inquisitive eyes.

“Can you help me carry some of this stuff to the picnic spot?” he asks me. “Dakihel was supposed to help me, but he ended up getting held up with some work and he couldn’t make it.”

I shut my eyes for a brief second, forcing down the twisted, jealous monster in my chest. I open them again quickly and smile at Oriké.

“Of course. I’m happy to help.”

He points out which baskets I should carry and picks up the other ones himself. We leave the house, stopping briefly to lock the door, before heading off into the forest. I quickly realize that, though we’re going down the sloping side of the hill like I usually do, we’re going a way that I’ve never gone. Towards Antash, the human town. I think maybe we’re going there, but I end up being wrong. We break through the trees into a huge field. There’s a few trees dotted here and there and a gentle hill slopes up in the middle, with a tree on top. It’s really a gorgeous place and I’m surprised I’ve never been here before. Oriké turns to me and smiles at my awestruck expression.

“What do you think?” he asks, gesturing at the field with the basket in his hand.

“It’s... well, it’s beautiful,” I say, looking around.

The trees are just starting to sprout their leaves and a few flowers and springing up all across the field.

“It’s amazing.”

He laughs and starts for the hill, seeming in high spirits. I smile despite myself and following, trying to ignore how tired my arms are from the heavy baskets. He stops at the top of the hill and puts his baskets down, stretching his arms. He spots me, still only halfway up the hill, and laughs. I scrunch up my nose and stick my tongue out at him. He keeps laughing until I reach the top of the hill, some time after. I set my baskets down and shove him forcefully down the hill. He glares at me, but he’s smiling. I turn away from him and start to take the things out of the baskets. I spread out the powder blue picnic blanket and take out the plates. He joins me, removing all the food at setting it around.

“I still can’t believe you cooked all of this,” I say, shaking my head as I look around at all of it.

“Well, it didn’t just appear out of thin air, did it?”

I laugh and shake my head, taking the last few things out of the baskets.

“I guess not,” I say, grinning.

I take out the candles and set them in holders, and he lights them with a small match. I recoil a little bit at the sight of the fire, tiny though it is. He lights the candles and then quickly shakes the match to put it out. He tilts his head at my reaction.

“Are you afraid of fire?” he asks me, his voice almost sounding amused.

I shrug and look up at him, scrunching up my nose again.

“Not really? I’ve just had bad experiences with it,” I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows at me curiously.

“Tell me about it.”

He sits down on the blanket and beckons me to sit beside him. I hesitate.

“Won’t Alydia be here soon?” I reason, tilting my head at him.

“She isn’t here yet,” he says, shrugging. “Won’t you stay with me until she gets here?”

I wring my hands together, still hesitant. I can’t shake the feeling of her ice blue eyes piercing into me.

“She won’t like that...” I trail off, looking at Oriké’s amused face.

“It’ll be fine. C’mon.”

I groan aloud, but I sit down with a huff, my arms crossed. Oriké takes one look at my disgruntled face and bursts out laughing.

“What?” I ask, indignantly.

“You’re so *cute* when you’re upset!” he cackles, his green eyes sparkling with glee.

My face flushes and I look down. But, no matter how hard I try, I can’t keep my eyes off him for long. His head is thrown back and there’s traces of tears of laughter in his eyes. His smile lights up his whole face. I can’t help loving how carefree he looks when he laughs.

“Yeah, yeah, *hilarious*,” I say, rolling my eyes at him.

He takes a few deep breaths to recover himself before turning to me.

“Sorry about that. So, tell me the story about the fire,” he says, his green eyes bright with interest.

I clasp my hands together and take a deep breath as well. My eyes wander across the field to the trees, watching the birds fly around within the depths of the forest. My mind reaches to grab the memories of my time in Lan’tiasa, when I was young.

“In retrospect, it wasn’t a big thing. But it seemed like a big deal when I was younger...”

He’s watching me intently, completely focused. It’s an odd feeling. I don’t think I’ve had his full and complete attention before. He’s almost always thinking about or doing something else.

“There was a lightning storm and part of the forest caught on fire. Not a new thing, it was something we’d dealt with before. But this time it was much closer to the village than ever before. Before we could contain it, a nymph’s house caught on fire. A friend of mine’s house. It was right near mine. My parents got me out and I watched my friend’s house burn down. They all survived, but she got some pretty nasty burns from it. I’ll never forget how lucky I was that it wasn’t my house.”

I finish the story and look up. Oriké is staring at me, wide-eyed.

“Wow...” he says, looking shocked. “That is a good reason to be afraid of fire.”

I look around at the field and up at the sky, checking the position of the sun. It’s far past midafternoon now.

“Shouldn’t Alydia be here by now?” I ask, turning back to Oriké.

He shakes his head, seemingly just realizing that. He looks around and his brow creases with confusion.

“Yeah...”



We sit in silence for a while. I notice that the steam that had been rising off the food is gone. I'm sure it's cold by now, or at least much less warm.

"I don't think she's coming," Oriké says heavily, breaking the silence.

I look at him, my brow creasing with pity.

"I'm sorry..." I say solemnly.

I crush down the jealous monster in my chest, which is screaming in victory. He looks up at me, a smile spreading on his face.

"Hey, do you wanna have a picnic? I can't eat all this stuff on my own."

I can feel my eyes widen in shock and my heart starts pounding. Even the monster in my chest is silent in shock.

*What? Me?*

But the words don't come out. I take a deep, quiet breath and a smile creeps onto my face.

"I would love to."

He starts serving out the food. I pick up one of the biscuits off of my plate and bite into it. My eyes widen in surprise and I chew on it. It's cold, but it's one of the most amazing biscuits I've ever tasted.

"This is amazing!" I exclaim, looking up at him in surprise.

He laughs and finishes serving up the food.

"Well, yeah. I wasn't going to make bad food for my fancy picnic date."

"Well obviously," I say, rolling my eyes. "I just didn't expect *this*."

I chain up the monster and reach out to put my hand near Oriké's, so close, nearly touching.

"I'm sure she would have loved it," I tell him earnestly.

He smiles at me and moves his hand so that our fingers are just touching. My heart pounds and I try to chase the blush from my face. After a second, he moves his hand away and continues eating. We finish in silence and pack up the baskets. By now, it's pretty much sundown. Oriké picks up a basket, but he puts it back down when he sees how distracted I am.

"Myrioé?" he asks, clearly confused.

I beckon him silently and he comes around the tree to where I'm standing. He follows my gaze as I look out at the horizon. The sun is just sinking past the treeline. The sky looks like an elaborate painting, with haphazard streaks of red, pink and orange.

"It's beautiful." I breathe, unable to tear my eyes from it, even to look at him.

"Do you not see sunsets much?" he asks, his voice light with amusement.

"No, I see them a lot. But never like this. Never this... perfect."

He laughs quietly, but he looks out at the sunset too. Standing next to him, looking out at the beautiful sunset, the moment is so perfect. Like a step out of life and into heaven. Just for a moment. We watch the sun sink below the horizon, the field slowly darkening around us. Eventually my eyes drift away from it and onto him. He smiles at me, and my whole body seems to glow with warmth. We gather up the baskets and start walking back towards the tower. The forest is dark and silent, but it's familiar to me somehow. I'm not scared. Not with him. We get back to the house and he unlocks the door. We stow the baskets in the kitchen and he says he'll deal with them in the morning. I bid him a soft goodnight, and I turn to leave.

"Myrioé, wait."

I freeze and turn slowly around. Oriké takes a few steps toward me until I have to look up to meet his eyes.

"I wanted to thank you. Thank you for staying with me out there. I know maybe you didn't want to, but I appreciated the company."

There's a silence. My wide eyes stare into his soft green ones.

"You're a good friend, Myrioé."

But before the monster can rear in disgust, he steps forward and hugs me. And everything freezes. The monster falls slack and almost disappears. My eyes are wide with shock. And then I feel everything. He's so warm, so much warmer than anyone else I've ever met. His arms are so strong, holding me tight. My head is resting lightly on his chest, since I'm too short to reach his shoulder. I realize all of a sudden that I can hear his heartbeat. A soft, slow pounding, right against my ear. Steady, constant. I close my eyes and lean into the embrace. I feel like I'm in another world. Away from all pain and all struggle. A true moment in heaven.

All too soon, it's over and he's stepping away. My chest feels tight and my legs feel like jelly. He smiles at me and I can't help but smile back.

"Goodnight, Myrioé," he says softly.

I nod, unable to make words come out of my mouth. I stumble backwards and out the door. It takes me a long time to get back to Dhal'yan, since it's dark and my legs still aren't working right. But the whole while, I'm floating on clouds.

## You will never know

A loud screech in my ear wakes me from my daydreams. I look up and smile at the owl I've nicknamed Aila, who's sitting on my shoulder and is clearly the source of the screech.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I should get going."

I look out the window and see that it's almost midday. I laugh to myself, before standing up and sending Aila gliding away. I check the owls quickly before heading down the long, winding staircase to the bottom floor. The shelves of letters are full to the brim, with a few overflowing and falling onto the desk. They're clearly haphazardly stuffed in.

"Oh, Oriké," I sigh, smiling.

I walk over to the shelves and organize the letters properly, aligning them all on the shelves.

"It'll make Dienya's job easier," I say to myself, nodding.

I've finally been here long enough to memorize the schedule of who comes when. Though, after four months, I wouldn't expect anything less of myself. After all the letters are in order, I head back into the house, heading for the front door to go check on my garden.

"Myrioé!"

Or not. I turn around to face Oriké, a small smile budding on my face at the sheer irony. He's walking toward me, mercifully without Alydia.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask, tilting my head and trying to keep from tapping my foot.

"I wanted to ask you..." he trails off and bites his lip.

"Yeah?" I ask, now curious.

"My... My parents are coming here tonight for dinner. They're coming to meet Alydia, but I told them about you and they want to meet you as well. Do you want to stay?" he asks me, his eyes slightly hesitant.

"Sure," I shrug, "could be fun!"

He's never talked about his parents, so I'm very curious about them.

"Are they visiting from Antash?" I ask him, knowing that's where most humans near here live.

"No. They moved to Ejuin after they retired this place to me. They're here for a visit, so they're staying in Antash," he explains.

I nod and smile.

"Cool! Well, I'd love to stay. I should go home though so I can tell Karhisha I'll be out late and change into something more appropriate for a dinner party." I tell him, my eyes wandering.

