

Chapter 6: Chocolate and First Smile

GIRL'S POV

I am drowning.

The water was everywhere. Cold, endless, and heavy. It lled my nose, my mouth, my ears. I kicked. I clawed. I reached for the surface. I couldn't see. My limbs felt sluggish, like the water was made of ink and sorrow. I didn't know how to swim. I never learned.

I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Not a sound. Just bubbles and silence.

Then I heard a voice.

Faint. Distant. Familiar.

I'd heard it before, I was sure of it. I couldn't place it, couldn't shape the memory into words, but something deep inside me clung to the sound. Like it was the only thing keeping me tethered to the world above the water.

It wasn't the master's voice. No, this voice felt... safe.

My eyes snapped open. The water was gone. So was the darkness.

Just a bed now, soft as clouds beneath me, thick blankets cocooning my limbs. I was still drowning, but in warmth and comfort this time.

My breath caught as I looked up and met a pair of eyes staring back at me. Blue as the open sky, watching with quiet intensity.

"You were dreaming," Kierygan murmured, his broad silhouette casting a shadow over me.

I sat up abruptly, breath catching in my throat. I didn't remember walking back to my room, only the jolt that felt like it fried my brain. Then, nothing.

But as I sifted through the fog, pieces came back to me.

Mirael.

She hadn't just touched the bracelet, she yanked it. Tugged so hard it triggered it.

Mistress had designed it that way. If I ever tried to remove or destroy it, it would strike back. A violent pulse meant to drop me instantly.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

I slowly lifted my eyes to his, searching, waiting for the glint of cruelty, the dangerous smirk Master always wore.

But there was none.

No malice. No warmth either. Just a calm, unreadable stare.

His eyes dropped slowly to the bracelet on my right wrist. Instinct kicked in. I pulled my arm behind me, tucking it out of sight, and dropped my gaze to my knees as heat crept up my cheeks.

"No one's going to try to take it from you again," Kierygan said, his voice low but steady. "We just want to find out what it is—and why it reacted that way. That's all."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. The words tangled in my chest, too knotted to free. I turned my face away instead, and that's when I realized we weren't alone.

A man stood near the replace, hands clasped behind his back. His skin was pale, almost silvery, smooth like polished stone. His eyes held the color of a setting sun, while his hair, short and curled at the ends, glowed like the first light of dawn.

My eyes icked between the two men, noting their stark differences. The stranger's golden hair caught the light. So unlike Kierygan's, dark as midnight. His smile came easily, his features soft and open. Kierygan, by contrast, always wore a hard expression, his face rarely anything but a frown.

"This is Evander," Kierygan said. "He's a scholar and my strategist."

I blinked at him. I didn't know what either of those words meant. All I understood was that the pale man's name was Evander.

He gave a small wave, his smile easy. "Those are just fancy titles," he said, as if he'd noticed my confusion. "All it means is that I study things. Try to make sense of the world."

I nodded slowly, quietly letting the word scholar away in my mind. A new one to learn.

Kierygan inched closer. "He wants to help," he said calmly. "To figure out what your bracelet really is... what it's doing to you."

Evander offered a small bow. "Only if you're willing, of course," he said, his voice smooth like melted candlewax.

I still had my doubts, but there was something about Evander's gentle smile and soft expression that made me feel like maybe, just maybe, I could trust him. Slowly, I brought my right arm out from behind me and lifted it in front of me.

Evander extended his hands, and after a hesitant pause, I placed mine in his.

The moment our skin touched, I inched.

He chuckled, not unkindly. "I know," he said, his smile lingering. "Cold, isn't it?"

I nodded, though part of me wanted to ask why his touch was so cold. With Kierygan, it made sense. He was a dragon, he lived beneath his skin. But I kept the question to myself.

Evander gestured toward the bracelet. "May I touch it?"

I gave another small nod. "Just... don't yank it or try to move it," I warned. "It hurts back."

He gave me a smile that, strangely, eased some of the tightness in my chest. "Don't worry," he said. "I know what it does. I was at the dinner table last night."

Very carefully, Evander ran a single finger along the metal, barely grazing the surface before pausing over one of the embedded stones.

"Interesting," he murmured, then turned to Kierygan. "Take a closer look, Kier."

