

The Thaw

The rooms had not been opened for years. Dust lay in a grey, velvet skin across the dressing table, while Holland covers draped the armchairs and the mahogany settee, turning the furniture into shapeless mounds along the walls of the sitting room. The grate had not been lit in years until tonight; the logs were damp and hissed, filling the air with a sharp, acrid smoke. It was furniture of a marriage left as they had left it. The five of them had come here because it was the nearest thing to a parents' house still standing in the palace, and because they could speak without the corridors carrying it.

Gerda stood nearest the fire, her hands trembling beneath the folds of her apron. She did not look at the others; she looked into the embers, her face pale and drawn. Beside her, Kai stood with his spine rigid, though the institutional precision of his posture seemed to be the only thing keeping him upright. His voice, usually a steady instrument of palace administration, was thin and brittle.

"I can still hear it," Gerda whispered. "The music. The violins were playing something light, something Anna loved. And then the sound of her hitting the floor. It wasn't a fall. It was as if the life had been yanked out of her."

Kai closed his eyes. He remembered the guests — the sudden, freezing transition from laughter to a vacuum of silence. He remembered the way the crowd had parted, not out of courtesy, but out of shock.

"I saw Her Majesty," Kai said, his voice cracking. "Three feet from her. Then Anna was on the floor, and

the gap between them was so small it felt like a canyon."

"She didn't even scream," Gerda said, her voice rising. "She just... she went. I was right there. I saw her eyes roll back. I saw the way her body seized, the way she locked. When I reached for her, she was already gone, though she was still breathing. Following them through those halls... she looked so small in Elsa's arms. Like a bird with a broken wing."

"We must—" Kai stopped. He swallowed. "We must understand what has happened to her."

Doctor Holt stepped forward. He was a man of precise habits, and tonight those habits were his only shield against the dread in the room. He reached into his coat and produced a heavy gold watch, clicking it open and shut, while his other hand gripped a wooden tube used for listening to the chest. His eyes were tired, rimmed with red, and he smelled faintly of peppermint and camphor.

"I have spent the last two days at her side," Holt began, his voice clinical but strained. "I worked around Her Majesty. The Queen has not left the chair. She has not moved, barely spoken, and she would not allow me to move her from the bedside, though she did not obstruct my examination of the patient."

"And?" Kai asked. "Is it the falling sickness?"

Holt shook his head. "It is not. I have seen the falling fits. There is no bitten tongue of that kind. The contractions were violent, yes, but this is not that illness. She has not woken, so there is no confusion after a fit to judge. There is only the sleep she will not leave."

"How, then?" Ivar asked. The soldier stood by the door, his arms crossed, his short stature making him

seem like a coiled spring.

"The linens are soaked," Holt replied. "Profuse sweating. The sheets must be changed every few hours. And yet," he paused, glancing at his hands, "there is no fever. I have felt her brow and her skin with my own hand a dozen times. She is not hot. She perspires as if she were in the throes of an ague, and there is no heat in her at all."

"Poison?" Signar asked softly.

The merchant was a man of soft edges and reasonable tones, his voice designed to soothe trade disputes. He looked frightened, his eyes darting between the others.

Holt sighed. "I have looked for the signs. The humours appear balanced. There is no jaundice in the eyes, no plethora in the cheeks, no obvious lesion or swelling of the glands. There is no scent of almonds or garlic on the breath. If it is a poison, it is one that leaves no footprint upon the body. She simply will not wake."

A heavy silence settled over the room, broken only by the popping of the damp wood in the grate.

Signar shifted his weight, his voice remaining gentle, almost tentative. "I only say what we all saw."

Kai frowned. "What is that supposed to mean, Signar?"

"The proximity," Signar said. "The half-second before the collapse. Her Majesty was three feet away. There was a look... a tension." He let the fire pop once. "And Anna had the room. You all saw it. The guests were hers. They always are, when she is in her element — the laugh, the hand on a sleeve, the way a hall turns toward her without being asked. Her Majesty has never had that. I do not say it as a slight. I say it as a fact we have all lived with."

No one contradicted him. Holt's mouth tightened, which was agreement. Ivar did not move. Kai's face did not change. Gerda's did, but she did not deny the hall.

"A sister's jealousy can be a quiet thing," Signar went on, still reasonable, still frightened. "A concentrated thing. If one is watching one's sister take a room that easily, three feet away, with the means to end a moment without anyone seeing how — I only say that the timing was... precise."

Gerda's hands had gone still in her apron. She had not yet spoken.

Signar looked at the covered furniture rather than at her. His voice dropped. "Or if it was not the guests at all. Anna's affection has always sat too readily on the company. Too warm. Too free. A manner some would call natural, and some would call... forward. Her Majesty has never had a taste for warmth spent so openly. I do not name a crime. I only suggest that a woman who can do what she can do, standing that close, with a reason she would never say aloud—"

Gerda turned on him, her eyes flashing with a sudden, fierce heat. "How dare you. I raised them both. I wiped their noses and tucked them into their beds. I know the love they have for one another. Elsa would sooner carve her own heart out than hurt Anna."

"I am not accusing," Signar said quickly, raising his hands in a gesture of peace. "I am merely observing. We are all frightened, and when we are frightened, we look for the thing that makes sense. The Queen is the only one who remained untouched by the chaos. She was standing there when it happened."

Ivar grunted, a short, sharp sound of disagreement. "I don't buy jealousy," the soldier said. "Jealousy is a slow burn. This was a strike. A blow." He looked at Kai.

"I mark it as a soldier's observation. When the footmen tried to move in to help carry the Princess, Her Majesty stopped them. She didn't just ask them to step back; she blocked them. The strength in her arms... it wasn't the strength of a woman who had spent her life in libraries. It was a command of the body that I found... uneasy."

"You are inferring a threat," Kai said, his voice regaining some of its institutional coldness.

"I am marking an observation," Ivar replied. "I swore an oath to King Agnarr to protect his daughters. I feel that oath stirring. I do not believe the Queen is a criminal, but I do not like the way the air feels around her right now."

Kai looked away, his gaze falling upon a small, ornate box sitting on the edge of a covered table. It was Ferdinand's gift, sealed with the man's personal signet, not a guild seal. It had been brought into the palace recently, a gesture of diplomacy.

"Someone else had a hand in this," Kai whispered. "The timing is too convenient. The box... she would never do this to her own sister. There is a hand we have not identified."

He did not elaborate, and the others did not push. The box sat there, the only object in the room that did not belong to the dead, and the conversation moved off it as if it had not been named.

Kai straightened his coat. The shock was still there, etched into the lines of his face, but the seneschal was reaching for the only thing he knew how to manage.

"We cannot allow this to leak," Kai said. "The palace is a hive of gossip. If the servants begin to whisper that the Queen has struck the Princess, the house will come apart before Anna even opens her eyes."

"And what do we tell the court?" Signar asked.

"We tell them nothing that would frighten the house," Kai said. "We implement a sort of... care. A division of labor. Gerda, you will remain the primary presence for Anna. You are the comfort. You are the shield for the fragile one. You will ensure that the Princess is tended to with every resource we have, but you will keep the doors closed."

"And Elsa?" Gerda asked.

"Her Majesty is to be managed," Kai said. "We watch her. We do not accuse, we do not provoke, but we do not leave her unobserved. She is the Queen, and she must be treated with the propriety her station demands. We keep her close, and we keep her quiet."

"You want us to treat the Queen like a prisoner," Ivar noted.

"I want us to maintain propriety," Kai said. "The Princess is the victim; Her Majesty is the sovereign. We will protect the victim and manage the sovereign until Doctor Holt can give us a name for this sickness."

"And if there is no name?" Signar asked.

Kai didn't answer. He couldn't. The thought of Anna remaining in that state — sweating and silent, and still not waking — was a horror he could not put in order.

"That is all," Kai said. "Return to your posts. Do not speak of this. Not to the maids, not to the guards, not even to each other unless you are in this room."

One by one, they turned to leave. Signar went first, his soft footsteps echoing in the hollow space. Ivar followed, his gaze lingering for a moment on the dust-covered furniture. Gerda stayed a moment longer, her eyes returning to the fire.

"She's so small in that bed," Gerda whispered.

"She will wake," Kai said, though he sounded as if he were reciting a prayer he didn't believe. "She has to."

Gerda nodded slowly and followed the others out.

Kai remained for a heartbeat, alone in the silence of the abandoned apartments. He looked at the holland covers, the grey dust, and the room left exactly as it had been. He felt the cold seeping through his boots, a chill the fire in the grate could not touch.

He turned and walked out, closing the heavy oak door behind him. Inside, the fire continued to hiss and spit, burning alone, casting long shadows over the furniture they had not uncovered.



The chair beside Anna's bed had acquired, over the course of five days, the specific character of a thing that has been sat in too long by someone who does not know how to leave. The cushion held the shape of Elsa's weight. The arm rests carried faint traces of frost where her fingers had gripped during the worst hours – the ones where Anna's body had been still for too long and Elsa's control had not been equal to her fear.

She was in the chair now. She had been in the chair since before dawn. The room held the grey light of early

morning coming through curtains she had not opened because yesterday Anna had flinched at the brightness and the flinch had been filed alongside everything else Elsa was cataloguing without acting on.

The basin on the washstand was full. She had filled it herself an hour ago when she heard Anna stirring – fresh water, clean cloth, the simple provisions of a sickroom. She had not commented on the fact that Anna had emptied and refilled the previous basin three times yesterday. She had not commented on the redness of Anna's knuckles when she came back to bed. She had lain in the dark and felt the humidity shift when the water ran and tracked the minutes – seven, then nine, then eleven – and she had stayed still and she had not gone to the basin and she had not asked.

The room was cold. Not dramatically. Not the crisis-cold of Elsa's worst moments. The specific, persistent cold of a woman whose ambient temperature had dropped several degrees since the throne room floor and had not returned to baseline. Frost feathered the corners of the window glass. A thin rime of ice traced the water pitcher's handle where Elsa had touched it in the night. Small failures of control she would normally dissolve before anyone noticed. She had not dissolved them. She was not sure she had the surplus attention to manage cosmetic ice while managing everything else.

Anna was stirring. Elsa watched her surface – the specific sequence she had memorized over two years of sharing a bed. The shift in breathing first. Then the hand, reaching. Finding Elsa's side of the bed empty because Elsa was in the chair and had been in the chair for hours.

Elsa's hands tightened on the armrests. The frost beneath her fingers thickened by a fraction. She should

be in the bed. Her skin should be there to greet Anna's hand. She knew this. But the chair had become a kind of post — the place from which she watched and from which she could see Anna fully, all of her at once, the way you could not see someone when you were lying beside them. Elsa needed to see. She needed the distance that seeing required. She needed to watch Anna wake and read the first unguarded seconds before the performance machinery came online and Anna assembled the face she had been showing Elsa since she opened her eyes two days ago.

Because something was wrong. Something beyond the attack, beyond the magic, beyond the seizure and the three days of unconsciousness. Something in the way Anna held her own hands. Something in the temperature of the water she used. Something Elsa could almost name but could not yet reach without crossing a line she had promised herself she would not cross — the line between observing and managing, between seeing and intervening, between loving someone and deciding for them what they could bear. The line that had been her parents' line. The line that had been her own line for thirteen years of locked doors.

She sat in the chair. She watched Anna wake. She kept her hands on the armrests and the frost beneath her fingers and the cold in the room and the observations she was building and the rage she was holding and the guilt she was carrying and the question she could not yet ask, and she waited. "Good morning." Two words. Soft. The voice she used when they were alone and the world was outside the door. No weight in it. No demand. Just the sound of a woman who had been awake for hours letting the woman she loved know she was present.

Anna's eyes opened with an effort. For a moment her vision struggled to focus on her environment, but Elsa's voice instinctively drew her gaze, helping her find an anchor in the sensory chaos of her surfacing consciousness. Then came the familiar face, the concerned look upon it, and the steeple of Elsa's long, delicate fingers weaved together.

Beneath the blanket that covered her, Anna's own hands on instinct sought out one another, revealing the numerous scabs and raw flesh exposed at her pads and knuckles. She winced momentarily and hastened to bury the sensation, to muffle it from taking over her face, but she did not say anything. Instead, she just looked slightly aside, breaking her gaze from her sister's.

Elsa watched the wince register on Anna's face before Anna had time to hide it. The small sharp inhalation, the tightening at the corner of the mouth, the quick redirection of the gaze toward the curtained window where the grey light came through in a flat sheet that flattened the colors in the room and made Anna's skin look paler than it was.

She did not move from the chair. Her hands stayed on the armrests. The frost beneath her fingers held its thin uneven pattern, unchanged. She had spent five days disciplining herself against the reflex to cross the small distance between chair and bed, and the discipline was a physical thing now, a held position of the shoulders and the spine that cost her something to maintain.

The basin sat on the washstand three feet from the bed. She had positioned it where Anna would see it the moment she turned her head. She had not positioned it as an invitation. She had positioned it as a piece of furniture in a sickroom, the way the water pitcher and

the folded cloth and the small ceramic dish of salt sat on the washstand, available and unremarked.

She let the silence hold for a count of four. Long enough to register, not so long that it became a demand. Then she shifted forward in the chair, not standing, just leaning her elbows onto her knees so her face came closer to Anna's eye level, and she kept her voice at the same quiet register she had used a moment ago.

"You slept through the night this time. That's the first time since you woke up."

A pause. Her eyes went to the place beneath the blanket where Anna's hands had moved against each other and then stilled. She did not let her gaze rest there. She brought it back to Anna's face.

"Gerda brought broth up an hour ago. It's still warm by the hearth if you want it, or I can ring for something heavier. You ate so little yesterday. I'd like you to eat something this morning, even a little, even if you don't feel hungry yet."

Her left hand left the armrest. The frost there cracked with a small dry sound as her fingers lifted away from it. She extended the hand toward the edge of the bed, palm down, fingers loose, the gesture of a woman offering contact without requiring it. The hand stopped at the edge of the mattress, resting on the wool of the blanket. She did not reach for Anna's hand beneath. She did not pull the blanket back.

The cold of her fingers transferred through the wool in a slow diffuse spread that Anna would feel as a faint chill near the hand that had winced.

"How are you? The honest version - I don't need to hear the falsehood you've provided for the Dr. Holt."

The question stayed in the air. Elsa did not fill the silence after it. She watched Anna's face with the

patient stillness of a woman who had decided, before she sat down in this chair five days ago, that she would not be the one to look away first.