He nods and smiles nervously.

"I'll be doing all the cooking this afternoon, so when you come back just let yourself in. And maybe entertain Alydia?"

My heart drops in my chest and I feel cold. Entertain her? How? I remember how much she hates me and I bite back an exasperated sigh. I force a smile onto my face and look back up at Oriké.

"Sure. I can do that."

He smiles at me and starts backing toward the kitchen.

"I really have to start the food. But I'll see you later."

I laugh and wave at him as he disappears through the door. As soon as he's gone, I turn and leave the house, hoping I don't meet Alydia on the way out. But the fates smile on me and I make it to the forest without encountering anyone except for a few squirrels and a robin. I walk briskly through the trees, my mind spinning.

“A dinner party... Wow...”

I get back to Dhal’yan and quickly update Karhisha on the situation. She seems very excited for me and she helps me pick out my nicest dress. I dress myself quickly and head back out the door again. Karhisha wishes me luck as I leave and I smile at her. I head down the stairs and immediately start into the forest. I decide to walk my way there and be careful of mud. By the time I arrive, the sun is low in the sky. Scared that I’m late, I run up the hill and let myself in the door.

“Myrioé.”

But it’s not his voice. It’s her. I look up to see her standing at the top of the stairs. She’s wearing a beautiful wine red dress and her lips are red.

“Hello, Alydia.”

There’s that sickly sweetness again. She comes down the stairs and smiles at me.

“I like your dress.” She says, gesturing forward with one of her porcelain hands.

But her smile strangely doesn’t seem fake. It seems strained. Like she’s really trying to be genuine. I smile back.

“Thank you. You look beautiful.”

I don’t have to lie. It’s true. She does. The door to the kitchen opens and Oriké walks out, carrying a large tray piled high with food. The three of us walk together down the hall to the dining room, which is already set with beautiful dishes and a vase of lilies.

“Wow... Sparing no expense, huh?”

Oriké doesn’t answer and instead spins around and leaves the dining room. I realize with I start that I had just heard a knock at the door and hadn’t realized it. Alydia turns to me, a nervous smile on her face.

“I’ll wait here,” she says, her voice soft.

I nod at her and quickly walk down the hall after Oriké. I keep to the shadows by the stairs as I see two people walk in the opened door. Oriké steps forward and embraces his mother warmly. She has long, blonde hair that’s tied back in a loose ponytail. Her bright green eyes, exactly like Oriké’s, are shielded by a pair of round glasses perched on her nose.

“It’s nice to see you, honey,” she says warmly, looking at him.

I expect Oriké to turn and hug his father, but he doesn’t. The exchange curt nods before the three turn and start walking towards me. Oriké and his father look like mirror images of each other, with the same tall stature and soft, brown hair. Oriké’s mother smiles as soon as she sees me and comes over to shake my hand.

“Forgive me, which one are you? He’s told us both of your names but not much else.”

“I’m Myrioé,” I tell her, smiling and shaking her hand.

“I’m Aelena. Aelena Roddhan, as you have probably guessed.”

I smile at Oriké’s father and bend my knees in a small curtsy. He nods at me.

“Daviol Roddhan,” he says, smiling slightly.

Oriké says nothing, simply continuing to lead the way to the dining room. As we enter, Alydia curtsies deeply and looks up through her lashes. Even I can admit that she looks beautiful. Aelena and Daviol introduce themselves to her as well and then we all sit down for dinner. I’m silent most of the time, letting Alydia talk to Aelena and Daviol and tell them about herself. My eyes stay trained on Oriké, gauging his reactions to everything. But every once and a while I see Aelena’s eyes flick to me and survey me curiously. I don’t think much of it. Obviously she’s curious about this girl who her son pulled out of a lake and is now hanging around his house. Although, I briefly wonder if she even knows the story about me being pulled out of the lake. If she does, she could be looking at me because she’s curious about how I’m alive. Despite the odd looks and the slight tension, the food is delicious

and dinner passes quickly. Oriké leaves the room to get dessert and I excuse myself to help him. We leave Alydia to talk to his parents. I follow him into the kitchen where he stops and heaves an exhausted sigh.

“I think it’s going well,” I say cheerfully.

He looks at me disbelievingly, but turns to get out the dessert. I help him carry things down the hall and place them on the table. Before I can sit down, however, I hear a loud screech echoing through the halls. I freeze and Oriké half stands up. Our eyes meet and I smile.

“I’ve got it. I don’t need any dessert. Please excuse me.”

I dip my head at Aelena and Daviol and back out of the room. Taking a deep breath, I head down the hall and into the tower. A wide grin on my face, I take the feed and start giving it out to all the owls. They screech indignantly and I laugh.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, we were pretty busy.”

Once they’re all satisfied, I sit down and look out the wide window spaces. The starry night sky glimmers above the dark forest. I gaze up at the full moon and smile. I’ve never been up here at night before, I never knew how beautiful it is.

After a while, I get up, dust my dress off and head back downstairs. I hear voices talking, so I hang back. I know I shouldn’t listen, but as always, my curiosity gets the better of me. I recognize the voices as belonging to Oriké and Aelena. I briefly wonder where Daviol and Alydia are, but I figure they’re off somewhere talking as well.

“You need to stop taking that girl for granted, Oriké.”

I look up sharply as I hear Aelena’s words.

“Who, Alydia?” I hear Oriké ask.

“No, Myrioé.”

There’s a slight pause and I can feel my heart pounding. Aelena’s soft words echo, bouncing around in my mind.

“How do you mean?”

Aelena sighs and I can hear her step forward. I can imagine she’s looking right into her son’s eyes, despite him being taller than her.

“She looks at you like you’re the best thing in the world, and you look at her like she means nothing.”

I turn and run. I can’t listen to any more. My feet make almost no noise on the wooden floors as I run through the halls. I head to the tower and leave through the door to the outside. Aelena’s words continue to echo in my head.

*“She looks at you like you’re the best thing in the world and you look at her like she means nothing.”*

I try not to let myself transmutate as I run across the grass and into the woods. Before long, I’m back at my tree and I sit down beside it, letting out a deep breath.

“Hey, Myri.”

I turn my head sharply to see Dakihel standing at the treeline, waving his hat at me. I smile and wave back as he walks over. He shoves me to scooch me over and then sits down beside me.

“You look very fancy, where’ve you been?” he asks me, raising his eyebrows curiously.

“I was at a dinner party with Oriké’s parents,” I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows at me and starts spinning his hat on his finger.

“That sounds fun. What made ya leave?”

I look out over the meadow to the treeline and the stars above it. Aelena’s words echo in my head once again.

“It doesn’t really matter,” I tell him.

We stare out at the trees together until something occurs to me.

“Hey, why are you here?” I ask him.

“I just came to think about some stuff,” he says, shrugging. “To get away for a bit.”

I turn to him, my face creased with concern.

“Get away from what?”

There’s silence for a bit, before he heaves a sigh and turns to me.

“My brother, Ekihel.”

My eyes widen and I tilt my head at him.

“I didn’t know you had a brother... Why are you trying to get away from him?”

Dakihel smiles sadly at me.

“You don’t have a sibling do you?”

I shake my head solemnly, keeping my eyes trained on him. He shrugs and sighs.

“We just fight a lot... We have a lot of disagreements.”

“Does he not approve of you... liking Oriké?” I ask, the sadness audible in my voice.

“No, no, he’s always been very supportive of that, actually. He was the first one I came out to and he supported me when I told my parents. He just... doesn’t approve of some of the choices I’ve made... He thinks that I should have gone into a more scientific, respectable job instead of just building things and spending so much time with Oriké.”

“I see...” I say, staring off into the trees.

We sit there in silence for a while before Dakihel gets up.

“I should be getting back,” he tells me. “Do you want me to walk you home?”

I suddenly realize that Oriké might be wondering where I am, considering how abruptly I left after tending to the owls.

“Thank you, but I should probably go back to the tower. I kind of left in a hurry and I think Oriké will be confused, at the very least.”

“Maybe even a little worried,” Dakihel winks at me and I shove him.

We bid each other goodbye and head our separate ways. I make my way back to the tower and let myself in. As I come through the front door, I see the main hall empty, save for Oriké sitting on the stairway with a contemplative expression.

“Hey.” I say, closing the door behind me.

He looks up and half-smiles.

“Hey. Where did you go?” He asks me.

I come over and sit down on the stairs, a little ways away from him.

“I just went out to get some air,” I tell him. “Social gatherings aren’t really my thing.”

He nods and we sit in silence for a bit.

“So, how did it go?” I ask him, breaking the silence. “The part I was there for seemed to be going well.”

Oriké is silent for a moment, staring off into the distance. I realize he might be thinking about what Aelena said and I try not to make it obvious that I know. Luckily, he talks before I have to.

“I think it went okay. I think my parents liked both of you, which is good. My dad seemed a bit concerned by the state of the tower, but all in all, not as bad as it could have gone.”

I nod slowly, taking in his words.

“That’s good.”

I pause for a second, weighing whether or not I’m brave enough to continue.

“Are things... okay with you and your dad? It seemed a little... tense.”

There's a long silence and my heart starts to pound, fearing that I've said something terrible. But after a while, he lets out a huff of laughter.

"I honestly don't know..." he tells me quietly. "He wasn't around a lot when I was younger, he was always working here."

"You didn't live here when you were younger?"

"No," he says, shaking his head. "My mom and I lived in Antash because it would have been too hard for him to work with us getting under his feet all the time. He wasn't ever around, and we only visited every once in a while. We only really got to know each other when I turned eighteen and he started training me to take over the tower."

I nod slowly, my eyes wide.

"That sounds rough..."

He shrugs and smiles slightly.

"Well, I never really knew him, so I never really knew what I was missing," he admits. "And I had my mom and Dakihel, so it wasn't all bad."

I smile and nod.

"Yeah, that's good. And now you have Alydia too," I remind him.

"And I have you."

He looks right at me and smiles. I feel my face flush pink and I look at the ground briefly. After a few seconds of breathing, I look back up. He's looking at me with an expression that's half confused, half amused.

"Yeah," I tell him, "you have me too."

We sit and talk for awhile longer, before we bid each other goodnight and I head back for Dhal'yan. Karhisha asks me how the dinner went, but I'm too tired to tell her. I collapse on my bed and stare out the window at the stars.