Kierygan stepped in, his hand resting on my elbow as he leaned forward. His touch radiated warmth, a striking contrast to Evander's cold fingers.

"I haven't seen this mineral before," Evander said, eyes narrowed in thought. "But the stones... these are Pyraethyst."

Kierygan's brow furrowed. "Pyraethyst?" he echoed. "They're only found here. In Altterra."

Both of them fell silent. I couldn't tell what they were thinking, only that the stones had caught their attention. And the fact that they were native to this land seemed to matter.

A sudden icker of boldness rose in me. "You can have it," I said quietly.

Kierygan's head snapped toward me, his frown returning. "What?"

Carefully, I twisted one of the embedded gems until it came loose. It rested in my palm for a moment before I held it out to Kierygan.

"Here," I said softly. "Take it. I don't want it. You can have them all."

Instead of taking it, Kierygan gently held my wrist. "What does it do?"

My fingers curled into a fist as the memory surged back, sharp and unwelcome. "Bad things... I think," I whispered. "Mistress always comes for them... when it's time to harvest."

"Harvest?" Evander echoed, brows knitting.

I nodded. "That's what she called it," I said. "When she's taken enough light... she harvests them."

"What exactly does she do to harvest them?" he asked.

A lump rose in my throat, but I forced it down. "She and the Master... they hurt me," I said, shame curling cold in my chest. "Usually by breaking my bones... healing them... and doing it again. Until I light up."

Kierygan didn't speak at first. His grip on my wrist tightened. Not painfully, but firmly. His jaw tensed, and though his eyes never left mine, something had changed in them. A red glow burned there, low and simmering.

Evander, on the other hand, swore under his breath. "By the stars," he muttered. "What they did to you... that was despicable."

His expression tightened as he dragged a hand through his golden hair. "I'm sorry you had to endure that," he added quietly.

Sorry. The word felt strange, alien, coming from someone else. Especially when it was spoken to me.

Kierygan's voice was quiet when it finally broke the silence. "How long were you in that tower?"

I blinked, searching the edges of my memory. "... I don't know," I said slowly, the admission sinking like a stone in my chest. I tried to remember anything that came before. But there was nothing.

"It's all I've ever known," I whispered.

Evander, thoughtful now, crouched beside me. "Did you ever try counting the moons?" he asked. "Just to keep track of time?"

"My tower didn't have a window," I murmured. "And... and I don't know how to count."

I looked down, fidgeting with the hem of my sleeve as shame crept in again, tightening my chest. My ignorance always seemed to bloom in moments like this.

Silence settled, heavy and uncertain. Then Evander let out a soft sigh and stood.

"That's enough questions for today," he said, clapping his hands once. "I think you've earned a reward for being so helpful."

Reward.

The word landed wrong. I stiffened, breath catching. Reward had never meant something good before.

Evander must have noticed, because in the next moment, he icked his fingers in front of my face with exaggerated air, revealing both hands empty.

Then, grinning, he reached forward and plucked something from my hair.

I inched, instinctively pulling back. But when I opened my eyes again, he was holding a small, shiny-wrapped object between his fingers.

"Magic," he declared with a wink.

I frowned slightly. That's not magic, I wanted to say. I would've felt it.

Still, he held it out like a treasure. "It's called chocolate."

"Chocolate?" I echoed softly, tasting the unfamiliar word on my tongue, then quietly tucked it away with the others I was learning.

"Yes," Evander said, eyes gleaming. "Only the most important discovery of the last few centuries. Go on, open it. Taste it."

I hesitated, then glanced at Kierygan. He gave a single, subtle nod.

So, I reached out.

Carefully, I peeled the wrapping. Inside was a small, dark square that smelled sweet and strange. I placed it in my mouth.

And then... everything stopped. The bitterness and sweetness melted on my tongue, like a warm hug from the inside. I had never tasted anything like it. Warmth bloomed in my chest, strange and sudden, and I had to blink hard to keep the tears from falling.

Evander grinned. "Told you. Magic."

It did taste like magic. Sweet, rich, and strange in the most wonderful way. I couldn't stop the small smile that crept onto my face.

Evander's eyes brightened. "Well, would you look at that," he said, teasing gently. "You do know how to smile. I was starting to think they never taught you that in your tower."

They didn't, I wanted to say.

I think... I just learned it now.