A drop of water fell from the lip of the basin into the basin itself. The sound carried in the quiet room – small, distinct, the kind of small noise that registered because there was nothing else competing with it. Elsa's eyes did not move toward the sound. She had heard it. She had filed it. She kept her gaze on Anna.

For a few moments, Anna's mind flashed with witty retorts, verbal pirouettes, even jokes that would get her mentally out of Elsa's reach. But she had been awake for two days and she was tired, tired in a way that a body cannot measure and her fingers ached. Every time she closed her eyes, rather it was in her sleep or waking hours she remembered that moment – her body going limp before the entire court, a tension inflaming her every muscle to the point that she could feel them tightening down around her very bones until she thought her own body would break her structure. Then came the tidal wave of electrical current in her spine that made her convulse while she remained awake through it all, awake and witnessing all the eyes on her, the horror, the pity and even – curiosity. Not by many, a mere few but a certain morbid fascination with seeing something beautiful becoming disheveled and helpless. The worst of it was Elsa's gaze, seeing the sheer terror in her expression, her own sister – the omnipotent ice enchantress utterly helpless, as her younger sister was undone by a simple trinket. Only their immediate vicinity in that ball room could have seen the locket of her hair in that box, and fewer yet could have identified it as a magical attack on her body. Elsa must have deciphered the lion's share of it, but there was

the only one thing she didn't know yet, that she actually was mortified from sharing with her - that the sympathy attack didn't end with her seizure, but that she could actually feel someone or something inside her very body when it happened in a way that made her feel nauseous, dirty and disgusting in a way that made her gaze gravitate towards the wash basin again and start scratching anew at the bleeding scabs that crisscrossed her knuckles.

She ceased the scratching with an act of sheer will as her mind came to rest. Her gaze slowly turned away, as if Elsa's words somehow defeated her and she silently drew them beneath the blanket, showing them to her sister. The words came out of her in an apologetic tone. "They're fine...I'm fine, it's just some rash that I can't stop itching. I'm sure if I will just get some proper soap or lotion it will pass away in a day or so."

Elsa's eyes tracked the small shift of the blanket where Anna's hands disappeared beneath it. She held her own position, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, her left hand still resting palm-down on the wool at the edge of the mattress. The frost on the right armrest cracked again as her thumb pressed into the wood.

She let Anna's sentence finish. She let the silence after it sit for three full seconds, which was long enough for Anna to feel the weight of being heard and not quite long enough to feel cornered.

"A rash."

The word came out at the same quiet register as everything else she had said this morning. No edge in it. Just the word, placed in the air between them like an object on a table that both of them could look at.

She lifted her left hand from the blanket. The motion was slow and telegraphed, the way a person moves when they are showing another person what they intend to do before they do it. Her fingers found the edge of the wool near Anna's wrist, and she drew it back perhaps four inches, exposing nothing more than the cuff of Anna's nightgown and the back of one hand. She did not pull further. She did not touch the skin. She let her own hand rest beside Anna's on the sheet, close enough that the cold radiating from her fingers would reach Anna's knuckles in a slow diffuse spread.

The knuckles were the color of raw beef where the scabs had been opened. Two of the cuticles wept a thin pink fluid that had dried at the edges and reopened at the centers. The skin around the third knuckle on the right hand was puffy, the pink shading toward the red that meant the body had begun to mount its own response to whatever was being done to it.

Elsa looked at the hand for a count of four. She did not touch it. Her own hand stayed beside it on the sheet, close, available, not crossing the small distance. Then she brought her gaze back up to Anna's face and held it there.

"Anna, I'm going to ask you something, and I'd like you to think about it before you answer. Take whatever time you need."

She let a breath out. The breath was visible in the cold of the room, a thin pale curl that dissolved between them.

"How many times did you wash your hands yesterday? Not an estimate. The actual number, if you can find it."

The question sat in the air. She did not soften it with a follow-up. She did not explain why she was asking. She kept her hand on the sheet beside Anna's and

her eyes on Anna's face and her body in the same patient forward lean she had held for the last several minutes.

A second drop fell from the lip of the basin into the basin itself. The sound carried again. Elsa's gaze did not move toward it. The frost on the armrest beneath her right hand thickened by a fraction more, climbing up onto her knuckles where her fingers gripped the wood, and she did not look at that either.

She waited.

"I...I don't remember, probably twice? maybe three times? I just had to go to the wash room so many times, you know how much I love to stay hydrated. It's like my thing whenever I'm sick and get bored, I start drinking so much and then i have to go empty my bladder, you know how I can get" Her voice went into a sing-song between self-berating herself and humor, her eyes giving the familiar roll as her hands moved along with her apologizing words, the performance was on now, with fanfare and song as Anna wove her little tale - while she mentally ran away as if her life depended on it from Elsa's inquiry.

Elsa stayed in the forward lean. Her left hand remained on the sheet beside Anna's exposed knuckles, the four inches of pulled-back wool holding its position. She let Anna finish the sentence about the water and the bladder and the sing-song roll of self-mockery, and she let the silence after it sit for a count of three before she moved.

The movement was small. She lifted her left hand from the sheet and turned it palm-up, the fingers loose, the gesture of a woman asking for something rather than offering it. She placed the hand in the space between the edge of the mattress and Anna's hip, open, waiting.

The frost on her right hand had climbed to her second knuckle and she made no effort to address it.

"Give me your hand, Anna."

The register was the same quiet one. No edge. The words came out as a directive rather than a request, but the directive carried no force behind it beyond the specific weight of a tone Anna's body had learned to recognize over two years of private hours. The tone she used when they were alone and she meant a thing and the meaning was not up for negotiation.

She waited. She did not reach. She did not soften the directive with a follow-up or undercut it with a please. Her palm stayed open on the sheet.

A third drop fell from the lip of the basin into the basin itself. The sound carried the same as the first two. Elsa's eyes stayed on Anna's face.

"I've been awake since four. I heard the water run at one, and again at three. Eleven minutes the first time. Fourteen the second. I counted because I couldn't sleep and the counting gave me something to do with my hands besides come into the bathing room and stop you."

She let a breath out. The breath made its pale curl in the cold air between them and dissolved.

"I'm not going to decide for you now. Instead I'm asking - give me your hand and let me look at it properly, that's all I'm asking of you."

The open palm stayed where it was. Elsa's eyes stayed on Anna's. She did not glance at the basin. She did not glance at the visible knuckles at the cuff of the nightgown. She held Anna's face in her gaze with the specific stillness of a woman who had decided, hours ago in the dark, that this was the morning she stopped cataloguing and started asking, and that the asking would be patient and would not stop.

The frost on the right armrest cracked again under her thumb. She let it crack. The cold in the room held its level — not deepening, not retreating, the steady ambient drop of a Fifth Spirit operating on a thinner margin of control than she usually permitted herself.

She waited for the hand.

Anna's mind wondered back to Elsa's expression the moment the foreign magic took over her body from within, how her own body crumpled onto the floor like a de-stringed mannequin. How desperately she wanted to scream to her that someone was hurting her, that someone was inside her but her throat was sealed shut by an invisible hand. She wanted to say all of that and more but instead a small tired smile surfaced to her face and she changed the subject instead. "You're just worried that my fingers cannot do that thing you which you find especially relaxing" She gave a suggestive smirk, while putting herculean efforts in her mind to try to push the narrative into something more manageable for herself.

Elsa did not smile. The suggestion of the smirk landed and registered and was set aside without acknowledgment, the way a careful reader sets aside a page that has been inserted into the wrong book. Her open palm stayed on the sheet. Her right hand stayed on the frosted armrest. The forward lean of her shoulders held its angle.

She let four seconds pass. The room held its grey light and its cold and the small wet sound of another drop falling from the basin rim. Then she lifted her right hand from the armrest and the frost there broke in a thin dry crackle that carried across the small distance between them while she brought the same hand on the sheet beside Anna's hip.

When she spoke the register had dropped a fraction quieter, which in the private grammar between them meant the opposite of softening.

"Anna. Look at me, please."

She waited until Anna's gaze came back to her face. She did not hurry it. She held her own eyes steady on the place where Anna's would land.

"I love you and I will not be moved off this. You can try three more deflections and I will sit through all of them and at the end of them I will still be here, asking the same thing. So you can save yourself the work or you can spend it. I'll wait either way."

The breath she let out made its pale curl in the air. She watched it dissolve.

"Give me your hand. Just the hand. I'm not asking for the rest of it yet."

Her left palm turned a degree more toward Anna at the wrist, the small adjustment of a woman making the offered surface easier to meet. The cold radiating from her fingers held its steady diffuse spread across the wool. She did not blink. She did not glance at the basin. She did not soften the words behind her with a follow-up joke or an apology or the warm noise that the old performance of sisterhood would have used to fill the silence and let Anna escape into it.

The silence stayed. The open hand stayed. Elsa stayed.

Anna's emotions lay war within her - the part of her that was desperate to cross the picket lines that she had raised around her - to allow the painful confession to finally bleed out of her thoughts while the other part of her stubbornly refused to acknowledge its own weakness, twisting and turning inward and gnawing at her with self loathing and pride. Then she sensed the tone -

"the voice" that Elsa used in their most intimate moments, when Anna was naked on her knees, blinded by a piece of cloth and silenced by another. The excitement was already there - primitive, animalistic while filling her with a limited outrage that Elsa would dare use that voice on her while knowing that she was struggling with a harsher truth. Her head turned slightly aside, looking at the window over Elsa's shoulder as her fingers slid back beneath the blanket. "it's a nice day outside, how long has it been since you had a nice stroll Elsa? You know by those cliffs you love so much at the edge of the fjord where it meets the sea?"

Elsa heard the deflection land and she heard the small catch beneath it, the half-second hesitation where Anna's voice had registered the private register and tried to route around it. The routing was visible. The cliffs and the fjord were a door Anna was holding open and gesturing toward and the gesture was so practiced it almost worked.

Almost.

Elsa held her position for a count of three. Both palms open on the sheet, the forward lean unchanged, the frost on the right armrest holding its pattern. Then she did something she had not done since sitting down in the chair before dawn - she stood.

The motion was unhurried. She rose from the chair and the wood released her weight with a small creak and she did not break her gaze from Anna's face as she straightened. She was wearing the pale grey wool dress she had been wearing since yesterday afternoon, the one Gerda had brought up when the previous dress had become too cold to bear close to skin. Her platinum braid had loosened in the night and lay half-undone over her left

shoulder. There were dark shadows beneath her eyes the color of bruised silk.

She took the two steps to the edge of the bed and she sat down on the mattress beside Anna's hip, the weight of her settling into the bedding with a slow compression that tilted Anna's body a fraction toward her. The cold she carried transferred through the bedding in a diffuse spread. She did not touch Anna. Instead, she placed her hands in her own lap, one lacing itself within the other.

"The cliffs will be there tomorrow, Anna. And the day after. They've been there for ten thousand years. I'm not worried about missing them this morning."

She let a breath out and watched it curl pale between them.

"I want to tell you what I've been doing for five days, because I think you should know, and then I'm going to ask you my question again, and I'd like a real answer this time."

Her laced fingers tightened a fraction in her lap. The knuckles paled where the pressure increased.

"I've been sitting in that chair. I've been watching you breathe. I counted the breaths for the first day because counting kept me from doing other things, things that would have been worse for both of us. When you started waking up I stopped counting breaths and I started counting other things. How many times you reached for water. How many times your hand went to the basin. How long you heated the the kettle before you washed. I have a number for all of it and I didn't even want to have any of these numbers. I have them anyway because the alternative was to come over here and pull your hands away from the soap and I promised you a long time ago that I wouldn't decide for you what you could

carry, and I am keeping that promise this morning by sitting on this bed and asking you instead."

She lifted her left hand from her lap. She extended it again, palm up, this time resting it on the blanket directly over the place where Anna's hands lay hidden beneath the wool. She did not press down. The weight of the hand was light. The cold of it sank through the blanket in a slow diffuse spread that would reach the raw knuckles in a few seconds and would feel, when it arrived, like the only thing in the room that was not warm enough to hurt.

"I'm not going to use that voice on you to make you talk. I'd never do that and you know I'd never do that. What I'm using right now is the other voice. The one I use when I'm asking you something as your sister, and your sister is frightened, Anna. Your sister is very frightened and she would like a real answer."

The fingers of her right hand had begun, very faintly, to frost where they rested in her lap. She noticed. She did not address it. A thin pale rime formed across the knuckles and held.

"How many times did you wash your hands yesterday."

She kept her left hand where it was on the blanket above Anna's hidden ones. She did not look at the window. She did not look at the basin. She held Anna's face in her gaze with the patient stillness of a woman who had moved from the chair to the bed because the chair was no longer close enough and who would not be returning to the chair until she had been answered.

A fourth drop fell from the basin's lip into the basin itself. The sound was the same sound the other three had made. Elsa did not turn toward it. The room held its grey light and its cold and the small steady

weight of a sister waiting on the mattress beside her sister.

Anna felt the cold creeping from Elsa's delicate fingertips across her own digits, she sensed her proximity to her which somehow felt a hundred miles away at the same time and listened to her breathing and then those words - a request to quantify. Her eyes shut and a sardonic smile crossed her lips. "seven...no....eight times. I think..."

Elsa heard the number land and she did not let her face show what the number cost her. Eight. The word sat in the air between them with the small definite weight of a thing that could now be counted. Her left hand stayed where it was on the blanket above Anna's hidden ones, the cold of her fingers sinking through the wool in its slow steady spread. Her right hand rested alone in her lap, the rime of frost across its knuckles thickening by a degree she chose to ignore.

She let the number have its silence. Three seconds. Four. The room held its grey light and the small wet sound of a fifth drop falling from the basin's lip, and Elsa kept her gaze on the closed line of Anna's mouth where the sardonic curve had appeared and then settled.

"Thank you. That was hard to say and you said it anyway."

Her voice held the same quiet register, neither warmer nor cooler than the words before the number. She moved her left hand on the blanket - a small adjustment, drawing it two inches closer to where Anna's wrist lay hidden beneath the wool, the kind of motion that announced itself before completing itself.

"Eight times yesterday. Twice in the night. That's ten times in something less than a day, and the skin on your hands looks the way it looks because of that

arithmetic and not because of any soap that exists in this castle."

She let a breath out. The pale curl of it moved between them and faded.