*I feel like I know more about him.*

I curl up and fall asleep with a warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest.

## How much

“Another dinner party?”

My jaw is hanging open in disbelief and I’m staring, wide-eyed, at Oriké. He smiles and shrugs at me.

“It’s only been a week since the last one!” I protest.

“Well, yeah. But Alydia’s family’s turn to come for dinner. She said Dakihel could come, since he didn’t get to come last time, and that you could come too, if you wanted.”

I pause for a second, thinking. It’s odd that she invited me, or was okay with me coming, when she dislikes me so much. And having a dinner party with her family would be no end of awkward. But it was fun last time, despite the tension, and I would feel bad leaving Dakihel alone with the lovebirds.

“I… Sure, I’ll come.”

He smiles at me and looks almost… relieved. I smile back, shrugging.

“I can’t leave Dakihel alone with you two, that would be terrible of me,” I joke. “So, are we meeting her parents?”

Oriké shakes his head, looking almost worried.

“No, they’re far too busy, as her mother is the Governor of Lorle. Her older sister and older brother are coming,” he explains.

I nod slowly, taking in the information. I briefly wonder if Alydia’s siblings will be anything like her, or if they’ll be completely different. Oriké goes back to his study to work, after delivering the news to me, leaving me to go out into the garden and tend to my plants.

“Ey, Myri!”

I look up at the sound and see Dakihel walking up the hill towards me. He tips his top hat and gives me a one-armed hug.

“Hey, how are you?” I ask him, grinning.

He shrugs nonchalantly, his expression lazy and careless.

“I’m fine. Excited for the dinner party, for sure. How ‘bout you?”

I shrug as well and turn back to the plant that I had been trimming.

“Pretty good, but a bit nervous for the dinner party, to be honest,” I admit, clipping the dead leaves off.

“Nah, don’t be. They’ll just be a couple of stuck-ups from Lorle. Don’t even worry about it,” he reassures me.

I pick up the trimmed leaves and look at him, my face creased with concern and disbelief.

“Sure.”

After we talk for a while, I head back to Dhal’yan to get changed again. When I arrive and tell Karhisha what’s going on, she just stands there, disbelieving.

“*Another* dinner party?” she asks me, her eyes wide.

I shrug and nod, heading for my room and for my closet. I figure it’s weird to wear the same dress again, but I don’t really have any other nice ones.

“You can borrow one of mine.” Karhisha says decisively, turning to head for her own room.

She has always been much more stylish than me and she has a lot more dresses and fancy clothes. She opens her closet and swings her hand out.

“Pick whatever you want!” she says, grinning.



I eventually choose a short, flowy blue dress and she helps me pin my hair up in a loose bun. When I protest, she laughs.

“C’mon, it looks great on you. I promise, he’ll love it.”

My face flushes pink and I scrunch up my nose, angrily.

“Wh- yo-... Agghh!”

She cackles and finishes pinning up my hair, twisting a blue ribbon into it. I thank her quickly before pulling on my shoes and rushing out the door. I know I might be a bit late because I took so long getting ready, so I run along the lakeshore until I make it to the tower. In the distance, I can see two figures slowly walking up the hill. Panicking, I head around the house and go in through the tower door, locking it behind me. When I come into the main hall, I see Oriké, Dakihel and Alydia standing together and waiting. They’re all dressed in their finest, Dakihel with his top hat and Oriké with a top hat of his own. Luckily, Alydia’s siblings don’t appear to have arrived yet.

“Hi, everyone,” I say quietly.

Dakihel turns and greets me warmly. Oriké simply nods, looking nervous, and Alydia doesn’t even move, her eyes constantly fixed on the door. Almost as soon as I come to stand beside them, there’s a sharp rap of the door. I hear Alydia draw in a sharp breath as Oriké walks forward and opens the door. I can’t see the two people he greets warmly until he steps back and they walk in the door. My sharp ears pick up the sound of Alydia’s teeth grinding together, which I’m sure none of the others hear. I feel a surprising flash of concern for her, but I’m distracted by the two people who I assume are her siblings. I can’t keep a slight look of shock off my face as I see them. Her sister, the taller of the two, is beautiful. She has blue-green eyes that are just as piercing as Alydia’s and her sleek black hair is twisted up into a bun. She’s wearing an indigo and white dress and a regal expression. Almost in direct contrast, the man who I assume is Alydia’s brother looks very shy. He’s standing half behind his sister, though also dressed up in his best, and he keeps pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose self-consciously. His black hair is short and tousled and his blue eyes are the precise shade of Alydia’s.

“Alymaire Digyéta,” the woman says, executing a perfect curtsy in our direction.

Her brother stumbles to do the same, bowing deeply, his glasses slipping off his face. He catches them quickly and rams them back onto his nose, blushing.

“I-I’m Mairden Hyélian,” he stutters.

Dakihel smiles and nods at him. The warm look in Dakihel’s eyes seems to comfort Mairden and the young man smiles as well. I give him my friendliest look, determined to make a good impression. Alydia gives her sister a tense look, her eyes narrowed, and doesn’t look at her brother. We all introduce ourselves and then we move to the dining room for dinner. As we walk, I see Alydia smile warmly at her brother, the kindest expression I’ve ever seen on her face. Mairden smiles back and they link hands for a brief second. I wonder what it’s like to have a sibling. When we get to the dining room, Oriké sits at one head of the table and Alymaire takes the other one. They look at each other for a second, both of their expressions full of insufferable dignity. We all take our seats on either side and I find myself seated beside Dakihel. He pokes my leg with his foot repeatedly and I try to keep from rolling my eyes. He doesn’t seem to understand the pressure of fancy dinners. Not that I really do, nymphs never have fancy dinners. All I know is that it’s important to Oriké.

As we eat, the others talk and I sit in silence. But I notice that Alymaire is doing most of the talking.

“My husband is Rahian Digyéta, of course. You may know of him, he’s a well known merchant in Tanekh. Unfortunately, my parents haven’t managed to marry these two off yet.”

She waves her hand at Alydia and Mairden, who are sitting to her right. My eyes flick to Oriké and I see he looks uncomfortable. I briefly wonder why, but Alymaire quickly starts talking again. As she talks, I watch her siblings. Mairden keeps his eyes on his food. Every so often, his gaze will flick up to look at Dakihel, before hurriedly returning to his food. Alydia, on the other hand, keeps her eyes trained on Alymaire. Every word her sister says, Alydia takes in, her eyes narrowed. She doesn't look at Oriké at all, unlike Alymaire, whose gaze is trained on him almost the entire time. But every so often, Alymaire will look over to meet Alydia's eyes and the tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife. We finish eating, and Oriké suggests we move into the living room for tea and dessert. I notice Mairden briefly open his mouth, then quickly close it again. Realizing that I'm also half playing hostess here, I walk over to him.

"Did you need something?" I ask, trying to make my voice soft and kind.

"I-I just... Well, I heard you have an amazing library here and I... I'd really like to see it if that's okay..." he stutters, his eyes wide as he looks at me.

Oriké hears and turns around.

"Of course. Dakihel, could you show him the library?" Oriké requests, turning to his best friend.

Dakihel nods good-naturedly.

"Sure," he replies. "It's real big and full of books, you'll love it."

Oriké, Alydia, Alymaire and I continue down the hall towards the living room as Dakihel and Mairden head for the library. Oriké pulls out his pocket watch, just as I realize what time it is.

"Dagne!" he says, looking up at me. "Myrioé-"

I cut him off with a nod and a smile.

"I got it, don't worry about it."

I give a small curtsy towards Alymaire, who nods, and I head back down the hall towards the tower. I run up the stairs, two at a time, and I'm breathing hard when I reach the top. Aila sails toward me screeching wildly. I squeak in shock and quickly duck to avoid her talons. I burst out laughing and hold out my arm for her to land on.

"Sorry, sorry, I'll get your food now."

After I feed them all, I sit down on the floor of the owlery, as usual, and look out the window. The only sounds are the soft hoots and the rustling of wings. The owlery is always such a peaceful place to gather your thoughts.

"I guess Alydia's been overshadowed her whole life, huh?" I say, to no one in particular.

A small barn owl soars down and lands beside me. I smile and pet its feathers gently. Aila chirps and takes off in a flutter of wings, landing on one of the roosts on the wall.

"That's why she's so determined to make an impression on everyone... She never got to be the one noticed..."

Realizing I should probably be getting back down, I stand up and dust myself off, straightening out my hair. I head down the stairs, checking the tower door as I go to make sure it's locked. I start to head for the living room, but I realize that I don't really want to listen to Alymaire talk any more. I walk up the main stairs and head for the library instead. As I approach I hear Mairden and Dakihel's voices talking.

"You... you really think I'm cute?"

Mairden. It's much less familiar. I smile at the words and shake my head. That's Dakihel for you.

"Sure. I've always thought Alydia would be cute if she were a boy. And now here you are. It's just perfect."

I hear Mairden squeak and shuffle his feet. I can tell he doesn't know what to say. I want to go in, but I don't want to interrupt this conversation.

"So... You too?" Mairden asks.

"Yeah, me too."

"Who'd you tell first?"

"My brother, Ekihel. What about you?"

"Alydia..."

At this point, I decide I should go in before they discover me and think I was eavesdropping. Which I kind of was. Regardless, I push the door open and quietly slip inside.

"Hey..." I say softly.

Mairden looks mortified, but Dakihel smiles. They're sitting in the window seat together and were probably just staring out at the grounds before I came in.

"Nah, she's cool. She knows," Dakihel says, grinning at me. "Hey, Myrioé."

I walk over to them, smiling at Mairden. There's no space for me on the window seat, so Dakihel beckons me into his lap. Mairden smiles nervously at me and Dakihel turns to him, continuing the conversation as if they hadn't been interrupted.

"So, both your sisters know?"

"Yeah," Mairden says, nodding. "Alydia's always been really supportive. It took Alymaire a bit to get used to it, but she came around too. They're super great about it."

*So she's a good sister...*

There's a moment of silence and an unspoken question hangs in the air.

"My parents don't know though... I think they're still hoping I'll marry some pretty, rich lady from Tanekh or something."

Dakihel shrugs.

"You could always marry some pretty, rich tradesman or something. That's what your sister did and they were fine with it."

Mairden laughs and I can't keep from smiling.

"Something tells me they wouldn't love that."

He and Dakihel look at each other and I suddenly feel really awkward being between them. I get up off Dakihel's lap and walk over to a nearby bookcase to start looking at the books. But I'm not really looking, I'm thinking.

The rest of the evening passes without incident. Things seem, if possible, even more tense between Alydia and Alymaire as the two siblings leave. Alydia and Oriké seem on edge, so Dakihel and I leave and give them some space. As we're walking down the hill, Dakihel puts his arm around me.

"Life's tough, Myrioé," he says, staring out at the trees.

I shove him, laughing.

"When did you get all wise?" I ask.

He shoves me back, but lightly.

"Today. Now I'm wise, deal with it."

I roll my eyes at him and head down the hill. After a bit, we part ways and he heads back toward Antash. I walk through the dark, cool forest, looking around at the trees around me. I can't stop thinking about today. Maybe I was wrong about everything?

*I really don't know anything about her...*

I pause to look through the trees at the lake.

*She's not at all what I thought she was...*

## *I love you*

The sun gleams in the sky, shining down on the world and making it glow. I close my eyes and lean my head back, taking a deep breath of the fresh air.

“Nice to get out of the house, huh?”

I open my eyes and look at Oriké, who’s standing in front of me and smiling slightly. Dakihel is standing behind him, sneaking up on him. I bite my tongue inside my mouth to keep from laughing.

“Gotcha!” Dakihel shouts, launching himself onto Oriké’s back.

Oriké’s expression changes into one of shock as he goes lurching forward.

“Dakihel!” he yells, trying to throw his friend off.

They both go tumbling into the grass and I narrowly roll out of the way. They eventually come to a stop, both breathing hard, both of their white shirts covered in grass stains. Dakihel his top hat off the ground where it had fallen and plunks it down on Oriké’s head, twisting it around. Oriké yanks the hat off, his hair looking tousled, and tackles Dakihel, tossing the hat into the grass. The two wrestle and shake each other, shouting and laughing.

“Boys,” I say exasperatedly, rolling my eyes.

“Excuse me?” Dakihel laughs, incredulously.

I turn to walk away, but Dakihel runs up behind me and grabs my waist.

“Hey! What are you doing?” I cry out furiously.

He yanks me up and I go sailing through the air before landing seated on his shoulders. I try to stay angry, but laughter bubbles up within me and I let it out. It feels good to laugh.

“Hold on to me!” I tell him.

“What are you going to do?” Oriké asks me, laughing.

“Knowing her, something stupid,” Dakihel says, grabbing my legs anyway.

I let go and let myself fall backwards until I’m hanging upside down off his back. I grin as I look at the treeline, hanging perilously off the earth.

“Get ready!” Dakihel calls out, his voice laced with devious laughter.

I scream as he spins around and I go sailing around in a circle. I hear shouts of laughter from both of them. Or maybe it’s from me. I’m flying and I don’t ever want to come down.

“I’m letting go! You better catch her!”

I shriek in fear as I feel his hands leave my legs and I go flying through the air before crashing into another warm body. We go tumbling to the ground, a tangle of limbs. My face flushes red and I flail around trying to get away. I haven’t been this close to him since he hugged me.

“Dogpile!” Dakihel yells.

I scream and try to roll out of the way, but he leaps up and lands right beside me, mostly on top of Oriké. Oriké shouts, but he’s laughing. I’m laughing too, we’re all laughing. Laying in the grass, a tangle of limbs, all laughing like idiots.

“Oriké!”

The three of us look up at the sound of a sharp call. Alydia is standing a little ways away, her hair slick, her posture perfect, her dress spotless. Her eyes pierce into me as they glide over the three of us laying in a pile.

“Hey, Alydia,” Oriké says, getting to his feet.

“You said you’d help me with my research today, didn’t you?”

“I did say that…” Oriké admits. “But why don’t you come hang out with us for a little while?”

She narrows her eyes at him and taps her foot impatiently. It makes no sound in the soft grass, but it has the intended effect.

“You told me you would,” she insists.

Oriké sighs and gets to his feet.

“Alright. Let’s go,” he says.

He walks off towards the house, but Alydia doesn’t follow. Dakihel and I get to our feet and as I walk past her, she reaches out and touches my hand.

“You and Dakihel make a sweet couple,” she says, smiling.

I grin at her and smile too. It takes all the self-control I have not to laugh. Dakihel, unfortunately, doesn’t have the same self-control. He lets out a loud snort of laughter, causing Alydia to turn to him with her eyebrows raised.

“Sorry, sorry. A... bug flew in my nose,” he tells her.

Her face wrinkles in disgust and she turns to walk back up to the house, meeting Oriké on the way, who had stopped to wait for her. As soon as they disappear inside, Dakihel and I turn to each other and burst out laughing. I slump against him in a fake faint, holding my hand up to my forehead.

“Oh, Dakihel! I’m so in love with you!” I simper, fluttering my eyelashes.

He turns and holds me at arms length, his face twisted in mock pain.

“But alas, we cannot be together, my love!”

“But why?” I say, shaking him. “Why must you torment me like this?”

“I’m gay,” he says, in a flat tone, staring right at me.

We stare at each other in silence for a moment, both of us fighting smiles, before we burst out laughing again. I fall to the ground, tears of laughter running down my face. Once we both recover, Dakihel pulls me to my feet.

“I don’t really wanna go back in there and deal with the lovebirds, do you?” he asks me.

I shake my head aggressively. He grins and shrugs.

“You wanna go for a walk then?”

“Sure!” I say, smiling.

We turn and head into the forest. He seems pretty uncomfortable with walking over roots and through shrubbery and things, so I keep him to the trail. I realize that humans probably don’t traipse around in the forest as much as nymphs do. Eventually I lead him off the trail and down to the lake’s edge. I sit down on a rock and beckon him down. He sits on the ground beside me, and follows my gaze out across the water.

“Is this the lake you fell in?” he asks quietly.

There’s a pause as I try not to relive it. It’s easier now that the lake isn’t iced over. It looks different.

“Yeah...” I tell him.

“What was it like?”

I let out a long sigh and look at the ground.

“Cold. Really cold.”

He nods, but stays silent. I appreciate that. We stare out at the lake together, watching the sunlight dance across the small ripples.

“Myrioé?”

I swing my head around to see Karhisha emerging from the forest, a look of surprise painted on her face. I raise my hand and wave as she comes over. Dakihel looks at me, confused, then back to Karhisha.

“Oh, you two haven’t met. This is Karhisha. Karhisha, this is Dakihel.” I tell them.

They shake hands and both smile.

“Nice to meet you,” Dakihel says. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too,” Karhisha replies. “I’ve also been told a lot about you.”

She looks at me and smiles.

“What are you doing here, Karhisha?” I ask her. “It’s pretty far out from Dhal’yan.”

“I was just going for a walk. I was kind of trying to meet you on your way back, but I didn’t really think I would. This is kinda crazy.”

I laugh and get up off the rock I had been sitting on. I turn to Dakihel and tilt my head at him.

“Do you think you’ll be able to find your way back from here or should I walk you back?” I ask him.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. I actually walk in these woods a lot. I know the way back from here, don’t worry about me.”

“Okay,” I say, smiling.

I give him a quick hug before turning to head back towards Dhal’yan with Karhisha.

“See you tomorrow, darlin’,” he calls from behind me.

I let out a snort of laughter and turn back to wave at him. He salutes to me and blows me a kiss before turning away and walking off. I roll my eyes at him, but I’m smiling. Karhisha looks at me, eyebrows raised.

“What was that about?” she asks, her voice high pitched.

“Don’t get excited, he was just joking.” I tell her, rolling my eyes when her face falls.

“Geez, Myrioé, he’s really cute. You never told me how cute he is,” she berates me.

I let out another snort of laughter and shake my head aggressively. She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Karhisha, don’t go there. Trust me, don’t go there.”

She looks confused, but she lets it drop. We start walking through the forest and soon arrive back at Dhal’yan. Karhisha turns to me, grinning widely.

“You know who’s really hot?”

I roll my eyes at her but I can’t keep the smile off my face.

“Jhosî.”

I laugh and head for our house, not making a comment. I can hear her laughing behind me. She’s quiet until we get to the top of the stairs, then she pipes up again.

“Seriously! With his dark hair, and his dark eyes, he just looks so brooding. And his freckles are *adorable*.”

“Mhmm,” I say, walking in the door and pulling off my boots.

“Come on. You can’t tell me you don’t think he’s hot.”

I shrug and sit down on the edge of my bed. She joins me, her wide, brown eyes looking at me earnestly.

“I don’t know, I don’t really.”

“Not *really* or not at *all*?” she presses.

I roll my eyes at her and shove her off the bed.

“Not at all.”

“Ugh, fine.”

She gets to her feet and leaps onto my bed, landing with a soft thud on her back and spreading out all her limbs so she covers the whole space. I roll my eyes at her.

“If you think he’s so hot, why don’t you ask him out?”

She rolls over and presses her face into the covers.

“Nooooooo,” she whines, her words muffled by the pillows.

“Pfff, you chicken,” I tease her.

We stay up incredibly late talking, but I don't manage to convince her to ask out Jhosí. When she finally goes to her room, I curl up under my covers and gaze out my window at the stars. The same stars I see when I look out the window of the tower. They mesmerize me to sleep. That night I dream.

*It was beautiful out.*

*The sun shone down on the wide, sunny field. The grasses swayed gently in the wind, or at least, the part that wasn't crushed under feet did.*

*Dozens of people milling around, all talking, laughing, discussing. A boy I recognize stands in the crowd. Dark skin, brown hair, blue eyes. Looking up at a platform that has been built nearby.*

*And there he is.*

*Standing on the platform like he was born to be there, his head held high, his arms rigid at his sides. He's dressed in his best, like at a party, a party that I've once been to. His brown hair is being gently tousled by the wind and his green eyes are sparkling in the sunlight.*

*He steps forward and everyone falls silent. The boy I recognize lets out a cheer.*

*He smiles and clears his throat. He starts talking, about success, about life, about support, about how he couldn't have succeeded without a very special person.*

*Wait, what?*

*“Myrioé, get up here,” he says, grinning.*

*I realize all at once that I'm standing beside the stage, on some sort of lowered platform along with a few other people. He reaches out his hand to me and my feet move of their own accord. I'm walking up the stairs onto the wooden platform and towards him.*

*“I couldn't have done any of this without you, Myrioé,” he says quietly.*

*He hugs me. Wraps his arms around me and holds me to his chest. My heart pounds and I can feel tears running down my face. But I'm smiling bigger than I ever have before. I feel his lips press against my head. I'm happier than I've ever been. I'm floating on clouds.*

*He lets go of me and steps away. He says a few more things that I don't quite catch and we walk off the stage together.*

*The world seems to blur, then reform, and I know it's later. I see Aelena coming up to me, a huge smile on her face. She embraces me, a warm, motherly hug.*

*“You're so good for him, Myrioé,” she says softly. “You're perfect.”*

*I see him smiling at me over her shoulder, his eyes full of love.*

When I wake in the morning, there's tear tracks on my face. But every piece of it I can remember vividly. And I have the warmest feeling in my chest that I've never felt before.