"I'm going to lift the blanket now. Just to your wrists. I want to see both hands together, and I want you to let me look at them without telling me a story about what I'm seeing. You don't have to explain anything. You only have to let me look. Can you do that for me."

The question was placed without a rising intonation at the end. It was a question made of a sentence shaped like a request, and the shape carried the specific private weight of the register Anna's body had learned over two years of closed doors. The register Elsa had separated from the sister-voice a few minutes ago and which she was now, with deliberate care, allowing to return — not to compel, but to offer Anna a familiar architecture to lean against if leaning was what she needed.

Her fingers found the edge of the wool. She did not lift it yet. She waited the small measured beat that the asking required, the beat that distinguished asking from taking.

"Tell me yes, Anna. Or tell me no and I'll put my hands back in my lap. Either answer is the right one. I only need to hear it."

The frost across her right knuckles cracked once, a thin dry sound. She did not look at it. Her eyes stayed on Anna's face, on the closed line of the mouth and the place where the sardonic curve had been, and she held herself in the patient forward stillness of a woman who had moved from chair to mattress and would not be moving back.

A sixth drop fell from the basin's lip. The sound was the same as the other five.

Elsa sensed the shift in Anna's gaze before it fully turned, the way her sister's eyes slid away from the blanket and the piercing ice blue stare that had pinned them there. She heard the change in the register of the room, the soft yet commanding entrance of her queen, the hand ready to pull at the mental if not literal bandage. Anna fought the urge to confess, to resist, to beg her not to do this, but something inside her yearned to bend, to flex beneath Elsa's will, to reshape herself into whatever she required. She complied. Her chin dipped in a quiet nod of approval, a fraction of an inch, the smallest possible affirmation a body could give and still be counted as having given one while her own heart sank to an uncomfortable depth against her chest's diaphragm.

Elsa caught the nod. The motion was small, and she had been watching for it, registering it the instant it arrived. She did not rush what came after. Her fingers found the edge of the wool blanket and drew it back in one slow, continuous motion, not lifting, just folding the edge down toward Anna's waist, exposing both hands where they lay against the white linen of the nightgown. The wool settled against Anna's hip with a soft, compressed weight.

The hands were worse than the single visible knuckle had suggested. Both sets of cuticles were broken. The right hand had a split along the side of the thumb where the skin had cracked from dryness and then been worried open by the opposite thumbnail. The pads of three fingertips on the left hand had gone the specific shiny pink that meant the surface had been scrubbed past the point where the body could keep up. A thin watery fluid

sat in the deepest crack on the second knuckle of the right hand, neither blood nor pus but the kind of clear weeping that came from skin that had been asked to be a barrier and had run out of material to make one with.

Elsa looked at the hands for a count of six. Her expression did not change. The frost across her right knuckles thickened by a degree she chose not to address, and a faint pale rime began to feather across the linen sheet in a six-inch radius around where she sat. She brought her left hand to rest beside Anna's right one on the linen. She did not touch. The cold radiating from her fingers reached the broken skin in its slow, diffuse spread, and the spread would feel, against the raw places, like cool water that was not water.

"Okay. I see them. Thank you for letting me look at them."

Her voice held the same quiet register. She did not let the count of six show up in it.

"I'm going to ring for Gerda in a few minutes. I'm going to ask her to bring up the lanolin salve from the still room, the one with the calendula and a roll of the softer linen. I'm going to dress these myself. Not Gerda, not Dr. Holt. Me."

She let a breath out. The pale curl moved between them and faded.

"That's the first part. The second part is that I would like you to stop washing them for a few days, and I know that's going to be very hard, and I'm going to help you. I'm not asking you to explain anything yet. I'm asking for a few days. Can you give me a few days, Anna?"

Her left hand stayed beside Anna's right on the sheet, close enough that the cold of it was a presence Anna could feel along the back of her hand without any

skin meeting any skin. Elsa kept her gaze on Anna's face. The grey morning light cast against the platinum strands that had escaped the loosened braid and laid them in a pale line across her collarbone where the wool of her dress met the white of her skin.

The seventh drop fell from the basin's lip. Elsa let the sound pass. She kept her eyes on Anna's and her hand on the sheet and her body in the patient, still weight of a woman who had been given a small yes and intended to be very careful with it.

Anna's azure eyes met her sister's, and a lump formed in her throat. "I... I can't promise... I won't scratch them again. I'm sorry, Elskan... I want to say yes, but I can't promise... I can't lie to you..." Her voice trembled into the smaller, secret tone she reserved just for this particular aspect of Elsa. "My queen..."

Elsa heard the word land. *My queen*. Two syllables placed into the air at a register Anna had not used in the daylight hours since the throne room floor, and the placement of them carried the specific weight of a small white flag run up a pole between two people who had built the pole together over two years of closed doors.

The rime of frost on the linen around where she sat thickened by a degree. She felt it bloom and chose not to address it. Her left hand stayed beside Anna's right on the sheet, the cold of her fingers reaching the broken skin in its slow, steady spread. She kept her eyes on Anna's face, upon the wet shine that had gathered along the lower lid of the left eye and had not yet been permitted to fall.

She let the word *Elskan* settle between them before she answered. The Norse endearment carried its own private weight, the one Anna used when the apology

beneath it was older than the moment she was apologizing for.

"You did not lie to me. You told me the truth and that is the only thing I asked for."

Her left hand lifted from the sheet. She moved it the small remaining distance to Anna's right wrist and let her fingers settle there, the contact light enough that Anna could pull away without resistance. The skin of Anna's inner wrist where the pulse ran was warmer than the rest of her hand, warmer than it should have been by a margin Elsa registered and filed. She did not press against it. Instead, her thumb came to rest on the soft tendon below the heel of the palm where no scrape had reached.

"Listen to me carefully, Anna. I am not asking you to promise anything you cannot keep. Promises you cannot keep are how people end up lying to the people they love, and I do not want that from you, not ever and not about this. So we are going to change the request."

She let a breath out, the pale curl of it brief in the cold air. Her thumb moved once across the tendon beneath it, a single slow stroke, the small private signal Anna's body had learned in private hours and would recognize now without having to think about it.

"Here is what I am asking instead. When you feel the pull to wash them, you come to me first. You do not have to explain why. You do not have to say the word *wash*. You only have to come find me, wherever I am, and put your hand in mine, and let me hold it for one minute. After that minute, if you still want to go to the basin, you go. I will not stop you. I will not follow you. I will let you go. That is the whole bargain. One minute, my hand, and then you decide."

Her thumb stilled on the tendon. The cold from her fingers around Anna's wrist held its steady temperature, the kind of cold that would feel against the raw skin like the only thing in the room not asking anything of it.

"Can you give me that *Elskan*? Not the not-washing - just the minute before."

She did not move her hand from the wrist. The rime of frost on the linen around her hip had spread another inch and she let it spread. Her braid, half-undone over her left shoulder, shifted as she leaned a fraction closer, the platinum strands catching the grey morning light in a pale fall across the wool of her dress.

"And the other word you used. The one you used just now. You can use it with me whenever you need to. Daylight or dark, this room or any other. It does not require permission and it does not require a reason. I will hear it the same in any hour. Do you understand me?"

The eighth drop fell from the basin's lip into the basin itself. Elsa let the sound pass. Her hand stayed on Anna's wrist. Her eyes stayed on Anna's face. The forward weight of her on the mattress did not shift, and the wet shine along Anna's lower lid had grown by a fraction that the grey light from the window picked up and made visible against the freckles on the upper cheek.

She waited.

Anna slowly nodded in agreement, her torn fingertips trembling in Elsa's cool grip. "I... I will come to you. I promise." Her head slowly sank against Elsa's shoulder, without a word or a warning, and she buried her face into the side of her neck, silently shuddering

there without explaining a single word of what was lurking beneath the surface of her skin.

After a few moments, she sighed and visibly exhaled, drawing fresh air into her. "I know you're trying to be considerate, to keep me safe. We both know something happened to me five days ago, so please... Elsa, if you have anything else you want to ask me. Please just ask it already."

Elsa felt the weight of Anna's head settle into the curve of her neck with the sudden, unresistant surrender of a body that had been holding itself upright too long. The trembling registered through the wool of her dress in small, rapid pulses against her collarbone. She did not speak. She brought her right hand up from her lap and set it against the back of Anna's head, her fingers threading into the loose auburn hair above the nape, the cold of her palm spreading through the strands in a slow, steady diffusion. The white streaks caught the grey morning light where her fingers parted the red.

She held the position without shifting her weight. The rime of frost on the linen around her hip had stopped spreading and lay now in a pale circle roughly eight inches across, the edges of it feathering into the weave of the sheet where the cold met the warmer fabric beyond. Her left hand stayed around Anna's wrist, the thumb still resting on the tendon beneath the heel of the palm. She felt the pulse there running at a rate she noted and filed.

Elsa heard the exhaustion in it and the challenge and the small thread of something that sounded almost like a dare.

"I didn't ask you for the rest. I'm not going to ask you for the rest, not this morning, not before the salve is on your hands and the broth is in your stomach and

you've had another night of sleep without a seizure. Those things come first."

She shifted her hand at the back of Anna's head, her thumb making a single slow pass through the hair above the nape. The motion was the same one she used in private hours when Anna's body was coming down from a held position and needed something to follow.

"I do have one question. It is not the question you are bracing for. It is a question about something I felt, not something I saw, and I've been carrying it for five days and I would like to put it down." She let a breath out against Anna's hair, the pale curl of it brief and cool. "When the seizure started. When you were on the floor and I was holding you. I felt something move through you that was not the attack. Something hot. Something that pushed back. I felt it for maybe three seconds, and then the convulsions got worse and I couldn't feel anything else."

Her thumb stilled on Anna's wrist. The pulse beneath it had not slowed. The frost on the linen held its circle.

"I'm not asking you to explain it. I'm asking if you felt it too. That's the whole question. After that you can put your head back on my shoulder and I will ring for Gerda and we will deal with your hands and the broth and nothing else until you want to say more. Can you answer that one for me?"

She kept her fingers in Anna's hair and her thumb on Anna's pulse and the cold of her body at the steady ambient drop she had stopped trying to regulate. The grey light through the curtains had begun very faintly to brighten toward the pale silver of a morning that had decided to begin.

Anna's eyes flooded with tears at the question, her gaze holding Elsa's for a moment, part challenging, part holding something fragile that was about to explode into a mosaic of broken shards. "You're coddling me. Don't... you should know better than that." Her shoulder shifted slightly, almost accidentally, as her free ginger and white streaks slid back behind her shoulder as if to hint at their origin strictly to make her point.

Her eyes glared and nostrils flared—like a wounded animal cornered and becoming dead set on striking out at its captor. But instead, she stopped and took hold of one particular strand—the one hanging at the periphery of her vision—and dangled it in a wayward spiral against the edge of her collarbone. "Do you remember how I got this one?"

She noticed the way Elsa's glance moved away from her and her hand—the same one Elsa had been holding by the wrist now clutched her own palm with an intensity that seemed absent before.

"We were on a bedroll—in the highest spire of the castle with its windows wide open so we could see the stars in the sky above us, my body was unfurling beneath you when your fingers settled on my neck and I could feel you growing ice inside my very throat till it started to seal my windpipe and blackness flooded my vision and then—then my heart started palpitating. And I was there—flushing all over and begging for you to never stop and you didn't." her gaze squared itself with Elsa's, a small defiant smirk crossing her lips.

"And ever since—whenever you see me in court, whether I am beside you in a Gala, or standing beside you at a reception, or merely watching you at the table of the grand council making policy...you always see them—my white streaked strands, you always see me. Elsa—you

know what I really am, what we really are to each other."

"We always knew what we were to each other - we've been sisters for all of our lives together and out of those years we have been committed to each other for at the last three years, and in the last two years - well, we have become so much more than that, haven't we?" She paused, took a breathe and watched the subtle changes in her older sister's expression - tenderness, care but also a latent anxiety.

"We have assumed thus far that only the two of us know of that latter part, but surely others have realized that I keep getting additional white streaks—just like the one I got when you struck me when I was a child. Someone must have realized this—that there's more to us than meets the eye. Someone who wanted to hurt you, or perhaps the kingdom or even myself. All three of those are part of the same whole."

Anna paused once more, her eyes on the basin, watching another drop of water fall off its ledge before she continued.

"So now ask me again... what do you think happened to me that day?" She choked down a sob, her nails dug into her own thighs as the bleeding ebbed, the leak from the wounds to her fingers smeared against the bare skin of her legs.

Elsa held the position on the mattress without shifting her weight, though her left hand tightened a fraction around Anna's where the grip had reversed itself, the cold of her palm pressing into the broken skin with a steady pressure that did not retreat. The rime of frost on the linen around her hip spread another two inches in a slow, uneven crawl, the edges of it finding the wool of her dress and climbing up onto the

hem in thin, pale fingers. She held Anna's gaze through the spiral of auburn that swung against the collarbone and the white strand beside it, and she let the question Anna had placed in the air sit there for a count of six before she answered.

The chair behind her had a faint cracking sound as the frost on its armrests contracted in the deepening cold. The water in the basin three feet away had begun to skin over at the rim, a thin transparent disc forming against the ceramic.

"I remember the spire. I remember every minute of it, Anna, the bedroll and the stars through the window and the sound you made when the ice reached the back of your tongue. I remember sobbing your name. I have not forgotten one second of that night and I will not pretend with you that I have." Her voice held its quiet register, the words coming out at a pace that did not hurry. "You are right that I was coddling you. You are right that someone has watched us long enough to read what the white means. I have been a fool about that and I will not be a fool about it any longer."

She lifted her free hand and gathered the spiral strand Anna had dangled, her fingers closing around it with the same care she would use on a piece of glass, and she did not pull it. She held it. The white in it caught the grey light at the window and lay across her knuckles.

"So I will ask you the real question and I will not soften it. What did you feel inside your body when the heat rose. Not just the pushing back. The thing before the pushing back, *Elskan*. The thing that made the heat necessary in the first place. Tell me what was done to you, because somebody did something to you, and I felt

enough through that link to know the shape of it without having the word, and I would like the word now.”

Her grip on the strand stayed light. The frost on the linen reached the edge of the mattress and stopped there, a pale uneven border running along the seam of the bed. The skin of ice on the basin’s water thickened by a hair and held. She kept her eyes on Anna’s face and her body in the same forward weight she had carried since she sat down on the mattress, and she waited for the word.