## Unless you see

The sky is darker today. A thick layer of clouds shields the sun from reaching the earth. It's chilly, and I shiver a little as I walk up the hill towards the house. I hear a screech from above me and I look up to see Aila soaring down. I smile and hold out my arm for her to land, but she sails past me and alights in a nearby tree. Her feathers are ruffled and she looks thoroughly disgruntled. I look up at her, concerned, but she chirps and turns away. Confused and worried, I turn and head back up towards the house. I let myself in and walk into the empty main hall. I hear muffled voices coming from the study, so I turn away from the hall to the owls and head up the stairs. The voices continue, sharp words and retorts. I follow the sound to the study and peek in the door. Oriké is pacing back and forth beside his desk, his face screwed up in angry concentration. Alydia is standing near the door, not far from me, looking affronted. I slip in through the door, quietly, and sidle over to Alydia. Oriké whirls around and glares at me.

"You'd better not make any noise, Myrioé," he snaps. "I've got enough to deal with right now, between the two of you."

I quickly look at Alydia. Her expression is confused and she looks hurt. I breathe a quiet sigh and step forward.

"Hey, what's going on?" I ask him, softly.

He turns on me, glaring forcefully.

"I have a billion things to do and I don't have *time* to be dealing with the two of you griping and asking more things of me!"

I nod slowly, fighting the urge to cry and looking up at him with a calm expression.

"I understand. Well, no one is going to ask anything else of you. Do you need any help with anything?" I ask him, quietly.

He snatches a paper up off his desk and crumples it into a ball, breathing hard.

"Oriké, you're getting irrationally angry about this," Alydia says sternly. "Just let us help and it'll get done faster."

"I don't *want* any help from you!" he shouts, his eyes blazing.

Alydia takes a step back, reeling.

"From either of you!"

Alydia spins on her heel and leaves the study. Oriké turns back to his desk and bends over the papers again. The tension in the air is thick. Making a split-second decision, I turn and follow Alydia out. I hear Oriké kick the side of his desk and my chest tightens, but I keep going. Regret won't help me now. I just barely see Alydia disappearing down the bend in the hallway. She's not running, but I can hear her heels clicking on the hardwood. She's walking fast. I follow her, my boots making minimal noise on the floor. I eventually reach the main hall and I see the front door swinging shut with a bang. Taking a deep breath, I head down the stairs and out the door. It occurs to me that she may have simply left and headed back to Antash. Yet, something tells me she'd want to stick around. Or, at least, that she wouldn't want to be alone. As soon as I close the front door behind me, I head down the steps and turn into the garden. I wander for a bit, looking around at my plants. I brush my hands over some of the flowers, but the whole time I'm looking for Alydia in my peripheral vision. Finally, I see her. In a small cove of the garden that I thought only I knew about. It had been overgrown with ivy and rose bushes, and is mostly hidden, but there's a small bench in it and several pretty flowers. I had never cut back the overgrowth because it's such a pretty little place. I see her sitting there, her hands in her lap, staring at the ground. With her white and blue dress and the red tips



of her black hair, surrounded by white and red roses, it makes a pretty picture. I walk up beside her quietly and she looks up. She's not crying, but she looks incredibly tired and sad.

"Hey, Myrioé."

Her voice is quiet, and she looks back down at the ground as I sit on the bench beside her. We sit in silence for a bit, before I start to speak.

"He shouldn't have yelled at you like that..." I say quietly. "It was completely uncalled for."

She's quiet for a bit, before looking up to meet my eyes. I've always been so preoccupied with how piercing and glaring her eyes are, I've never really appreciated how beautiful they are. A light, sparkling blue.

"Thanks..."

"He only does that when he's stressed," I tell her. "When he's stressed about something, he kind of forgets that other people exist or that they have feelings. But he's not like that all the time, most of the time he's really sweet."

I realize all of the sudden that it's probably stupid of me to be telling her things that she already knows about her own boyfriend. But, I realize she's smiling slightly.

"I know his work is really important to him. I just wish I was as important to him," she says quietly.

"I know... But nothing is, or ever will be, as important to him as success..." I tell her. "It's hard to accept being second in priority, but I guess that's just a sacrifice you have to make in order to be close to him..."

Alydia lets out a soft huff of laughter, still looking at the ground.

"I guess you're right... It's just... like you said, a hard thing to accept."

I nod slowly and we sit in silence for a bit longer. I don't know what else to say, so the silence continues. I don't know if I've helped or not.

"I probably shouldn't have come out, I know you hate me, I just wanted to make sure yo--"

"What?"

She looks at me and we sit in silence again, staring at each other. My eyes are wide and hers are confused. Finally, she laughs a little and returns her gaze to the ground.

"I don't hate you, Myrioé."

*Wait, what?*

"What? But you... you kept looking at me weird... I thought you hated me because I'm always hanging around..."

I trail off as she looks up at me once again. Her eyes are sad and almost scared.

"Myrioé, I envy you."

I freeze and look at the ground.

"Why?" I whisper.

There's a brief pause and she lets out a long sigh.

"Because you love him."

My face flushes pink and I turn my head away, my heart pounding.

*How does she know?*

"What makes you think that?" I ask her.

I curse how shaky my voice sounds. She laughs again. It's a little less sad this time, a little more like a real laugh. Maybe I am helping.

"I can see it in your eyes. Whenever you look at him. The way you move around him and do whatever he needs from you without a backwards glance."

I curl my hands into fists and rest them on my knees, biting my lip. If it's this obvious to her, he must know already. I take a deep breath to calm myself and look back up at her.

"Why do you envy that? Don't you love him too?"

She looks away and she curls her hands into fists too.

"I..." she trails off.

"You're his girlfriend... Don't you love him?" I ask, my voice soft and scared.

"Not in the way you do."

I barely catch the words because she's talking so quietly. I'm scared. Scared for Oriké, scared for her. But deep in the darkest parts of me, there's a sick feeling of hope that I crush down.

"What do you mean?"

She lets out a long sigh, but she doesn't raise her eyes from the ground.

"I do love him. I love him a lot. But not in the way that I'm supposed to. I love him like a friend."

My brain is spinning, I don't understand.

"Then... why?" I ask.

"My parents... always had big dreams for me. When they found out I had become close with the Owl-keeper of Antash and that he was showing an interest in me, they were insistent. I only did this to please them... Just like I've done with everything in my life... But if I'd had my way, I wouldn't have done it." She pauses. "I prefer girls."

I blink for a few seconds, unable to comprehend everything I'm hearing.

"You... like girls?"

"Yeah."

She looks up and meets my eyes. I try not to portray my shock on my face, but I don't think I'm doing a very good job. Her eyes widen as she seems to realize something.

"Not you, of course. I don't like... like you."

I raise my eyebrows at her, confused and almost concerned. She realizes what she said and scrambles to backpedal.

"Not that there's anything wrong with you, I'm sure people do like you and you're really nice I'm just saying that I don't."

I blink at her.

"Like you, that is."

We stare at each other for a second, before I feel laughter bubbling up within me. She smiles and suddenly we're both laughing. We laugh for a long time at the craziness of all of this. I thought she hated me for so long, when all this time, I could have had a friend. When we finally recover, I take a deep breath and look at her again.

"So... do your siblings know?" I ask her.

She smiles and nods.

"Mairden's been really supportive. Alymaire... less so..."

I tilt my head and the smile fades from my face.

"How do you mean?"

"I think... Well, I think she doesn't approve of me getting into this relationship just because our parents want me to..."

I nod slowly, starting to understand.

"She's not a bad sister, really. She just thinks she always knows what's best for us," Alydia says. "And she's not always right."

I look up all of a sudden, and see that it's already past midday. Alydia looks up too, and she grimaces.

“Dagne! I was supposed to meet Navia at midday!”

She turns to me and smiles.

“Thank you for the talk, Myrioé. I really do feel a lot better.”

She stands up and laughs a little.

“Maybe don't tell Oriké?”

I laugh too, and stand up next to her.

“No way. Not until you tell him yourself.”

All of a sudden, she turns and hugs me. I freeze up, my eyes wide. Eventually, I break myself out of the shock and wrap my arms around her.

“I don't hate you, Myrioé.”

She steps back and smiles at me before heading off down the garden path and down the hill towards Antash. I let out a long, heavy breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, and I drop down onto the bench again.

“Did that just happen?”

I sit there for a while, mulling over this new information in my head. After a while, I head back inside. I have a clear purpose. Not burning, there's no fire. Just a cold, clear purpose. I walk up the stairs and knock on the door to the study. Oriké mutters for me to come in, so I push the door open and step inside. He's standing at his desk, with his glasses on his nose, reading over something. He looks up briefly before looking back down.

“Did you need something?” he asks, not looking up.

“No. I want to tell you something.”

Now he does look up, confused. I know why. I barely come to tell him things like this, or say anything with this much conviction in my voice. It's a good thing, too. It'll have more effect this way.

“You shouldn't have yelled at Alydia like that.”

He looks almost taken aback. I don't know why he wasn't expecting this.

“It was rude. It was mean. She was only trying to help you and she didn't deserve the way you treated her.”

I stare at him for a second, trying not to let pain and anger leak into my expression.

“You need to stop pushing away people who are trying to help you. That'll only hurt everyone, you included.”

Without waiting to see his reaction, I spin on my heel and leave the room. I feel a sudden desire to get out of the house, so I leave for the day. I walk through the forest, my mind spinning, feeling a little sick inside.

“Was that the right thing to do?”

I never really figure it out. But the next day, I regret everything anyway.