Anna’s throat and facial features tensed, tightening to the point of seeming to become painful before her voice shook with barely constrained bitterness and anger. “Is that an order, my queen?”

Elsa held the white strand between her fingers for another second before she let it slip back against Anna’s collarbone. Her left hand stayed wrapped around Anna’s where the grip had reversed itself, the broken skin pressing into her palm, the warmth of the blood there meeting the cold of her fingers in a small wet seam she registered and did not retreat from. The rime of frost on the linen had stopped spreading. The skin of ice on the basin’s water held.

She let Anna’s question sit in the air for a count of four. The bitterness in it carried, and beneath the bitterness the small precise tremor of a woman offering Elsa a weapon and waiting to see if she would pick it up.

“No, *Elaskan*. That was not an order and you know that it was not an order, and you know I would never put that voice on a question of this size.” Her words came at the same quiet register she had held since sitting down on the mattress, the pace of them unhurried. “You are angry with me and you have every right to be angry with me. I

sat in that chair for five days and watched you tear your hands apart and I told myself I was respecting you by not asking. That was a coward's accounting and you deserved better from me. So I am asking now, and I am asking as your sister, not as your queen."

Her thumb moved once across the back of Anna's hand where the blood had begun to dry between their palms. The motion was the same slow stroke from earlier, the private signal Anna's body knew.

"You can answer me or you can tell me to wait, and I will wait. What you cannot do is sit there alone with it for another hour while I pretend I do not see what it is doing to you. I am done pretending. That part is over."

She lifted her free hand from where it had returned to her lap and brought it to Anna's jaw, her fingers settling under the line of it, the cold of her thumb finding the wet track on Anna's cheek where a tear had finally been permitted to fall. She did not wipe it away. She held the contact.

"Tell me what was done to you, Anna. Whatever shape it takes. I am sitting on this bed and I am not leaving this bed and there is nothing you can say to me that will make me leave."

Her braid had slipped further off her shoulder, the platinum laying now across the front of her dress. The frost across her right knuckles had thinned where her hand now rested against Anna's jaw. The grey light at the window had brightened by a small visible degree, and somewhere below in the castle a door closed and footsteps began their distant climb up the servants' stair toward the residential wing.

She waited.

Anna turned her head aside, forcing her gaze to remove itself completely from Elsa's own, and paced a

few feet away. Her body instinctively headed towards the basin before she stopped and moved to the window, viewing the Fjord. Her hand instinctively rested against her abdomen as several silent tears formed at her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

"It's late. I want to rest. I think you should leave now. You are right—you've been waiting here for five days for an answer, there is no need for you to stay any longer as I have no answer I am inclined to provide in any manner."

Elsa watched the small distance open between them, the four feet of floorboard Anna had placed between the mattress and the window, the way Anna's bare feet found the rug and then the cold wood beyond it without seeming to register the change in temperature. The hand against the abdomen registered. Elsa filed it without letting her face move. Her own hands settled in her lap where Anna had left them, the broken-skin warmth on her left palm cooling already in the air of the room.

She stood from the mattress. The rime of frost on the linen cracked beneath the shift of her weight, small dry sounds carrying in the quiet. She crossed to the foot of the bed and stopped there, keeping the four feet of distance Anna had set, not closing it. Her braid had come further undone and she did not adjust it. The grey light at the window caught the side of Anna's face where the tears had run, and the auburn hair fell forward to hide the wet track on the cheek nearest the glass.

"Alright, *Elskan*. You want me to go, and I will go," Elsa said. Her words came at the same quiet register she had held since the word *queen* left Anna's mouth. "I am not going to argue with you about it and I am not going to make you say it twice. Rest is the right thing to ask for and you are right to ask for it."

She moved to the washstand and lifted the small ceramic dish of salt from beside the basin, setting it on the bedside table within Anna's reach when she returned. The skin of ice on the basin's water cracked at the edges as the room's ambient cold continued its slow steady drop, and she did not address that either.

"Gerda will be up in ten minutes with broth and the salve. You can let her dress your hands or you can send her away, that part is yours. I am going to my study and I will be there until evening. The door is not locked. The door is never locked between us - not anymore, you know that."

She paused at the threshold of the bedchamber with her hand on the frame. The wood beneath her fingers acquired a thin pale rime where she touched it. She did not turn fully toward Anna, only enough that her voice would carry clean across the room.

"I am not leaving because you have outmaneuvered me. I am leaving because you asked me to, and the difference between those two things matters to me even if it does not matter to you this morning. I will see you tonight, or tomorrow, or whenever you decide. *Jeg elsker deg.*"

The door closed behind her with a soft definite click. Her footsteps moved away down the corridor at the unhurried pace of a woman who had decided, somewhere between the mattress and the threshold, that the next move would not be a question. The next move would be an object. Something Anna could hold in her hands that did the work without requiring the word.

Anna counted till one hundred and only then let herself sink onto the floor, clutching her knees in her arms as she muffled her sobs against her own muscles and skin. Her heart was aching inside her, her body sore all over in ways that should not be possible after five days

as she found herself in a constant battle that involved her second-guessing her own body and memories. It was just five days ago and she still couldn't paste the details that would shed light on what actually happened to her that day. The memories haunted her—the helplessness of it, the unrelenting feeling of being invaded and the suffocating waves of revulsion and shame that seized her whenever her eyes closed since that day.

The floorboards beneath Anna held the cold the way old wood always held it, drawn up from the stones of the foundation through the joists and into the soles of her bare feet where they pressed flat against the grain. The rug she had passed over lay six inches behind her heel. She had walked past it without noticing, and the wood beneath her had the specific dry chill of a floor that had been keeping company with a Fifth Spirit for five days.

A knock came at the door. Three measured taps, the rhythm Gerda used when she was carrying something that required both hands. The latch lifted before Anna could compose an answer and the door opened the careful eight inches that announced a tray rather than a person.

"It's only me, lamb. I'll come in if you'll have me, or I'll set this on the table by the door and go, whichever suits you better this morning."

Gerda stepped through with the tray balanced against her hip, the small woman of fifty-three with the iron-grey hair pinned at the nape and the practical wool dress the household staff wore in the colder months. The tray carried a covered ceramic bowl, a folded square of soft linen the color of unbleached cream, and a small glass jar of pale yellow salve with the calendula petals visible through the glass. A second item sat beside the jar, wrapped in brown paper and tied with mauve-and-teal

silk ribbon. Gerda set the tray on the small table beside the hearth without coming further into the room.

"Her Majesty asked me to bring this up before the broth got cold. The salve is the calendula batch from September, and there's clean linen for after. The wrapped package is from her as well. She said you'd know whether you wanted it now or later, and she wasn't to press you about it either way."

Gerda's hands settled in front of her apron, the fingers laced loosely. Her eyes did not travel to where Anna sat against the foot of the bed. They stayed on the middle distance between the tray and the window with the practiced courtesy of a servant who had served a household with locked doors for forty-two years.

"The kitchen has eggs and a bit of the smoked trout from yesterday if the broth doesn't sit right with you. I can have either of those up in ten minutes. You only have to ring."

She paused at the threshold with her hand on the door. The grey light from the window caught the side of her face and the small soft lines around the mouth that came from a lifetime of being kind in rooms where kindness was not always returned.

"I'll close the door behind me, lamb. You take whatever time you need with it."

Gerda reached for the latch, ready to leave Anna the quiet she had been instructed to give her.

The tray sat on the small table. The brown paper package beside the salve jar caught the morning light through the window, the mauve-and-teal silk ribbon knotted with the specific neat double-loop Elsa had used since she was a girl. A faint chill came off the package that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

"Gerda... please stay a while. Help me with these, if that's alright?"

Gerda's hand stilled on the door latch at the sound of the request. She turned back into the room with the unhurried economy of a woman who had spent forty-two years entering and leaving sickrooms, and she pushed the door closed behind her with her hip rather than her hand. Her grey eyes found Anna against the foot of the bed and stayed there for a count of two before she crossed to the hearth table and lifted the tray.

"Of course, lamb. You only had to ask and you didn't even have to ask in so many words. Let me bring everything down to where you are, that floor will be kinder to my knees than the bed will be to yours just now."

She set the tray on the rug six inches from where Anna sat and lowered herself beside it with one hand braced against the floorboards, the other smoothing her apron flat across her thighs. The grey-pinned hair at her nape had a few escaped strands at the temples and she tucked one behind her ear with a fingertip before she reached for the jar of salve. The lid came off with a small soft pop and the smell of calendula and rendered lanolin rose from the pale yellow surface, warm and grassy, the kind of scent that belonged to barns and still rooms rather than sickbeds.

"Give me the left one first, sweetling. We'll work from the worst to the better and that way the second hand will feel like a kindness after the first. You hold it out flat for me, palm up, and you tell me to stop if it pulls anywhere it shouldn't."

Gerda's own hands were small and lined and warmer than the room, the knuckles slightly thickened with the work of forty-two winters in the castle. She waited with

the jar balanced on her knee until Anna's left hand came forward, and then she dipped two fingers into the salve and worked a small amount between her fingertips before she touched anything. The salve went on cool at first contact with the broken cuticles, then warmed against the skin in a slow steady spread that did not sting against the raw places, only sat there.

"This batch came up well, I had the calendula from the south garden and they kept their color through the drying. The bees were good to us in August, that's why the wax is taking the lanolin the way it is. Soft, you see. It won't tear the scabs when we wrap the linen over it."

She talked the way she always talked when she was dressing a wound, the words moving steadily and meaning nothing in particular, the steady voice of a woman who had learned that a hurt body listened to rhythm more than content. Her thumb worked the salve into the broken cuticle of Anna's index finger with a pressure no firmer than a moth landing, and she did not look up at Anna's face. She kept her eyes on the work.

"Her Majesty asked me yesterday what we had on hand for skin that had been worried raw. I told her about this batch and she said to keep it set aside. She didn't say what it was for, lamb. She doesn't tell me things she means to handle herself. I only mention it so you know she's been thinking about your hands for longer than this morning."

The wrapped package on the tray sat between them. Gerda reached for the folded linen instead and began to tear a strip with her teeth at the edge to start it, the way she had torn linen for forty-two years.

Anna offered her hand to Gerda's calloused hands, watching them working the ointment against the tears in

her skin and the raw, exposed flesh at her fingerpads. This was the woman who took care of her and Elsa all these years, before and after they lost their parents, and Anna couldn't stop but think to herself that she was there too, on that night, five days ago. Her voice was reluctant, as if she were a cocooned thing needing to peel away its own layers in order for the words to come out. "Gerda... what happened five days ago, I... I don't remember much of what happened when I had my seizure. Were you there when it happened? Can you tell me what you saw?"

Gerda's hands did not still. The thumb working the salve into the broken cuticle of Anna's middle finger continued its slow moth-pressure, and the strip of linen she had torn lay across her knee waiting. She let the question breathe for a moment the way she let most things breathe—not avoiding it, not rushing toward it, just giving it the room it needed to be the size it was.

"I was there, lamb. I was standing to the left of the second pillar with Astrid and the girl who handles the winter linens—I can never remember her name, the one with the red kerchief. We were bringing the new table coverings through the east passage for the afternoon changeover when the envoy came in."

She reached for the salve again. A small amount more, worked between her fingertips.

"I saw the box. I saw you open it." A pause, deliberate and brief, the kind that separated what came next from what came before. "I saw you touch what was inside it."

Her hands continued their work, the salve spreading in slow careful circles across the back of Anna's hand where the skin had gone the shiny pink of a surface asked to be a barrier too many times.

"You went down very fast. There was no catching you, sweetling. Not for any of us. You were simply-present, and then you were on the floor, and I have seen people fall faint before, I have seen people fall ill before, and this was not the shape of either of those things." She tore the linen strip to length against her teeth and set it aside. "Your body was fighting something. That was the shape of it. A person fighting something they cannot see and cannot reach."

She looked up then, briefly, the grey eyes finding Anna's face with the specific directness of a woman who had spent forty-two years deciding which truths were hers to name and which belonged to someone else.

"Her Majesty was beside you before the second heartbeat. Before anyone else in that room had moved a single foot, she was on the floor with you. She put her body between yours and the stone and she held you while you fought whatever it was, and she did not look at the court and she did not look at the envoy and she did not look at anything except you." A small pause. "I have served this family for forty-two years. I have never seen her face do what it did in those minutes. I would not know what word to give it."

Gerda reached for the torn linen strip and began to fold it with her fingers into the soft wrap she used for raw skin, the motion automatic and practiced.

"Dr. Holt was called but by the time he reached you the worst of it had passed, though you were not conscious. The Queen carried you herself up to this room. She would not have the footmen do it. She would not have anyone touch you. She carried you up three flights of stairs and she sat down in that chair with you still in her arms and she did not put you down until the physician needed to examine you and she stood at the

foot of the bed for that entire examination with her hands at her sides and her face very still and when it was over she went back to the chair."

The linen wrap took shape between Gerda's fingers, the edges folding inward.

"She has not slept. I brought food up twice a day and she ate perhaps a third of it each time and gave me no trouble about the rest of it, just thanked me for bringing it and set it beside the chair. She did not leave this room. In five days she did not leave this room for more than a quarter of an hour at a stretch, and even then she left the door open." Gerda's hands paused for just a moment on the linen, the small hesitation of a woman choosing her next word from among several. "I changed the water in the basin each morning. I did not comment on the temperature she had left it. I only mention it, lamb, so that you know—she was watching the basin too. Even while she was watching you."

She reached for Anna's hand again, the linen wrap ready, and her voice settled back into its even practical register.

"Left hand first, then the right. Hold still for me. This part pulls a little."

Anna went quiet, feeling her heart pinch within her chest, fighting the urge to start weeping there in front of Gerda. Thinking of her sister, her delicate, lithe sister carrying her unresponsive body three flights of stairs. Her heart broke inside her to a thousand pieces, over and over. Her azure eyes met Gerda's deep grey pools, like iron made calm through the woman's age. "Gerda... did you ever feel like there was this stain, that no matter how hard you tried to rub it off, it just could not be removed?"

Gerda's fingers moved on the linen with the steady precision of forty-two years, and she said nothing more for a moment, only wrapped, the soft cloth finding the broken places and covering them without pulling at the scabs. The room held its grey light and its cold and the small practical sounds of a sickroom being tended.

Then she set the finished left hand back in Anna's lap and reached across for the right, and her voice came at a register slightly lower than the one she'd been using, the register she used when she was in the territory of something she had decided, alone in the dark of her own room, to say.

"Lamb. Whatever was done to you in that throne room—and I am an old woman who has seen enough to know when something has been done—it was not your fault for opening a box a kingdom sent as a gesture of peace. A princess receives gifts — that is part of what it is to be a princess. The fault belongs to the hand that prepared the box, and not to the hand that opened it."

She did not look up. Her fingers continued their work on the right hand, the wrap taking its careful shape.

"You didn't deserve it, sweetling. That's all. You didn't deserve any of it."

Elsa had been standing in the corridor for four minutes.

Not pressed against the door. Not close enough to make out the words through the wood. Far enough down the passage that Gerda's voice reached her only as tone and not content—the low steady register, the pause, the register dropping further. Far enough that she could tell herself she had not been listening.

She had been listening.

Her right hand rested against the stone wall of the corridor where the plaster had given way to the older material beneath, and the frost she was leaving in her handprint was the deepest frost she had left on any surface in five days. A slow radial crack had formed in the stone itself, hairline, following the mortar joint outward from the center of her palm. She noticed it and did not move her hand.

The word *done* had carried through the wood. She had heard that one clearly.

She stood in the corridor with the frost spreading beneath her hand and the hairline crack in the mortar and the grey light coming through the small passage window behind her, and she let herself understand the shape of what she had not let herself name for five days. She had known the shape of it from the throne room floor. She had catalogued it and filed it and told herself she did not have enough information, and the telling had been cowardice dressed in restraint.

She knew what had been done to Anna. She had known since the minute the sympathy link discharged.

The wall beneath her hand acquired a second crack parallel to the first.

She moved her hand from the stone and looked at the handprint she had left—white frost against grey stone, the fingers splayed, the center of the palm where her heat line ran deepest showing a faint blue tinge where the cold had gone structural rather than surface. She studied it for a moment the way she studied things she intended to remember.

Then she walked to the study at the far end of the corridor and stopped by the window that looked out over the fjord.

The wrapped package was still on the tray beside the salve. She had tied the knot herself before dawn, the double-loop, the pair of doeskin gloves inside the brown paper, the softest she had in the chest. She had put the cold into them deliberately, a slow careful working that had taken twenty minutes because the dosage mattered—enough cold to be a presence Anna would feel against her skin, not enough to hurt, precisely calibrated to the register they used when she was wrapping Anna's wrists in the private hours. An anchor. A reminder that the cold could be asked for and did not only arrive uninvited.

She had sent the package with Gerda without knowing whether Anna would open it. She still did not know.

The fjord below the window was grey with August, the water flat and cold and holding the overcast light in a uniform silver. A single fishing vessel was making its way out toward the mouth, small at this distance, the sail catching what little wind there was.

Ferdinand had used Anna's hair. He had taken the vocabulary of their most private intimacy and made a weapon from it and put it in a box and sent it with a bow, and Anna had reached in with her freckled hands and touched it because Anna always reached in, that was the thing about Anna, the quality that made her beloved by every person who had ever stood in a room with her, the quality that Ferdinand had identified and aimed at and used.

Elsa placed both hands flat on the surface of the desk. The wood beneath her palms frosted white in the shape of her handprints, and the inkwell in the corner of the desk cracked along the seam where the ceramic had been joined, a clean fracture that split it in two halves. The ink inside had frozen solid.

She looked at the cracked inkwell for a moment.

Then she sat down in the chair behind the desk, folded her hands on the frosted wood, and began to think about Ferdinand.

As Gerda departed her room, Anna thanked her for her help and care, kissed the woman on the forehead and embraced her, and then she was alone in the room and looked at the parcel that was delivered - the meticulously wrapped brown paper tied in the mauve and teal colored silk ribbon that Elsa kept for the few gifts that she wanted to pay personal attention to. Anna untied it carefully and revealed the contents of the package—a pair of black leather gloves with the finest rabbit lining on the inside that were ornamented with silver decorations that mapped the constellations—the same ones that were in the sky the night that they declared their love to each other. Her voice came out as thin as a whisper, "Oh Elsa..." as tears of bittersweet joy flooded her eyes till she could not see anymore. Her body started emanating heat involuntarily and she knew that the walls would soon soak it up and communicate in their silent manner her feelings throughout the hallways and along the stairwell that lead to Elsa's chambers.

The heat came through the stone the way heat always came through old stone—slowly, then all at once. Elsa felt it before she understood it, the way she felt moisture before she understood weather. A warmth moved through the wall behind her at the rate of a tide coming in, diffuse and sourceless and unmistakably Anna, because nothing in the castle produced heat at that specific temperature, that specific character, the solar quality of it that was the opposite of Elsa's cold the way noon was the opposite of midnight.

She had been sitting at the frosted desk for twenty-six minutes. The cracked inkwell had been moved to the side. The two handprints on the wood had been joined by a third where she had rested her chin on her fist and the cold had traveled from her jaw into her hands and into the surface beneath without her directing it. She had been thinking about Ferdinand with the slow structural patience of a glacier deciding the eventual shape of a valley.

The warmth reached her shoulders through the stone at her back, and she stopped thinking about Ferdinand.

She sat very still, her hands rested flat on the desk in their frosted handprints. The heat moved through the wall and found her the way Anna always found her—not cautiously, not strategically, but with the specific warm ungoverned quality of a feeling that did not know how to be anything other than what it was.

She opened it.

The thought was small and precise and cost her more than she expected. She had not been certain - she had tied the knot before dawn in a room that smelled of cold and lanolin and the specific sleepless quality of a night spent deciding what she could not say in words, and she had given the package to Gerda without being certain. She had twenty years of experience to make peace with uncertainty. Yet, she had not made her peace with this.

The heat continued its slow passage through the stone. She turned her chair until her back was no longer against the wall and faced the window and the fjord instead, and she let the warmth reach the empty air of the study and dissipate there. She did not go to it. She did not move toward the door. Anna had asked her to leave and she had left, and the package was not a

summons. It was not an opening she had any right to push through. It was only Anna, alone in a room with something Elsa had made for her, feeling something large enough to warm the walls with it.

She sat in the chair facing the window and she put her hands in her lap and she held the warmth the way she held Anna's pulse when they slept—present, attended to, not intervening.

I see you, Elskan.

The frost on the desk thinned a fraction where her hands had lifted from it. The specific small retreat of a woman whose control had found a fraction more margin than it had possessed a moment ago, because the heat was answering a question she had not been able to stop asking since Anna had fallen at her feet.

She was still there. Whatever had been done to her in that room - Anna was still there and she had opened the wrapping paper herself, and the constellations had found her.

Elsa looked at the fjord. The fishing vessel had reached the mouth and was taking the turn south. The overcast was beginning to lighten at the eastern edge, the cloud thinning toward a pale silver that was not yet sun but carried the shape of it.

She would wait. She had told Anna the door was not locked and she had meant it, and she would keep meaning it for however long the keeping required. That part was not hard. She had kept meaning things for Anna for twenty years. She had no intention of stopping now.

She reached across the desk and set the two halves of the cracked inkwell back against each other, the clean fracture aligning precisely. The seam between them held only because the ink inside had frozen solid and bridged the break.

She left it that way. Fragile and held. She could think of worse metaphors for a Wednesday morning in August.

The heat through the wall had begun, very gently, to fade.

Some time later, there was a knock at Elsa's door. She opened it and found herself facing Johan - Anna's personal page. He stood straight as a pine, hands clasped behind his back as though facing the wind. His posture always grew too rigid in Elsa's presence. Whether from loyalty to Anna or fear of the ice queen, she could never tell; usually, she found it amusing. But this moment was not a time for amusement.

"What is it, Johan? Has something happened to the queen regent? Be quick about it," she inquired, concern creasing her brow.

"No... my queen... the queen regent is fine. She just wanted to ask you to join her at the palace's gardens. Her explicit words were 'were you taught me how to fall...' She didn't explain her intention, your majesty." The young page seemed as if he was about to escape from his own skin as he stood before Elsa, apparently completely baffled by the task he was given.

Elsa looked at Johan for a count of three. The boy held his posture with the specific rigidity of a sixteen-year-old who had decided that stillness was the same as composure, and the deciding showed in the set of his shoulders and the careful nowhere-focus of his eyes. She noted the tension and set it aside. She noted the message and did not set it aside.

Where you taught me how to fall.

The frost on the desk behind her made a small cracking sound as the temperature in the room shifted by a degree, and Johan's eyes moved involuntarily toward

the sound and then back to the middle distance with an effort that was almost admirable.

"Thank you, Johan. Tell the queen regent I will be there shortly."

Her voice gave Johan nothing to report to the other pages. She kept her face in its administrative register and watched him retreat with controlled haste.

She closed the study door.

She stood for a moment with her hand on the latch and let the message reassemble itself in the quiet of the room. *Where you taught me how to fall.* The pond in the south garden, kept frozen by Elsa through the summer, the ice carrying the familiar shape of her own working-thicker at the edges, thinner at the center, the grey August light sitting flat on it. She had taken Anna there eight years ago, before the doors opened, during one of the brief seasons when their parents had decided that supervised proximity was permissible. Anna had been thirteen and had wanted desperately to skate and had been unwilling to admit she did not know how. She had pretended for approximately forty-five seconds before her feet had gone in two different directions and Elsa had caught her by the wrist and said, with the grave practicality of a sixteen-year-old who had been thinking about falling her entire life, "the first thing I will teach you is how to land."

She had not thought about that afternoon in some time. Now she gave it the attention she reserved for Anna's deliberate messages: the message beneath the message, a map reference rather than a destination.

Come to the place where you taught me that falling does not have to break you.

She went to the window and looked at the south garden below. The pond was visible from this angle, the

oval of it grey-silver between the dormant beds, a thin tracery of frost along the stone edging. No figure at the pond yet. She had been asked to be there shortly and she intended to honor the timing.

She went to the armoire beside the door and took out her winter coat—the dark blue wool, the one with the frost-work at the cuffs she had put there herself—and put it on without particular ceremony. She took her gloves from the pocket and held them for a moment without putting them on, feeling the cold of the leather against her palm. Then she put them on and went to the door.

The corridor was empty. She walked without rushing or dawdling—the measured pace of a woman answering a summons. Only a light frost followed her over the stone, no more than the ambient trace of a Fifth Spirit at rest.

At the top of the servant's stair she paused and looked out the small passage window toward the garden below. The figure in the red coat had just come through the south door, moving across the dead grass toward the pond with the specific careful walk of a woman whose hands were wrapped in linen and gloves and who was carrying herself as if the carrying required attention.

The gloves were on - both of them. The black leather catching the overcast light.

Elsa's hand tightened on the window frame. The stone beneath her fingers acquired its frost. She looked at the figure below for a count of four—the auburn hair loose under the hood, the careful walk, the gloves—and then she released the frame and went down the stairs.

She came through the south door and crossed the dead grass without hurrying. She did not call out; her footsteps over the frozen ground announced her. She

stopped at the pond's stone border and looked across the three feet between them at Anna.

The pond held its grey surface while the frost at the stone edging remained undisturbed. She had not worked it this morning; the ice she had laid over the water still held, thicker at the edges where the garden shaded it from the summer sun.

She waited. Her breath made its pale curl in the cold air between them and dissolved.

Anna stepped carefully onto the frozen pond, this time without skates. Her heat softened the ice enough to accept her tread without melting beneath it - a balance she had mastered over the past year. She approached Elsa and held out her hands. The leather clasped them snugly, hiding the injuries, while light glinted from the constellation ornaments set into the backs.

"Thank you... they are beautiful. When... how did you manage to get them made? The craftsmanship... the details," Anna said, her gaze briefly drifting at the ornaments, both of them knowing without saying the meaning hidden in them. Her azure pools then turned back to meet Elsa's glacier blue gaze as tears filled her eyes. "Just... thank you."

Elsa watched Anna's feet find the ice and hold it - not skating, not quite walking, the surface yielding beneath each step and firming behind it. She had felt Anna's solar warmth working the pond from twenty feet away and adjusted her own cold by reflex. Fire and ice calibrated without discussion, as they had learned to do in recent years.

She looked at the gloves when Anna held out her hands. The black leather caught the overcast light across the surface and the constellations moved with it - the silver wire-work she had begun herself in the

small hours of the fourth night, sitting at the workbench in her dressing room with a needle and a spool of fine gauzy thread and the star charts she had pulled from the shelf without allowing herself to examine why she was pulling them. She had not needed the charts as they were etched into her memory but in those first nights that she sat by her sister, she felt an overwhelming need to see them, to trace her fingertips over the lines upon the paper. She had stitched them in order—Cassiopeia first, because it had been directly overhead that night and Anna had traced it with one finger against the open sky and said *it looks like a crown that fell sideways* – and then the others in their positions relative to it, working outward from the center the way memory worked outward from a moment.

She had not slept that night either.

Her eyes moved from the gloves to Anna's face, to the wet shine gathering along the lower lids, and she held Anna's gaze without speaking for a count of three. The pale curl of her breath moved between them in the cold and faded away.

"I finished them last night." Her voice came at the quiet register, the private one. No weight in it beyond the words themselves. "I needed something to do with my hands that wasn't coming through your door."

She took the two steps across the stone border and onto the ice, her own feet finding the surface without ceremony. The ice under her did not yield. It thickened a fraction, the cold of her traveling down through her boots and into the pond's surface in a slow structural deepening that steadied the ground beneath both of them. She stopped close enough that Anna's warmth reached her—that specific solar quality, the complement, the thing she could feel but not fully read—and she brought her

own gloved hands up and cupped them around Anna's where they were still extended, the leather of her palms pressing against the leather of Anna's, the constellations under her fingers.

"The doeskin came from Hollander's tannery on the east road. I had it in my dressing-room chest already." A brief pause. The ghost of something that was not quite a smile moved at the corner of her mouth and settled again. "The lining is from the chest in my dressing room - the rabbit fur. I had enough for both hands and a small amount over."

She did not let go of Anna's hands. Her thumbs moved across the backs of them, finding the edges of the constellation ornaments through the leather—Cassiopeia, the Hunter, the small tight cluster of the Pleiades that Anna had pointed at that night and asked *are those the ones that sail by?* The cold from Elsa's hands reached through the leather and found the linen wrap beneath and found, beneath the wrap, the cold-steady presence she had put into the doeskin before she wrapped and tied the package - the same cold she used in private hours. The calibration was exact, she had made certain of it.