## *Yoursself*

The next day, when I wake up, something feels off. I can't quite explain it, but as I leave for the day and walk through the forest and head for the tower, I can't help but feel like something is different today. And I'm not disappointed.

As I approach the tower, I'm surprised to see Alydia standing on the front steps.

*Why hasn't she gone in yet?*

She turns to me as I come up to the gate and walk towards the steps. Her face is creased with worry, but she looks relieved to see me.

"Hey, Myrioé," she says quietly. "I'm glad you're here."

I walk up the steps to stand next to her.

"What's happening? Why hasn't he opened the door yet?" I ask her.

"I don't know... I've been knocking for almost twenty minutes, he's not opening."

I step forward and knock on the door, hard.

"Oriké?"

No reply.

"Are you sure he's in there?"

She shrugs and her brow furrows in concern.

"I don't know... He hasn't said anything."

"What's happening?"

We both turn to see Dakihel walking toward us, wearing a look that's just as confused as ours. Alydia shrugs and looks at me. For some reason, she doesn't seem to like talking to Dakihel.

"We can't get in. We've been knocking, Alydia's been here for twenty minutes and he hasn't answered."

Dakihel's face creases with worry and he beckons us.

"Let's try a different way in."

The three of us head around the house and over to the tower. Dakihel looks determinedly at the door, before lifting his foot and kicking out hard. Alydia's lets out an audible gasp and my jaw drops. The door flies off its hinges and crashes down inside the room.

"He'll forgive me for that," Dakihel says, brushing himself off.

There's a brief pause.

"Probably."

We walk in and Dakihel picks up the fallen door, leaning it against the doorframe. Alydia and I both look at him, concerned.

"Eh, I'll fix it later."

I open the door into the house and we all walk through the hall.

"Oriké?" I call, looking around.

We're greeted by silence as we walk around the house. Everything seems cold and abandoned, and no one's here. We walk up the stairs, peeking into the rooms as we go. They're all empty and untouched. Dakihel peeks into Oriké's bedroom for us, but he's not there either. And, his bed doesn't look slept in.

"Should we check the study, maybe?" I suggest.

We continue our search through the house, sweeping every room until we get to the study. Alydia goes in first, and then freezes, letting out a gasp. Dakihel and I follow her in and we both freeze as well.

“Oh my god.”

The place is a mess. Papers are strewn everywhere, crumpled up. There’s muddy boot prints on some of the crisp, white sheets. The desk is covered with papers and books and a bottle of ink has been knocked over, dyeing the papers inky blue and soaking into the wood. The chair has been knocked over. I bring a hand to my mouth and tears well up in my eyes. There’s no sign of Oriké. Dakihel looks confused and suspicious, Alydia looks afraid. Suddenly very worried, I turn and run for the tower. I dash up the stairs, three at a time, until I reach the top. A few seconds later, Alydia and Dakihel arrive at the owlery as well. A large, handsome screech owl is perched by the window, with a letter attached to its talons. I go over and untie it, letting the owl fly off. I freeze as I see the name scrawled on the front in round, loopy letters.

It’s addressed to me.

“What does it say?” Alydia asks in a hushed voice.

I open it with shaky hands and pull out the folded paper.

*Myrioé,*

*I’m writing this quickly, so I have to be brief. We received a letter earlier today saying that Oriké has been kidnapped, and if we want him back, we have to pay a ransom of 5000 kavas. There was a listed meeting place, near the nymph village of Fyeliddan.*

*I don’t know if they’re telling the truth or not, but we can’t risk it. Daviol and I are coming back north at once. We’ll meet you on the outskirts of Madne. If Oriké is home and well, send this owl back with a letter. If we don’t get one, we’ll assume to see you at Madne as soon as possible. The letter gave us a time for the meeting, in two days’ time.*

*Please help us save our son.*

*Aelena*

The letter slips out of my hands and flutters to the ground. Dakihel snatches it up and his eyes scan the few lines.

“Oh my god...” he breathes.

Alydia peers over his shoulder and reads it as well.

“Oriké...” I whisper.

“Well, we need to go,” Dakihel says.

I nod to him and we both look at Alydia. She nods as well, slowly. I take the letter and tuck it into my pocket, before starting down the stairs. Alydia and Dakihel follow me. I feel bad leaving the owls here alone, but they can take care of themselves. We head to the ruined study and Dakihel pulls a rolled-up map off of a shelf. He spreads it out on the ink-soaked table and we all look over it. He points out Madne on the map, but I’m surprised to see that none of the nymph villages are marked.

“Do you know where Fyeliddan is?” Dakihel asks me.

I nod and close my eyes, summoning up a mental image of the many maps I’ve seen in my life. I open my eyes and place my finger down on the map.

“About there,” I tell them.

“Good.” Dakihel rolls up the map and tucks it under his arm. “Let’s go. We can get a cart in Antash.”

I shake my head.

“I don’t like riding. I’ll run.”

Alydia and Dakihel both look at me with surprised and concerned faces, but they don’t question it. The three of us head down the hill at a brisk walk and it occurs to me that I’m going to see Antash for the first time in my twenty-one years of life.

I’m honestly underwhelmed. It’s not nearly as beautiful as Dhal’yan. Just a few clusters of houses here and there, farms and a big building in the middle that I take to be the town hall. Dakihel gets a cart off of someone and we head out almost immediately.

“Are you sure you don’t want to ride with us, Myrióé?” Alydia asks me, tilting her head.

As if in response, I let my form twist into the deer, stamping my hoof a few times. Alydia laughs and gets into the cart.

Travelling is long and rough, but my stamina as a deer is considerably more than as a nymph, and even better than it was as a wolf. I run alongside the cart as we hurtle down the road towards Madne. The trip takes the whole day and it’s dark when we’re approaching. Alydia gets us a place to stay, but I feel uncomfortable staying inside. Aelena and Daviol haven’t arrived yet, so all we can do now is wait.

And I hate waiting.

I decide to go for a walk while Alydia and Dakihel eat. I’m not hungry. I walk around the small town, grateful that the streets are mostly empty. A few people shoot me odd looks as I pass. Probably because my pointed ears give me away as a nymph. Despite the fact that Fyeliddan is quite close to here, they seem like they’ve never seen a nymph before. Then again, I wouldn’t blame the nymphs for staying away from this place. It’s not... particularly inviting.

I reach the edge of town and start heading back. My mind is spinning, thinking about Oriké. It’s all I can think about.

*Where are you?*

The next morning, we wake up and dress silently. None of us want to say anything. We don’t know *what* to say. We leave early and head to the meeting place. When we arrive, we see Aelena and Daviol already there. Aelena’s face is creased with worry and she keeps folding and unfolding the corner of a piece of paper she’s holding. Daviol’s worry isn’t as obvious, but his eyes flick around and he’s tapping his foot. The three of us approach quietly and Dakihel calls out a greeting. Aelena’s face dissolves into relief as she walks over to us. I smile at her, then freeze in shock as she gives me a quick hug.

“Thank you for coming,” she says, tears budding in her eyes.

“Of course,” I say.

Dakihel and Alydia nod as well. Daviol walks over and taps his wife’s shoulder.

“We need to get moving.”

Aelena nods and straightens up.

“Of course,” she says.

She hands me the paper she was holding and we all turn to go. Daviol leads us away towards where their cart is parked. It’s much nicer than ours had been, since, as Oriké had told me, they were taking a tour of south-western Ke’aphra before returning home to Ejuin. My chest tightens as I think

of Oriké and, for the thousandth time, I pray he's okay. Daviol gets into the cart first and helps Dakihel and Alydia up. Aelena turns to me, tilting her head.

"Are you coming, Myrioé?"

I sigh to myself, quietly. I would prefer to run, but if I do, I'll miss out on whatever plan they decide on. I hate missing out on things. I take Aelena's hand and she helps me climb into the cart. It clearly wasn't built to hold this many people, so we're tightly packed together and it's very warm. I press my face against the cold glass of the window to cool myself off. But, though it makes me more comfortable, it doesn't take my mind off of Oriké. Aelena is the first one to break the silence.

"So, what are we going to do?"

Her voice is wavering. I don't blame her. There's a heavy weight in my chest, a constant fear. Every second I'm just praying that Oriké is still alive and okay. I reach out and take her hand. She smiles at me, before turning back to the others.

"Should we pay the ransom?" Aelena asks. "We have the money..."

"But there's no guarantee that whoever has Oriké will even give him back if you pay. It might just be a waste," Dakihel says, resting his chin on his hands.

"No one's going to pay anything," Alydia says suddenly. "And we're going to get Oriké back."

We all fall silent and listen to her plan. My eyes widen as she talks and I clench my hands into fists. It's risky, but it just might work. After she finishes talking and we all agree, we sit in silence for a long while.

"We're here," Daviol says suddenly, his voice heavy with apprehension.

Daviol opens the door and we all pile out. Aelena and I thank the driver and we form a tight circle.

"Let's do this," Alydia says, her eyes full of determination.

We split off and I head into the trees. Once I'm out of sight, I twist myself into deer form and bound towards the place where I know the meeting is supposed to be. The trees cast moving shadows on the ground, seeming like ominous warnings of the treacherous path ahead. But I shake off my apprehension and keep going. This is the only way to get Oriké back. When I arrive at the meeting place, a small clearing with a large boulder in the center of it, the place is empty. I find a place in the bushes that's thoroughly concealed and I lay down, staying in deer form. I know that no one could be suspicious of a deer, but I can't help but feeling like people are watching me.

I wait for several hours, silent and still. When I look up, it's almost midday. The kidnapper, or their representative, should be here any second now. I hear a rustling in the bushes across the clearing and I duck my head down, despite knowing that they won't suspect a lone deer resting in the bushes. I had expected the person to look sinister and evil, or at least have a sinister energy. But the person who emerges into the clearing is none of those things. Not even wearing a dark cloak like I had expected. With soft, light brown hair, blue-green eyes, wearing a red plaid shirt. It's just a normal human man.

With pointed ears.

## The way

I try to suppress my shock, but a small noise escapes me. The man turns toward me, his blue-green eyes glaring sharply. Thankfully, he must have thought nothing peculiar about the deer nestled in the bushes, because he turns away and looks around the clearing. He's looking for Aelena and Daviol, I'm sure. Except, he won't see them. They aren't coming.

I nestle deeper into the bushes and keep my eyes fixed on him. He leans against a tree to wait, but it's in vain. After a long while, he chuckles to himself and shakes his head. He's realized they aren't coming.

"What a shame," he sighs.

He turns and heads into the forest. I get to my feet, or... hooves, and shake myself. I trot quickly across the clearing, over to where he disappeared into the forest. Working fast, I dig my hoof into the mud and kick out hard, hitting a tree and leaving a muddy hoof print on it.

*Come on, guys...*

I turn and quickly bound into the forest towards where the man disappeared. It's hard to track him through the undergrowth, but I catch glimpses of him every couple of minutes, so I'm able to stay on track. Every so often, I leave a muddy hoof print on a tree so that Dakihel and Alydia can follow. The walk is long and tiring, but I don't stop. I can't risk losing him.

Eventually, the man breaks out of the trees and heads for a large manor on a hill. I don't know where we are-- there aren't any other houses anywhere near here. I release my transmutation and slip back into nymph form. My curiosity nags at me to go investigate the house and find Oriké, but I know I have to wait for the others. So, taking a deep breath, I sit down to wait.

It takes them a while to arrive, maybe half an hour. At this point, I'm pacing back and forth along the treeline, barely able to keep myself from rushing into the house. Dakihel emerges from the forest behind me, with Alydia close after. They're both out of breath and look a little ruffled from charging through the forest, but they're otherwise unharmed.

"Where did he go?" Alydia asks, her blue eyes wide.

I nod to the large manor house on the hill and Dakihel's eyes widen.

"Oh boy..." he says softly, "we didn't really plan for this part, did we?"

"No, but we can figure something out. I've been thinking on it while I've been sitting here. There has to be a side door into the kitchen or something-- in houses like these there always are-- so that people delivering food supplies can get it right to the kitchen and don't have to come in the front door." I tell them.

Alydia nods slowly.

"That... might work," she says.

Normally, I would smile at her approval. But right now, my face is a mask of concentration. We don't have any time to waste.

"Let's go."

The three of us make our way around the hill, keeping close to the treeline and counting on the shadows to hide us. Once we get around the side of the manor, we start up the hill. When we're about halfway up, I spot the thing that I had been praying existed.

"There," I whisper.

The three of us look up to see a door on the side of the house, with a few windows to the sides of it. As we creep up to it and peek in the windows, we see no one bustling around in the kitchen. In



fact, it looks dusty, like it hasn't been used in a long while. Dakihel tries the handle of the door, but it's locked.

"Dagne!" he curses softly.

Alydia steps forward, her eyes narrowed. She removes a hairpin from her hair and expeditiously picks the lock. As the door swings open, she turns to see me and Dakihel staring blankly at her, mouths agape. She rolls her eyes and replaces the pin in her hair.

"Don't ask," she says firmly.

Dakihel and I look at each other, but we do as she says. The three of us creep quietly into the house. The kitchen is empty, but there's nothing in it that could give us a clue as to who this man is or where Oriké might be. I walk over to the door across the room and open it a tiny bit, peeking out. It leads to a dark, empty hallway, lit only by a few lamps. I beckon the other two, and we start into the hallway. It's long and twisting, but we don't dare turn and go through any of the other doors. Eventually, we reach a huge main hall, lit by a golden chandelier on the ceiling. On the wall opposite us, there's a massive tapestry hanging. I go over to it while Alydia and Dakihel look around. It seems to be some kind of family tree, with several faces staring out of small frames. I look down at the most recent addition, a single son. His name is too hard to make out in the darkness, but his father's name is Otohré Lueqen.

*Lueqen? Like, Rahu and Kahr Lueqen?*

But I'm quickly distracted from this by looking at the mother. Otohré Lueqen's wife. I can't see her name or her face. Someone ripped strings out of this tapestry, maybe with a knife. The loose strings hang down, leaving a hole in the tapestry where this person's face must have once been. I feel a pang of pity for whoever it was. What a fate, to be torn from your family tree like that.

"Myrioé!" Alydia hisses from behind me.

I turn away from the tapestry, and the three of us head up the main stairs. This house is much bigger and much grander than Oriké's, and the halls are much more confusing. As we walk down the hall, we see a door that has light pouring from the bottom of it. Dakihel turns to us, eyebrows raised. Alydia and I look at each other, then nod. Dakihel reaches for the handle, but before I see him touch it, something claps a hand over my mouth and yanks me backwards into the shadows. I reach out my arm towards Alydia, trying to scream a warning through the flesh that blocks my mouth. Before I can try to struggle free, something is pulled over my head, and my vision goes dark. I writhe and struggle, but I feel someone heave me up, maybe over their shoulder, and start carrying me. I hear several loud thumps and a shout that's abruptly cut off. I thrash around trying to escape the iron grip that holds me.

"Dakihel!" I try to shout. "Alydia!"

But the sound is all around me. There's something over my head. They can't hear me. I continue to kick and squirm, but whoever's holding me must be very strong, since they have no problem carrying me to wherever I'm being taken. My heart is pounding, I can hear it in my ears. I try not to hyperventilate, but it's hard to breathe with something over my head and I've never been more scared in my life. Suddenly, the darkness around me lightens slightly and I guess that we've been carried into a well lit room. I let out a squeal as I feel myself falling and I'm slammed down onto a cushioned surface. Something is yanked off my head and I squint my eyes as bright light floods in around me. When I adjust to it, I realize that I'm seated on a couch of some sort, with Dakihel and Alydia sitting next to me. Across the room, a fire crackles in a fireplace, and in front of it is a black, wooden chair with a man sitting in it.

"Dear, dear girl," he says softly, his blue-green eyes rising to meet mine. "How naïve you are."

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Where’s Oriké?” I demand.

He laughs softly.

“Straight to business then?” he asks. “You must be Myrioé.”

I recoil in shock and fear as the words leave his mouth.

“How do you know my name?” I ask, cursing how afraid my voice sounds.

“You are the one they wrote to, are you not?” he asks me, tilting his head.

“Yes,” I say defiantly, “what’s it to you?”

He laughs again, seemingly endlessly amused by my resilience.

“And you were the one who was waiting in the clearing for me, were you not?”

My eyes wide and I’m silent. How could he have known I was there? Was he watching me as I arrived?

“W-what are you talking about?” I stutter.

I hear Alydia breathe out through her teeth beside me. My whole body feels so tense, I’m so confused.

“The deer.”

I freeze. He *does* know.

“How do you know that?”

He laughs again, for a long time, his head thrown back.

“A real deer would have run off the second I came into the clearing. Only a transmuted nymph would actually stay and watch me that intently. I know nymphs, Myrioé.”

Every time he says my name, I feel twisted and sick inside. But that’s the least of my problems right now.

“How do *you* know nymphs?” I ask him, my eyes wide, trying to make my voice sound offended.

“I would assume living among them for thirteen years would give me a pretty thorough idea.”

I reel back, my eyes widening.

“Why would a *human* live among nymphs?”

A silence falls over the room and I can hear the man’s harsh breathing. Suddenly, his expression curls into hatred and he slams his fist down on the side of the chair.

“Because of my mother’s *stupid mistakes*,” he hisses furiously.

“Your mother?” I whisper.

He clears his throat and sits up straight. When he looks back up at us, you never would have guessed that he had just been so angry.

“How rude of me,” he says, his voice even, “I haven’t introduced myself. You may call me Ci.”

“Like the letter?” Dakihel asks.

Ci sighs.

“Yes. Like the letter.”

“My mother was stupid enough to fall for a human. I didn’t want to be born, but born I was. My father didn’t want me. He left.”

I turn my head to look at Dakihel and Alydia and see that their expressions are just as blank and confused as mine.

“My mother, she decided to raise me among the nymphs. She thought it would be better for me. But my whole life, I was mocked, ridiculed, hated, *disrespected*.”

The way he hisses the last word makes me think that was the one he hated the most. I see Dakihel glance at me out of the corner of his eye.

“And do you know why?”

The question is directed at me.

“Because of your eyes,” I say softly.

He leaps to his feet, a mad grin on his face.

“Right you are, Myrioé! Just because my eyes were blue. Because I wasn’t a true nymph like the *rest of them*. So when I was thirteen, I left my mother. I left my home, and I came to live here with my father.”

His face suddenly curls into a terrifying snarl and he leans forward out of his chair. I recoil in fear and Alydia’s hand snaps down to grab my wrist.

“I deserve to be *revered*! I am the descendant of Rahu Lueqen himself! I should be respected and adored! Not treated like an outcast or some sort of *mistake*!”

He’s spitting the words like they’re vile. I can see the madness in his eyes, glimmering and glinting in the firelight. The idea that this man is the one who has Oriké is terrifying. He suddenly calms and sits back in his chair.

“You know... Your little friend... What’s his name?”

“Oriké,” I say immediately.

“People sure respect *him*. Fancy little Deari-vådare, he is.”

It’s odd to hear a human use Maeidh’a words, even though I know he was raised among nymphs.

“He doesn’t deserve it though. There’s nothing special about him. He’s not important. Not like I am.”

A sudden surge of defiance bursts up in me and I raise my head.

“You’re wrong!”

Ci looks up, raising an eyebrow at me.

“And what would you know, little Myrioé?”

“He is special! He’s the most amazing person I know. And maybe he isn’t perfect all the time, but he’s kind and he cares! He tries his best to be good. Not like you, you’re just awful!”

Ci bows his head and I’m suddenly terrified. He gives a low chuckle and I can see the firelight reflecting off his white teeth.

“You know, I was hoping we wouldn’t disagree like this, Myrioé.”

I hear a click and I look down at his hand in horror to see a small gun clutched in his fist. Dakihel gives a shout of alarm as Ci raises it toward me and Alydia gasps. But before the gun can fire, something hits me in the back of the head, hard, and I black out.

*“How unfortunate.”*

The first thing I notice when I wake up is that I’m lying on something hard. Probably the floor. The second thing I notice is that I’m very, very cold. I instinctively bring my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around myself. My whole body feels sore. I sit up, then bring a hand to my head as it throbs. I can feel the bruise forming. I look around and find myself in some sort of storage room. The floor is stone, which explains why it was so hard, and it’s full of boxes and assorted items. Right near me, leaning against some boxes, is a large, dusty painting of two men. The older man has brown hair streaked with grey and a full beard. The other one looks like Ci, but younger. A plaque on the bottom reads ‘Otohré Lueqen and his son, Cikatíé’. I realize it has to be Ci and his father. I look around me and see Alydia and Dakihel lying nearby. They’re both unconscious but appear unharmed. My gaze travels a little further, then freezes.