"They are not beautiful." Her voice was the same quiet level. "They are functional. The beauty is where you were looking—at those stars in particular, on that particular night. I only put them where they belong."

Her thumbs stilled on the backs of Anna's hands. She looked at Anna's face, the freckles and the wet along the lower lids and the auburn hair loose under the hood, and she let the looking announced itself—not managed, not filed, not catalogued for later. Just Elsa looking at Anna in the grey August light with five nights of unsleep behind her eyes and a hairline fracture in the

mortar of the corridor wall that she had no intention of repairing.

"You came outside." The words were soft. "That's the first time since you woke up."

She was not asking. She was naming it the way she named things that mattered—quietly - once, without requiring a response. The pond held its grey surface around them and the garden held its quiet August stillness and the overcast above them had thinned another degree toward the pale silver that was beginning very faintly, to carry the suggestion of the sun behind it.

"I did come out, didn't I? You asked a question and I avoided it. Yet, you do deserve an answer." Anna took a deep breath, turning her head aside as her gloved hand laced its fingers with Elsa's leather-clad fingers, her body coming shoulder to shoulder beside her sister as they both gazed out at the icicles formed by winter itself upon the still reeds upon the bank of the frozen pond.

"I was raped." The words came from her with a small gust of rapidly cooling air. She did not say another word, just kept holding Elsa's hand tightly and stared at the stillness of the frozen pond.

The word landed.

Elsa heard it the way she heard ice forming in deep water—not as sound alone but as a structural event, something shifting below the surface that changed the weight-bearing capacity of everything above it. The pond beneath their feet gave no sign. The reeds on the bank held their icicles. The garden held its August stillness. The world continued at its ordinary pace and contained nothing that acknowledged the size of what Anna had just placed in the cold air between them.

She did not move. She did not tighten her grip on Anna's hand and she did not loosen it. She held the laced fingers at exactly the pressure they had been and she stood shoulder to shoulder with Anna in the grey light and she looked at the frozen pond and she breathed, once, slowly, the pale curl of it brief and quiet and barely visible.

The cold came.

Not the ambient cold she had been leaving on surfaces for five days, the imprecise cold of strained control and insufficient sleep. This was different. This was the structural cold, the deep-water kind, the cold that lived below the working cold the way bedrock lived below soil. It moved outward from her in a slow radial spread that she did not attempt to contain—the ice on the pond thickening by a measurable fraction, the frost on the dead grass along the bank crystallizing to a bright hard white, the icicles on the reeds lengthening by half an inch in the space of a single breath. The temperature in the immediate vicinity of the pond dropped four degrees in the time it took for that breath to dissolve.

She let it happen and she did not let it go further than the garden wall.

She turned her head and looked at Anna's profile. The line of the jaw and the freckles on the cheek and the auburn hair against the hood and the place where the breath came and went in its small visible rhythm. She looked at all of it with the specific quality of attention that was not cataloguing and was not managing—that was simply Elsa seeing Anna and refusing to look away.

When she spoke her voice was the quietest it had been all morning. Not the command register. Not the

sister register. Something below both of those, something that lived in the same place as the structural cold but that persisted for most of her life in its silence.

"I know."

Two words. Not *I suspected* and not *I feared* and not the careful diplomatic phrasing of a woman who had been telling herself for five days that she did not have enough information. The truth - she had known. She had felt it on the throne room floor with Anna convulsing in her arms, the wrongness moving through Anna's body with the specific intimate violation of something that was not Anna and was not asking permission, and she had known the shape of it and she had not been able to say it and she had spent five days not being able to say it till Anna had said it herself.

She turned Anna's fingers in hers so that their hands were no longer laced but nested together. The cold of her palms pressed through the leather on both sides in a slow steady surround - the calibrated cold, the private cold, the one that asked nothing and only held.

"You carried that for five days, alone" It was not an accusation as much nor an absolution, merely a measure of the dead weight of its burden. "You washed your hands and you smiled at the physician and you told me about the rash." A breath. The pale curl of it moved and faded. "I should have asked sooner. I knew what I was not asking and I told myself I was waiting for you to be ready but I was not ready to hear it - to know it as a word instead of a shape."

The frost on the bank had reached the first stone of the garden path. She noticed and drew it back by a fraction, not much, just enough to keep it within the bounds of the pond's immediate territory.

She did not offer solutions nor did she name Ferdinand. She did not say what she was already doing in the part of herself that had moved past the grief and arrived at the structural patience of a glacier deciding the eventual shape of a valley. None of that belonged in that moment.

Anna's own heat started coming out in waves, emanating from her, like a summer breeze in the midst of the frozen pond, synchronizing in the space between Elsa's creeping fractals of ice that spread out from the very soles of Elsa's feet. It was not a gentle heat—but a punishing, heartless one like the desert wind blasting through stone.

"I remember it all—lying there on the floor, immobilized while that thing... filled me. While my body was held in your arms and my voice was silenced. My body just clenched—my muscles felt like they were trying to crack my own bones, my nerves just... attacked me. Even now when I think of it, when I think of your eyes Elsa... how they looked down at me, the pain in them. I just want to gouge out my own eyes, to tear off my own skin to just... undo it all, to make it all go away. And I can't—I simply can't."

She remained silent, like a stone statue, her hand still warm, still clutching Elsa's fingers while her gaze remained fixated upon the reeds that were a few dozen yards away from both of them.

The word stayed where Anna had put it. In the cold between the reeds and the dead grass and the pale sky, it stayed.

Elsa did not fill the silence that followed it. She had learned, over two years of private hours and before that over a lifetime of doors, that some silences were not empty—that some silences were the most honest thing

two people could offer each other, the refusal to cover a truth with noise before the truth had been permitted to exist in the air for long enough to be real.

She held Anna's hands inside both of hers and she stood on the ice and she breathed.

The heat coming off Anna's body reached her in waves—not the solar warmth from the study wall, not the warm ungoverned feeling she had felt through the stone when Anna had opened the paper and seen the constellations. This was the other kind – the punishing kind, the one that felt like the desert's wind and seared against the skin. The kind that had nothing comforting within it and everything to do with a body that had been asked to contain something it was not built to contain. Elsa felt it moving against her own cold and she did not step back from it. She let the warmth find the frost at the edges of her coat and melt it and she stood in the small perimeter of Anna's heat and held on.

The ice under their feet was doing something she had not directed. The cold spreading outward from her soles was meeting Anna's warmth at a shifting boundary that moved as Anna's heat moved—ice retreating a fraction where the heat blast pressed hardest, reforming where it eased, a slow negotiation happening beneath their feet that neither of them was consciously conducting. She noticed it and left it alone. The pond could manage its own terms.

After a long moment she turned her face back toward the pond. Her voice returned quieter than it had been all morning.

"You are not dirty, Anna."

She said it the way she said things she had decided were true before she said them—without qualification, without the cushioning noise of *I know you feel* or *I*

want you to understand. The sentence complete in itself. A fact placed on the record in the cool August air above a frozen pond while the icicles on the reeds grew and the garden held its stillness around them.

"Whatever was done to you. Whatever was taken. You are not dirty and the washing will not find anything to remove, because there is nothing there. Do you hear me?"

Her thumbs moved across the backs of Anna's hands through the leather—once, slow, their private signal.

The desert heat pressed against her in another wave. She turned into it the way she had learned over two years to turn into the things Anna gave her—not bracing, not managing, just receiving. The frost at the collar of her coat melted in a narrow line where the warmth reached highest. She did not address it.

"I was looking at you." The words came at the same quiet level, her gaze still on the frozen pond, on the icicles on the reeds and the place where Anna's heat had cleared a thin line of open water along the near bank. "In the throne room. You said you remember my eyes—how they looked down at you. I want you to know what was in them. Not the pain. Beneath the pain."

A breath. The pale curl of it moved into the cold between them.

"You. I was looking at you - the whole time, every second of it, there was nothing in me that was anywhere except with you. Whatever that thing was doing, whatever it was taking—it did not have your eyes. It did not have the part of you that was looking back at me. I had that part. I held it the entire time."

Her thumbs made their second slow pass across the backs of Anna's hands.

"You did not go through it alone, Elskan. You were not alone on that floor. I know that is not the same as

stopping it and I know it does not undo it and I am not offering it as either of those things. I am only telling you what was true."

The icicles on the reeds had stopped growing. The frost on the bank held its line. The pond between them and the reeds lay grey and still in the overcast light, and the thin line of open water along the near bank steamed faintly where Anna's heat met the cool August air above it—a small visible breath, the pond's own, rising and dissolving.

She stood in it and she held Anna's hands and she did not look away from the water.

"It knew that I was looking at you... it knew what we shared... what we are to each other. And it raped me while I was silenced in your arms Elsa. I don't know... I don't know how to get over that. It wanted to tear us down, to tear you out of my heart and it did it with glee Elskan." Something in her expression winced, like a mirror forming its first crack before it completely gave in and shatters.

The crack in her expression lasted half a second before Anna's face reassembled itself. Elsa saw it. She saw it the way she saw the hairline fracture in the inkwell-clean, structural, the kind of break that did not announce itself loudly because it did not need to.

She turned away from the pond.

She released Anna's hands. Not withdrawing—releasing, the distinction her hands knew how to make, the opening of a hold rather than the ending of one. She brought both hands up and set them on either side of Anna's face, the leather of her palms against the cold-flushed skin of Anna's cheeks, her thumbs below the cheekbones where the freckles were densest, her fingers at Anna's temples where the white streaks began in the

auburn. She held Anna's face the way she held things she was not willing to let the world move—with both hands, with her full weight behind them, with the steady structural cold that was not the ambient cold and was not the crisis cold but was the deep-water kind, the kind that had been here before everything else and would be here after.

She looked at Anna. Directly. The glacier blue that she knew people found difficult to hold and which she leveled at Anna's face now without management or softening.

"Listen to me."

Not the command register nor the sister register. The voice below both of those, the one from the pond's bedrock.

"It knew what we are to each other because what we are to each other is written on your body and your body was the medium it used. It chose you because you are the place I can be reached. That is true and I will not pretend it is not true."

Her thumbs moved once—not the slow private signal, not the asking gesture. Something slower than that. Something that had no grammar attached to it and was only the motion of a woman's hands on the face of someone she loved past the point where love had a useful vocabulary.

"It chose the right place. You are the place I can be reached. You are the only place. And I will tell you what that means and what it does not mean."

The cold from her hands was spreading through the leather into Anna's skin now, not the chill of an ambient temperature but the specific intentional cold she used in private hours when Anna's body needed an anchor—slow, steady, asking nothing, simply present.

"It does not mean that what we are made you a victim. It means that what we are is the thing that was worth attacking. Do you understand the difference. What was targeted was not your weakness. What was targeted was the most valuable thing in the kingdom. The thing Ferdinand could not reach through armies or trade or diplomacy or anything else a prince has at his disposal, so he found a practitioner and a lock of hair and he put it in a box and he sent it with a bow."

Her fingers pressed a fraction more firmly against Anna's temples. The frost on the pond behind them cracked once, a slow deep sound from the center where the ice was thinnest, and settled again.

"He did not tear me out of your heart. I am standing on this pond with my hands on your face and I have not moved and I will not move. Whatever it did inside you—whatever it took, whatever it left behind—it did not take this. You are still here and I am still here and that is the one thing it could not reach because that thing lives where sympathy magic cannot go. It lives in the part of you that looked back at me on the throne room floor."

She paused. The pale curl of her breath moved between them and touched Anna's face and faded.

"You asked me how you get over it. I am not going to tell you that. I don't know the shape of the path yet and I will not pretend that I do. What I know is that you do not walk it alone and you do not walk it in a direction that takes you away from me."

Her eyes did not move from Anna's. The mirror crack in Anna's expression was still visible to her, the small structural truth of it, and she held it in her gaze alongside everything else—the freckles and the white streaks and the wet along the lower lids and the desert

heat still coming off Anna's skin in its punishing waves against Elsa's cold hands.

She did not offer to fix it. She did not reach for the future minute where this was smaller. She stayed in this minute, on this pond, with her hands where they were, and she waited to see if the mirror would hold or shatter.

Anna then looked at Elsa, at the dark bags beneath her eyes, at the wrinkles of worry stretched over her normally porcelain-like fair skin. The smooth black surface of her glove caressed along Elsa's jawline and lips as she gently nuzzled her forehead against her sister's. "Gerda told me you carried me up the stairs in your arms," Anna said, a small smile curling on her lips, the beginning of a laughter that did not come through just yet.

The leather of Anna's glove found Elsa's jaw and Elsa held very still for it—the specific stillness of a woman who had learned, a long time ago, that holding still was how you kept something from ending before it was finished. The black leather traced the line of her jaw and the corner of her mouth and she let it, her own hands staying where they were against Anna's face, her forehead coming forward the small remaining distance to meet Anna's.

The contact landed.

She felt the warmth of Anna's forehead against hers—the particular, specific warmth of Anna, the one that was not the desert heat and not the solar warmth from the study wall but the baseline warmth of Anna simply existing in proximity, the warmth she had fallen asleep beside for two years and which her body knew the temperature of the way it knew the temperature of its own skin.

She let out a breath. It moved between their faces in a brief pale curl and faded.

"Gerda talks too much."

Her voice had shifted. Not the bedrock voice and not the command register and not the private quiet she had been using since the study. Something smaller than all of those—the voice she used in the dark, in private hours, when Anna had made her laugh before she was expecting to laugh and the laugh arrived before she could decide whether to permit it.

Her thumbs moved against Anna's cheekbones. The ghost of something settled at the corner of her mouth and this time it did not withdraw entirely.

"You are not a small woman, Anna. I want that noted. You are—compact, I will grant you—but you are solid, and you were not cooperating with the process, and by the second landing Kai was standing in the corridor and looking at me in a manner I found deeply unhelpful, and I told him very clearly that I required no assistance, and he nodded and went away, and then I had to actually get you up the third flight without letting him see me struggle because I had specifically said I did not require assistance."

A pause. She looked at Anna's face from an inch away, the close distance that erased the composure she wore for other people, the distance where the exhaustion was visible and the shadows under her eyes were visible and the thing beneath the ghost of a smile was visible—the relief, the specific enormous relief of a woman who had been sitting in a chair for five days listening to someone she loved breathe, and who now had that someone's forehead against hers and the smell of Anna's hair and the warmth of Anna's skin and the small

beginning of a smile at Anna's mouth that had not been there this morning.

"I managed," she said. "Eventually."

Her forehead pressed a fraction more firmly against Anna's. The frost on the pond behind them held its grey surface. The thin line of open water along the near bank had widened a degree in the last several minutes, Anna's warmth and the morning's slow brightening working together without consultation. A pale silver light had begun to press through the overcast from the east—not sun, not yet, but the shape of it, the suggestion, the specific quality of a August morning deciding to become afternoon.

She did not move her hands from Anna's face.

Anna pushed her away, a playful gesture that broke the proximity. "How dare you? Did you just call your little sister fat in her face? I swear the gull..." Her cheeks blushed slightly as the smile spread wider on her face, as she feigned an insulted pout.

Elsa let herself be pushed. The step back her body took was small and unhurried, the step of a woman who had been moved and was not troubled by it, and she looked at the feigned pout with the specific quality of attention she reserved for things Anna did that she had no intention of dignifying with an immediate response.

She let the silence hold for three full seconds.

"I said solid."

The word landed at the driest register she possessed, which was a register that had been described by diplomats as disconcertingly precise and which Anna had once characterized, less generously, as the voice you use when you are being technically correct on purpose. She folded her hands in front of her with the composed unhurried manner of a woman at a state

reception, which she was aware made the effect considerably worse, and she continued looking at the pout.

"Solid is a structural observation. It speaks to density of constitution. Resilience." A beat. "I carried you up three flights of stairs. I am offering you a compliment about your bone structure."

The ghost at the corner of her mouth had become something more definite now—not quite a smile by the standards of anyone who had not spent two years learning to read the difference between Elsa's expressions at close range, but unmistakably one to anyone who had. Her eyes held the pale winter light from the brightening overcast and in this light, at this distance, the exhaustion behind them was visible alongside everything else—the shadows, the loosened braid, the melted frost at the collar of the coat where Anna's heat had reached it.

She had not smiled in five days. Apparently, she had not forgotten how.

"Also," she added, after a considered pause, "you were uncooperative. I stand by that characterization entirely."

"Oh I can think of more than one time with my lack of cooperation was the last thing to hold you back," Anna said, smiling coyly as she tugged Elsa back into her arms and curled one of them along the small of her back. "And come to think of it, I thought you liked the fact that I was somewhat...more solid than you in certain places..." The blush in her cheeks intensified as she instinctively pulled the hood of her robe slightly tighter around her head.

Elsa allowed the arm at the small of her back. Her body settled into it with the unhurried ease of

something returning to a position it knew—not yielding exactly, not the yielding Anna did, but the specific quality of a woman whose body had decided, some time ago, that Anna's arm at the small of her back was where it belonged and had stopped requiring convincing on the subject.

She looked at Anna's face from the new distance, which was considerably shorter than the previous distance, and she held the coy smile in her gaze for a count of two before she answered.

"I have no comment on that."

The delivery was precise. The effect of it was somewhat undermined by the fact that the ghost at the corner of her mouth had deepened by a measurable degree, a fact she was aware of and did not attempt to address. She brought one hand up from where it had been displaced by the embrace and set it against Anna's ribs through the red coat, the cold of her palm spreading through the wool in a slow steady diffusion.

"What I will say," she continued, at the same considered pace, looking at a point somewhere above Anna's left shoulder with the expression of a woman reviewing a document, "is that the stairs were three flights and the difficulty was architectural rather than personal, and I would appreciate it if that distinction were observed."

She brought her eyes back down to Anna's face. The blush had reached Anna's ears, visible at the edge of the hood, and Elsa noted it and filed it with the specific private satisfaction of a woman who had, on balance, won the exchange.

Her hand at Anna's ribs pressed a fraction more firmly through the coat. The cold from her palm had found its level—not the deep-water cold, not the

structural cold, the private calibrated cold that lived between those two things, the one Anna's body had learned to lean into.

She said nothing else. She let the morning hold them on the ice and she did not look away from the blush at the edge of the hood, and the smile she was not quite permitting herself stayed exactly where it was—present, visible to anyone who knew where to look, which was one person, and that person was standing close enough to feel it.

Anna's voice dropped to an affectionate, teasing tone. "My brave, strong queen...my hero..." She traced the supple leather against Elsa's lower lip, her azure eyes losing themselves in Elsa's glacier blue gaze, her body pressing slightly closer through their coats, yet her internal heat already intimately communicating its presence to Elsa's flesh in their own silent channel. "Elsa...you must be exhausted, you haven't slept in five nights. Let's get you back to your room so I may tend to you for a while instead."

Elsa looked at her. The blush at the edge of the hood. The arm at the small of her back. The way Anna had pulled the hood tighter around her face as if the wool could conceal what was already entirely visible to the one person standing close enough to see it.

"Certain places," she repeated. The words came out at the reviewing-a-document register, careful and unhurried. "You have opinions about your own architecture now."

She tilted her head a fraction. The loosened braid shifted across the front of her coat.

"I recall forming those opinions first. I would like credit for the original scholarship."

Her hand at Anna's ribs did not move. The cold from her palm had settled into its steady diffusion through the wool, the private temperature, the one that was not asking and not commanding and was simply the cold saying I am present and so are you and this is what that feels like. She let it sit there and she kept her eyes on the deepening blush and allowed the thing at the corner of her mouth to finally become a smile.

Small. Precise. Entirely Anna's.

Then the leather found her lower lip and she went still. Not the managed stillness she wore for courts and councils. The other kind—the kind that happened before she could decide whether to permit it, the kind Anna had always been able to produce in her without warning or apology.

She held it for a breath.

"My chambers," she said quietly. The smile had not gone anywhere. Her eyes had not moved from Anna's. "Not yours."

It was not a correction. It was a preference stated plainly, the way she stated things she had already decided, and beneath the plainness of it was the thing she did not say aloud—that Anna's room still held the basin and the washstand and the five days of bad water temperature, and Elsa's room held none of that and she was not above arranging the geography in Anna's favor and calling it a preference.

Her hand left Anna's ribs. She brought it up and covered the gloved fingers at her lip, pressing them lightly there for one moment before she drew them down and held them, the leather of her palm against the leather of Anna's, the constellations between their hands.

"Come, then." She turned toward the south door, her hand keeping Anna's. Her steps on the ice were unhurried, the cold traveling before her in its familiar structural deepening, steadying the surface beneath both their feet. "You can take care of me. I will allow it."

The overcast had thinned another degree. The pale silver light above the garden wall carried the first faint warmth of a sun still deciding whether to appear.

Anna gently curled her arm within Elsa's elbow, taking a step closer beside her, discreetly supporting her exhausted slender frame through their coats, making an impression of two sisters affectionately walking beside each other while her body hummed with tender warmth against the outer side of Elsa's adjacent thigh and hip.

Elsa neither acknowledged nor resisted the support. She walked with Anna's arm through hers and allowed the steady warmth at her hip and thigh to reach her through both coats.

This was the public grammar and she knew it fluently. Two sisters walking. The beloved queen regent and her elder sister, taking the morning air after an illness. Any servant crossing the garden would see exactly that and nothing more.

What no servant could see was Elsa's body orienting toward Anna without instruction: the correction in her gait, the fraction of weight settling toward Anna's side, her cold retreating from the space between them as though it, too, preferred the warmth.

She had not slept in five nights. The exhaustion lived in her bones now, below the discipline, in the place where the structural cold came from. She could feel the weight of it in her jaw, in the specific effort it took to hold her head at its usual angle.

She looked at the south door ahead of them. Twelve feet.

"You are very warm," she said quietly. Not a complaint. An observation stated in the tone of a woman acknowledging a fact she finds, against her better judgment, entirely acceptable.

Her arm pressed Anna's fractionally closer.

Anna watched Elsa from the periphery of her vision and her heart silently broke. Seeing Elsa stumble a single step and quickly gather herself, regain her posture while she instinctively leaned in just a bit closer to offer her the support she knew she needed. Her voice lowered just enough so only Elsa could hear her "it's ok..I got you..."

Elsa felt the stumble before anyone could name it: her left foot met the frozen path at the wrong angle, her weight shifted, and her body corrected.

Anna was already closer.

The whisper found the space below her ear at the same moment Anna's warmth pressed into her side, and Elsa went very still for the length of one step. Not the managed stillness and not the struck stillness. Something beneath both of those — the stillness of a woman who had been holding everything and had just heard, that she did not have to.

She did not answer. Instead, she kept walking the remaining eight feet to the south door at the same unhurried pace, Anna's arm through hers and its warmth steady at her side. At the door, she opened and held it by reflex, then crossed into the corridor's dim warmth without releasing Anna's arm.

The door closed behind them. The garden fell away. The corridor was empty — stone and tapestry and the

particular interior cold that was partly August and partly Elsa and had been partly Elsa for twenty years.

She stopped walking.

Not dramatically. She simply stopped in the middle of the corridor, Anna's arm still linked with hers, eyes forward and braid half-undone over her shoulder. Then she drew one slow breath.

"I know," she said.

Quietly. To the corridor. To Anna. To the five nights.

"I know you have me."

The door opened onto the chamber's dim interior. Before Elsa had fully crossed the threshold the effort of maintaining her posture had begun to show. Anna moved to the hearth and awakened it with a subtle motion of her gloved fingers, where fire sprang to life without flint or tinder. She guided Elsa to her favorite reclining chair beside the small oak table and its waiting porcelain tea service, drew it out and waited before seating her.

"Do you want to sit first, or should I help you straight to bed?"

Elsa watched the fire catch. Anna's control had sharpened over recent months through repetition and attention, much as her own command of ice once had.

"Sit first," Elsa said. "The bed will wait ten minutes."

She allowed Anna to guide her down. Anna poured the autumn blend and set the cup within reach. Elsa wrapped both hands around the warm porcelain, then looked at the careful grip of Anna's hands.

"Pour one for yourself."

It was not a suggestion.

Elsa watched her pour. She knew that concentration as intimately as the constellations: the precise wrist, the slight inward settling of Anna's shoulders, the private register clicking into place. She then wrapped both hands around her cup without lifting it. The warmth of the porcelain pressed into her cold palms and she let it, which was also a decision. She looked at Anna across the small table and watched how the firelight had reached Anna's face, tracing against the freckles and the white streaks. The cup had begun to warm her palms and she lifted it and drank — the tea was the autumn blend, dried chamomile and the spiced bark Gerda ordered from the southern traders, the combination Anna had decided three winters ago was the correct remedy for Elsa's worst nights and had simply begun providing without discussion.

She set the cup down. Her eyes stayed on Anna across the table.

"How are your hands, inside the gloves."

The question was quiet and direct, stripped of the morning's caution. From four feet away, Elsa watched Anna hold the teacup with the precise grip of someone working around pain she had chosen not to mention.

For a moment Anna halted, realizing this was more than merely a question but actually a test.

"They feel comfortable." The words *my queen* danced on the tip of her tongue, but she held them back, not sure yet that Elsa was willing to apply herself in that particular manner to this conversation. "Should I show them to you?"

Elsa looked at her over the rim. *Comfortable* was honest—not *fine*, not *better*. It meant the salve had worked, the linen held, and the leather was doing what she had calibrated it to do.

She set the cup down.

"No."

The word came at the quiet register, unhurried. She held Anna's gaze across the table.

"I made them to fit you. I know what they feel like on the inside. I don't need to see them to know whether they're sitting correctly."

A pause. The fire spoke softly behind Anna, finding new material in the grate, and the light it cast moved across the table between them.

"I asked because I wanted to hear you say something true about your own body without preparing the answer first." Her thumb moved once against the side of her cup. "Comfortable is true. That's sufficient."

She lifted the cup again. Drank. Set it down with the same small precise sound it had made before. Her eyes had not moved from Anna's face. The firelight had found the exhaustion there too — less in the hollows and more in the particular brightness of someone running on something other than rest.

"Finish your tea."

Quiet. Definite. The tone that was not a suggestion and was not the command register either but lived in the narrow honest space between them. Anna heard it clearer this time in Elsa's voice and felt a subtle warmth grow in the pit of her abdomen. She picked up her cup of tea and quietly sipped it, her eyes intensely staring at Elsa's gaze while her lips brushed against the cup's rim, moistening from the intake of the warm fluid. She disciplined herself to remain composed as she quietly asked, "How are you feeling?"

Elsa looked at her for a moment. The question was Anna's—the warmth in it, the directness, the specific

quality of attention Anna wore when she was asking something she intended to hear answered truly.

She looked down at her cup.

"Tired."

She turned the cup once in her hands. The porcelain had given up most of its warmth to her palms and she could feel the difference now - the specific depletion of a thing that had been giving heat steadily and was nearing its limit.

"Five nights is a particular kind of tired. The kind that lives below the muscle." She paused again and turned to look at the flames that danced upon the hearth.

She looked up.

"I have been holding a great deal in a very small space." Her voice was the same quiet level. "And there's no more room left."

The frost on the window behind her had climbed another quarter inch since they came inside. She was aware of it and did not address it.

"I will be better after I have slept." Her eyes stayed on Anna's. "That is a true answer and not a managed one. I want you to know the difference when I give it to you."

"May I bed you? I just want to help you find rest and comfort, if I may."

Elsa looked at her across the table for a count of three. The question was carefully phrased. *May I*. Anna asking permission in the private register, the one that acknowledged the grammar between them without demanding it, the one that left the answer genuinely open. Elsa heard the care in the construction and she held it for the moment it deserved.

Then she pushed her chair back from the table. She stood without ceremony, the motion slower than usual, the specific slowness of a body that had been spending from reserves for five nights and was finally being permitted to stop spending.

"Yes."

One word. Quietly. She left the cup on the table and moved toward the bed, unfastening the frost-work cuffs of the blue coat as she went, her fingers working the buttons with the automatic precision of a woman who had dressed and undressed herself without assistance since she was fifteen and had decided that was a permanent arrangement.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Anna across the room. The firelight behind Anna had steadied into its even warmth and the room had found a temperature that was neither Anna's heat nor Elsa's cold but the negotiated middle of the two of them occupying the same space.

"The braid," she said quietly. "I cannot reach the back of it without pulling. It's been knotted since yesterday afternoon and I have been ignoring it."

She waited, her hands folded in her lap, the coat half-unfastened, the loosened braid lying over her shoulder in its complicated half-undone state.