“Oriké?” I whisper.

There he is. Just a crumpled heap in the corner. I scramble to my feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in my head, and rush over to him. I fall to my knees beside his head, my vision blurred by tears.

“Oriké! Oriké, Oriké... No... No...”

His face is bloody and his eyes are closed. Tears spill down my face and fall onto his black shirt.

“Oriké!”

My shouts wake Dakihel and Alydia. They come over, both murmuring. But I can’t make out the words. Dakihel is breathing fast.

“Oriké, please... Please no...” The tears are pouring down my face and my body is wracked with sobs. “Please be okay, please...”

I lay my head on his chest and listen to his slow heartbeat.

“I can’t lose you...”

My tears are soaking his shirt, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“Myrioé...”

I had almost forgotten that Dakihel and Alydia were still here. I feel a warm hand on my shoulder, but I don’t care whose it is.

“Oriké...” I whisper.

There’s a loud bang on the door and bright green eyes fly open. I leap away from him, scrambling back on my knees, the flow of my tears stemming. Oriké sits up and meets my eyes, looking bewildered and scared. The door flies open and we all scramble away. My head pounds. Ci is standing in the doorway, gun in hand, an ominous silhouette.

“Looks like your parents don’t care enough about you to pay for you, scum. All they could do was send these useless idiots,” Ci snarls. “Unfortunate for both of us.”

His voice is drastically different now, but he still has the same malice in his eyes.

“I don’t get my money and you... well...”

He lifts the gun and points the barrel at Oriké’s face. A tsunami of emotions crash down on me, all at once. Fear, panic, rage, fury.

Fire.

“STAY AWAY FROM HIM!” I scream.

But I don’t think all the words make it out. Halfway through, it turns into a howling roar. I can feel the fur sprouting, thicker and coarser than it should be, I can feel my bones breaking and reforming, but it’s wrong. My fingers curl into the claws that have been gone for so long. Alydia screams.

The wolf lunges. The gun fires.

I hit the ground.

## *I see you*

The first thing I notice is the warmth. Concentrated on my side, spreading throughout my entire body. As I shift, I feel a sharp pain in my side. But as I lie still, it's overwhelmed by the heat and nothing hurts. I see red on the inside of my eyelids, suggesting light. Everything's so warm, there's no cold. I just want to sleep forever.

"How's she doing?"

I perk my ears at the sound of voices. They sound like they're coming from far away, maybe through a wall or through a door. But my hearing has always been very good. I can hear them.

"She's still asleep. But she's stable now. Her wound is healing well, though I can imagine it's still very painful."

"I'm kind of worried for her. She hasn't eaten anything in over a day now."

Oriké.

"Well, it's very sweet of you to worry, but the best thing for her right now is rest. Just let her sleep. She'll wake up when she's hungry."

There's a silence, in which I keep my eyes closed and soak in the warmth. I don't know where it's coming from, but it's pleasant just the same.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

There's another brief silence.

"When I got... taken... The letter you sent here, telling them what had happened, about the ransom note and everything... It was addressed to Myrioé... Why'd you send it for her?"

There's a long silence. I can't tell if Aelena doesn't know what to say or if she does and she's just afraid to say it. Finally, she breaks the silence.

"Because I knew she was the one who would do whatever it took to save you."

I freeze up and my mind spins. Oriké is silent and I can tell he doesn't know what to say either. She's right, of course, I would do whatever it takes to save him. But I'm surprised that she knew that.

"Okay..." I hear Oriké say quietly.

"Maybe you should go check on her," Aelena suggests. "I'm sure she'd like to see you."

"Is she awake?"

"I'm not sure."

I hear the clicking sounds of Aelena's feet departing down the hallway. I finally force my eyes open and look around. I'm laying on a soft, maroon couch, with a fire blazing in the fireplace beside me. A small laugh escapes me, but I stop quickly as it sends a sharp pain shooting through my side. I'm in the exact same place, laying on the exact same couch beside the exact same fire, as I was the first day I met Oriké, after he pulled me out of the lake. I wonder if he did it on purpose. Though I think maybe not, since it seems to be Aelena who's taking care of me.

*I have to remember to thank her... I'm starting to owe Oriké's whole family a whole lot...*

The door to the room opens and I hear boots crossing the wooden floor towards me. I use my hands to push myself into a sitting position, trying not to use my core at all. I tuck myself up into a ball to make room for Oriké on the couch beside me. He smiles at me as he sits down.

"How are you doing?" he asks me quietly.

"I'm alright," I say, smiling at him.

He has a few bruises on his face and a few healing cuts, but other than that, he's okay.

He's okay.

I wish I could throw myself forward and hug him, but I know that would only make the pain worse. So I settle for resting my head on his shoulder.

"I'm really glad you're okay..." I whisper.

He gives a soft huff of laughter, staring into the fire.

"You were pretty torn up, huh? You were crying a lot."

My face flushes pink and I lift my head off his shoulder, turning my face away. I feel a warmth envelop my hand and I freeze up.

"Relax, Myrioé," he says softly. "Everything's okay now."

I let out a long sigh, letting all my muscles relax. As I lean against Oriké, another sharp pain stabs through me. I wince and draw in a sharp breath through my teeth.

"What happened to me?" I ask him.

There's silence for a second as he gazes into the fire. The light reflects in his bright green eyes, making them sparkle.

"You... jumped in front of a bullet..." he says slowly, not looking at me. "My mom says it broke your rib."

I look down in shock.

"Oh..." I say, at a loss for words.

We sit in comfortable silence for a little while, just appreciating each other's company.

"Where's Dakihel and Alydia?" I ask him.

"Well, Alydia wrote to her siblings and told them what had happened. Alymaire and Mairden arrived this morning-- Dakihel and Alydia are with them right now."

"I see," I say, nodding.

"But everyone's been by to check on you a few times. Alydia brought you that," he says, pointing at a vase of flowers sitting on the table nearby, "and Dakihel kept cracking jokes about how you're the first wolf to get shot and live."

I laugh a little, but my mind is still spinning.

"I really did turn into a wolf, didn't I..." I say quietly.

"Did you mean to?" he asks me.

"No..."

There's another long silence.

"Myrioé..."

"Yeah?"

"You... You jumped in front of a bullet for me..."

I turn to him and smile. He looks at me too, but his face is creased with confusion.

"Of course I did."

"But why?"

I keep smiling at him, my eyes bright despite the pain that throbs in my side.

"Because you're important."

He's silent. Trying to relieve some of the pain from my side, I scooch backwards and lay myself down on the couch beside him. I feel his hand brush my shoulder and I let out a long sigh. He lifts my head and shifts over so my head is resting in his lap.

"I talked to Alydia..." he says tentatively.

I tense up, my hands clenching into fists.

"What did she tell you?"

"We decided that being friends is probably a better idea for us."

Suddenly, a weight lifts off my shoulders. The jealous monster in my chest vanishes.

“What about her parents?” I ask.

He shrugs.

“She talked to her siblings about it. They said they’d tell her parents together.”

I breathe out a long sigh and my whole body relaxes. Oriké lays his hand over the bandage on my side, the pain melts away.

“It’s okay now, Myriolé,” he says quietly. “You’re safe.”

I let out a soft huff of laughter, but the pain doesn’t return. There’s only the gentle warmth of his hand.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” I whisper.

His other hand comes to stroke my hair gently. I bask in the warmth, from the fire and from him.

“I’m safe.”

I let out a satisfied sigh and close my eyes. I feel sleep take me, but for the first time, it’s not dark. There’s no anger or fire in me, no jealousy, no war.

The wolf and the deer are at peace.

*The End*

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

## CHARACTER NAMES

Aelena Roddhan | ah-eh-LEN-ah ROW-dan  
 Aila | Aye-lah  
 Alaynia | ah-LAY-nee-uh  
 Alydia Hyélian | ah-LIH-dee-uh HEH-lee-an  
 Alymaire Digyéta | ah-lih-MARE dig-YEH-tah  
 Ashna | ASH-nah  
 Caliéthá Chadha | ka-lee-EH-thah CHA-dah  
 Cikatié Lueqen | sih-KAH-tee-ey loo-EH-ken  
 Dakihel Lheône | DAH-kee-el lay-OWN  
 Daviol Roddhan | DAH-vee-ohl ROW-dan  
 Dienya | dee-EN-yah  
 Edhvan | ED-vahn  
 Ekihel Lheône | EH-kee-el lay-OWN  
 Galiet | GAH-lee-et  
 Hakhan | hah-KAN  
 Heaphria | heh-AF-ree-uh  
 Ignia | EEG-nee-uh  
 Istalia | iss-TAH-lee-uh  
 Jhosî | JOH-see  
 Kahr Lueqen | CAR loo-EH-ken  
 Karhisha Dhaliana | kar-EE-shah dal-ee-AH-nah  
 Mairden Hyélian | MARE-den HEH-lee-an  
 Myrioé Allôdhra | mee-ree-OH-ey ah-LODE-rah  
 Nadiéka Orthoa | nah-dee-EH-kah or-THOW-ah  
 Narhiel Adhalia | NAR-ee-el ah-DAH-lee-uh  
 Navia | NAH-vee-uh  
 Oriké Roddhan | Oh-ree-kay ROW-dan  
 Otohré Lueqen | OH-toh-ray loo-EH-ken  
 Rahian Digyéta | RAH-hee-ahn dig-YEH-tah  
 Rahu Lueqen | RA-hoo loo-EH-ken  
 Tadhari | tah-DAR-ee



## LOCATION NAMES

Antash | AHN-tash  
 Dhal'yan | DAL-yahn  
 Ejuin | eh-JOO-in  
 Fyeliddan | FEYEH-lee-dahn  
 Lan'tiasa | LAN-tee-AH-sa  
 Lorle | LORE-lay  
 Madne | MAD-nay  
 Tanekh | tan-EK

## MAEIDH'A WORDS

Deari-vådare | deh-AIR-ee VAH-dahr  
 Gahiel Agidan | GAH-hee-el AH-gee-dahn  
 Mazidh'a | MAY-ee-DAH  
 Sithheil | sih-THEEL

## OTHER WORDS

Dagne | DAN-yuh  
 Ke'aphra | keh-AFF-rah

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