Anna quietly got up from her seat and carefully unfastened the buckle of her robe, followed by the next one, stopping its motion when the rest of them were undone. She then undid her blouse and peeled out of her knee-long skirt, only to reveal the delicate weave of a white gauzy lace gown that hung off her tanned, toned figure. She paused to let Elsa admire her offered form but quickly resumed her motions, making sure to keep the focus on Elsa. She helped her out of the coat and dress,

then folded them over the chair. Elsa sat back on the bed, too tired to make a ceremony of being cared for. Anna settled behind her on the bed. Her legs carefully slid at Elsa's sides while the front of her body pressed intimately close against Elsa's shoulders. Her fingers carefully worked on the tangles of the braid, finding the constrained locks of hair and relieving them one by one, till Elsa's platinum pale strands finally regained their freedom.

The frost on the window thinned by a visible degree.

Elsa's hands unclasped in her lap. She did not direct them anywhere. They simply opened, resting against her thighs, palms up. The frost at her knuckles gradually retreated into her as the warmth of Anna's body pressed steadily against her shoulders and the braid fell into its place behind her shoulders.

When the last knot released and her hair finally fell—all of it, the full weight of it, she let out a breath that had apparently been waiting several hours to be released.

Anna's voice remained still, her own ginger and white strands caressing Elsa's fair skin as she leaned in against her shoulder blade and started pouring delicate kisses along the sharp angle of it that soon found the slope of her neck. Her arms slowly wrapped around Elsa's naked body and for a few precious moments she indulged herself in the embrace itself while radiating her own heat all around Elsa. Nourishing her with the very warmth that Elsa's body struggled in retaining.

Elsa did not move. The kisses found her shoulder blade one by one and she received them the way she received things Anna gave her without announcement—without bracing, without the small preparatory stillness

she brought to most forms of contact. She simply sat in the warmth that had wrapped itself around her and let it be what it was.

Her hands had found Anna's forearms where they crossed her body. She was not gripping. She was not directing. Her fingers settled against the fabric while her eyelids lowered.

The frost on the window was gone. She was not certain when it had gone. She had not dissolved it deliberately. It had simply retreated as the warmth reached the necessary depth, the way ice retreated from something that had been patient enough and warm enough and had not required the retreat to be acknowledged before it happened.

She turned her head slightly. Not enough to break the contact at her neck. Just enough that her cheek found Anna's hair where it fell against her shoulder—the auburn and the white strands both, the record of them, the map she knew by heart.

"You are warm," she said again.

Anna's hand found Elsa's jawline and she silently turned her aside so she faced her, but instead of meeting her gaze, Anna tilted her own head slightly aside—just enough to seal her lips with Elsa's own and kiss her with the raw, unadulterated love she felt for her from her very depths.

Elsa closed her eyes. Anna had heard the difference in *warm*; she had reached past the words and answered what lay beneath them.

She let herself settle. A fraction of weight released downward into the mattress, then another with the body making its own argument now which the mind had stopped countering.

"Stay," she said quietly. "Until I'm under. You don't have to—after. But stay until then."

The *don't have to* was honest. Anna had her own recovery to tend, her own morning, her own hands wrapped in linen and leather that needed watching. Elsa was not asking her to set those things down indefinitely. She was asking for the falling asleep part. The specific vulnerable minutes of it.

Her fingers tightened once on Anna's forearms where they crossed her body—not gripping, just present—and then loosened again.

Anna answered her with her tongue shyly pressing in between Elsa's lips, her other hand resting against Elsa's exposed hip, allowing a tongue of actual warmth to bloom out of her palm and unfurl within Elsa's depths, not penetrating but just caressing within her.

Elsa made a sound she did not plan to make. Small. Low. The sound of something releasing that had been held for too long without knowing it was being held.

The warmth found its way through her skin at the hip and moved inward the way Anna's warmth always moved—not asking permission, not requiring acknowledgment, simply *there*, a solar fact she had stopped resisting sometime between the pond and the corridor and the unfastened braid. It was not the desert heat from the garden. It was the other kind. The ungoverned kind. The kind that had no strategy driving it.

Her fingers found Anna's wrist. Not directing. Just—present. Feeling the pulse there the way she tracked pulses when she needed to know that something was still alive and still hers.

"Anna."

Her voice had gone to the place below all the registers. The bedrock place. She said the name the way

she said things she had already decided were true. Her eyes remained closed while the frost avoided the window. The fire behind them had found its steady even warmth and the room held the negotiated temperature between them, the middle ground that was neither cold nor heat but the specific climate of the two of them in the same space.

Her grip on Anna's wrist loosened. Her body made its final argument against the mattress and stopped arguing.

"Stay," she said again. This time without the qualifier. Without the *don't have to*. Just the word, placed in the quiet of the room, small and honest and entirely without management. Just that - just stay.

Anna let her hand slide down the slope of Elsa's hip and down along her thigh and then along the familiar descent that led to the warmth between Elsa's thighs. She slid her legs up against their outer side, mutely offering her sister to take her place upon her body's throne. Elsa let out a sigh and slid one pale leg up against Anna's knee and then the other, till both of her thighs remained comfortably relaxed and parted while Anna's heart started hammering within her chest.

It was these quiet moments that she especially loved - when Elsa just let go. When she just allowed herself to become vulnerable while Anna's fingers delved in between her outer folds, gingerly curling within her and working her gloved fingertips in slow, practiced motions within her.

Elsa's breath caught. The sound was small and involuntary and entirely Anna's—the specific sound she made when Anna found her without warning, without the careful architecture of anticipation, when the warmth arrived before the mind had assembled a response to it.

Her head fell back against Anna's shoulder. The leather was cold against her heat. That specific contrast—Anna's warmth and the cold she had built into the gloves, the constellation leather finding the most private warmth she possessed—produced something she had no governance over. Her fingers found the bedding. Not gripping. Just needing something to hold.

"Anna."

The name came out differently than the last time. Lower. The specific way she said it when Anna had taken something from her before she could decide whether to give it or hold onto it.

She breathed slowly, each exhale long and deliberate.

"I'm here," she said quietly.

Her eyes stayed closed. The fire held steady. The frost did not return.

"Lean back against me Elskan, just lean and close your eyes...sleep is coming soon."

Elsa did as Anna suggested. No decision preceding it, no architecture around it. Anna's voice found the last thing she had been holding upright and the holding simply—stopped.

Her weight settled back against Anna's chest in a slow continuous surrender that had nothing managed in it. The warmth received her completely, Anna's body solid behind her the way the ice was solid beneath her feet on the pond—not yielding, not moving, simply *there*, bearing what was placed upon it without requiring the weight to justify itself.

Her breathing changed. She felt it change without directing it—the exhalations lengthening, the inhalations growing shallow, the specific rhythm of a body finally given permission to begin its descent.

"Jeg elsker deg" she said through a breathless gasp.

Anna's fingers carefully curled her fingertips deeper along the path that lead within her Elsa's depth while her other hand remained tightly wrapped around her exposed chest till her spread fingers covered the surface that enveloped Elsa's thrumming heart. She could feel Elsa's body start to quiver but she didn't push any further, instead she kept kneading her inner flesh against her own pubic bone while cradling her within her arms into the dark, safe plunge of sleep.

The quiver began at Elsa's core and moved outward. Not the crisis-cold. Not the structural cold. Something that had no name in the vocabulary of ice—a warmth originating from Anna's hand and spreading inward and upward through her chest until it reached the place behind her sternum where she had been holding for five nights and it dissolved that too.

A sound left her. Quiet. Private. Entirely Anna's.

Her back arched a fraction against Anna's chest and then released—the specific release of a body that had been braced against something for so long it had forgotten it was bracing, and had finally been given something warm enough and patient enough and *known* enough to brace against instead.

Her fingers tightened once on Anna's forearm. Then loosened. Then went still.

The exhale that followed was the longest breath she had taken in five days. She felt it leave her completely, all of it, the throne room and the chair and the catalogued observations and the hairline crack in the corridor wall and Ferdinand's name written in patient glacial fury on the inside of her chest.

All of it. Out.

Her weight became absolute against Anna's body. The dead, honest weight of someone finally unconscious.

The frost remained in its exile. The fire held its steady warmth across the room, and Anna's heart beat its even rhythm against Elsa's shoulder blades while the pale silver light outside the window continued its slow brightening toward afternoon.

Anna's gloved hands slipped tenderly away from Elsa's vulnerable, exposed body, tucking her limp form further up the bed until all of her weight was supported by the mattress. She then covered her with a thick woolen blanket, looking at her for a long moment. A small smile found her lips as she pictured Elsa carrying her three flights of stairs on her very arms—and her mind was made. Her tanned thigh slid slowly up along Elsa's hip as her shin mindlessly draped between her thighs. Her face remained on Elsa's shoulder as she quietly listened to her heart beat, and Anna remained there for some time, until sleep finally caught her as well.

It was the middle of the night, and Anna was quietly sitting by the hearth, her body stark naked as she watched from the periphery of her vision Elsa's sleeping form while quietly sipping a cup of tea. Her thoughts shifted before her mind like the pages of a book unfolding before her, rereading the chapter of the last five days over and over, like an episode she struggled to comprehend. As the soft ticking sound of the grandfather clock echoed the passage of time, she stared

at the flames in the hearth, her gloved fingertip keeping a circle around the rim of the tea cup with a certain nagging realization: everything that transpired several days ago was coordinated. Someone among the palace staff, among their most trusted servants had betrayed them.

As the thought simmered in her mind, her own resolution hardened.

The heat of the ceramic cup pressed against her palms. The tea was hot, sending a steady warmth through her fingers to her wrists. As she swallowed the liquid, she felt the heat descend a path down her throat and settle in her stomach. The rug beneath her thighs had a coarse, woolen texture that pressed into her skin with each movement. The air in the room was cool against her bare shoulders, contrasting with the heat radiating from the hearth in front of her. The scent of chamomile and spiced bark rose from the steam in thin lines above the cup.

On the bed, Elsa lay on her side. Her breathing was rhythmic and deep. Each inhale lifted her chest and each exhale allowed it to settle back against the mattress. Her platinum hair consisted of tangled strands across the dark silk of the pillowcase. The firelight flickered across her face, casting moving shadows over her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose. Her skin was pale in the low light, except for the areas where the orange glow of the embers touched her shoulder and neck.

In the hearth, a log shifted and released a small shower of sparks that died against the stone grate. The smell of burning cedar filled the space between them and the bed. The light in the room was dim, with faint moonlight filtering through the heavy curtains to touch the edges of the furniture. Shadows gathered in the

corners of the ceiling and extended across the floorboards towards the foot of the bed.

Anna felt a lingering heaviness in her limbs. A weight resided in her muscles that made each movement feel slow and deliberate. There was a slight tightness in her abdomen, a residue of the previous warmth, but it faded into a general sense of fatigue. Her eyes remained fixed on the steady rise and fall of Elsa's breathing, tracking its rhythm with every breath she took. The coarse fibers of the rug pressed against her bare legs, providing a constant sensation against the chill of the room.

After a while longer, Anna slid back into bed, curling up in a spoon position against Elsa's back. She slowed down her breaths as she inhaled the familiar scent of her lover's hair before she opened herself to the chill that emanated from her. She fought back a gasp—the feeling of stepping out into a howling winter often accompanied this sensation when she allowed her sister's chill to invade her—but after the initial shock, there was always a lulling after-wave that followed, in which both of their bodies found an equilibrium of sorts between them.

Outside, a robin announced the arrival of dawn while the grandfather clock in Elsa's room ticked away. She let the sounds wash out her thoughts till sleep hesitantly returned to her.



Earlier that evening, the room smelled of old vellum, cold stone, and the metallic tang of ink. A single lamp sputtered on a heavy oak table, casting long, trembling shadows across the stacks of ledgers that housed the memory of the kingdom. It was an hour when the castle usually held its breath, and the five of them stood in a loose, awkward circle, as if they had collided by accident in the dimness. Doctor Holt stood slightly apart, his gaze fixed on the guttering lamp. He did not offer a diagnosis—not yet—but he nodded slowly. "The shadows beneath Her Majesty's eyes," he observed softly, "are not the shadows of simple exhaustion. There is a depletion there. A heaviness."

"It was the box," Signar interrupted, his voice hushed but urgent. He shifted his weight, his polished shoes clicking softly on the stone. "One must consider the origin. A gift of reconciliation from Ferdinand, and yet it carried a strike that nearly broke the Queen in her own throne room. The hand that prepared that box did not intend for Anna to wake up smiling. It was a calculated blow, and the Southern Isles—"

"The Southern Isles may have sent the vessel," Ivar countered, his voice a low, soldierly rumble. He stood with his back to the door, eyes scanning the corridor. "But the protection of the daughters is my charge. I saw

the Spirit's face when she carried the Queen. She was... transformed. I have seen that look on men who have forgotten everything but the person in their arms. It is a dangerous kind of devotion."

"It is an irregularity," Kai added, his tone precise and cooling, though he did not look at the others. He remained focused on the ledger open before him, though he had not turned a page in minutes. "The appearance of the throne during such a crisis is paramount. To have the Queen collapse in public is one thing; to have the subsequent recovery handled with such... secluded intensity... it disrupts the expected order of the apartments. Propriety requires a certain transparency that we are currently not seeing."

Gerda made a small, wounded sound in her throat. "They are only frightened. They have only each other. I spent an hour this morning wrapping Anna's hands in linen—the skin was raw, the fingerpads torn. Elsa had already left, but for five days I watched her keep that chair beside the bed, barely sleeping, barely eating. They are just two girls who love one another."

A silence fell over the room, heavy and thick as the dust on the shelves. It was the silence of people who had each arrived at the same precipice and were now realizing they were not standing there alone. They looked at one another—not with the kinship of friends, but with the startled recognition of ghosts. "We cannot simply... watch," Signar murmured, though he immediately looked away, as if the suggestion had been too bold. "If the crown is being steered by a grief we cannot see, the stability of the realm—"

"It is only talk," Kai interrupted, his voice returning to its formal, Seneschal's cadence. He closed the ledger with a soft, final thud. "We are tired. The

evening has been long, and the Queen is recovering. It would be an impropriety to dwell on these... impressions."

"I suppose," Gerda whispered, though she did not move. "We should sleep on it," Holt suggested, his voice neutral, devoid of the certainty he usually carried in the sickroom.

One by one, they drifted back into the shadows of the corridor, leaving the lamp to burn down. They had agreed to nothing, and they had decided nothing, yet as they parted, the air between them had changed. The secret had been breathed, and though they had stepped away from it, the breath remained, hanging cold and invisible in the dark.

