

Chapter 8: Master of Forge

GIRL'S POV

Grace had just finished helping me with my bath. Apparently, it's something I'm expected to do every day now. Back in the tower, I never had real baths. The closest I ever got was a cold basin of water, and even that was rare.

I told Grace I could manage on my own now. I even tried to prove it yesterday. Still, she hovered nearby, gently correcting my awkward grip on the soap, helping me reach the spots I couldn't quite manage.

She helped me dress for the day.

I'm also apparently meant to wear different clothes each morning and another set before bed. When I asked why, Grace said there are clothes for different things, reasons, occasions, and moods. I'm still trying to make sense of it.

Before she left, she paused by the door and glanced back at me. I was sitting by the window where I'd spent most of my time since arriving.

"You know... you don't have to just sit there and stare all day. You're actually allowed to go outside," she reminded me, as she did every morning. "This isn't your old tower anymore."

I nodded and smiled, but said nothing.

She left with a soft click of the door, and the silence settled in again. Sunlight spilled through the window, painting the wooden floor in long, glowing stripes.

For someone who only knew walls, shadows, and silence, the outside feels... too much. Too wide. Too loud. Too full of things I don't understand.

From here, I can watch the sky shift its colors, the birds wheel and dive, the snow slowly melt. And for now, that's more than enough.

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest when a loud knock shattered the silence, pulling my attention from the window. Panic arched instinctively.

I'm still getting used to the idea of answering doors. In the tower, Mistress and Master never knocked. They just... appeared.

I tried to remember what Grace and Emma had told me about guests and manners. What was I supposed to say again?

Before I could piece it together, a voice came from the other side. "It's me, Evander," said a smooth, familiar tone. "May I come in?"

I hesitated for a moment, then answered, uncertain but trying. "Uh... yes."

The door creaked open, and Evander stepped inside, wearing that same easy smile he had the last time I saw him. Warm and bright, like sunlight.

Today, it was just him. Kierygan wasn't with him. I haven't seen or heard anything about him since the day he came with Evander.

Evander scanned the room, his smile lingering. He paused, as if weighing something, then stepped to the window beside me.

He looked down, his voice soft. "What a wonderful view you've got here."

I only nodded, glancing up at him briefly before turning my gaze back on the distant treetops. I knew he didn't come here just to look out a window with me. There was something else. I could feel it in the way he stood, in the quiet between his words.

He exhaled slowly. "All of this must be overwhelming," he said gently. "I understand why you're afraid to go outside."

He paused, then added, "But... there's someone who might be able to help us learn more about your bracelet. Maybe even find a way to remove it."

Hope flickered in my chest. I looked up at him, lips parting. But no words came.

Evander offered a small, cautious smile. "And he wants to meet you."

I tensed at the thought. The idea of meeting someone new didn't exactly thrill me. I'm still trying to understand the ones I already know and what they want from me.

But... if there's even a chance this could free me from the bracelet, then it's worth trying. And honestly, I wasn't sure I had the option to say no.

"All right," I said at last.

Evander smiled wider this time, his golden eyes twinkling. "His name is Ashteryn," he said. "And I should warn you, he's a bit... different."

I frowned, uncertain what that meant. I wasn't sure if 'different' was good or bad. The fact that he felt the need to warn me suggested it wasn't good.

"He's not like you or me," Evander went on. "He looks a little... odd. And he might come off a bit rough around the edges. But if there's anyone who can help with that bracelet, it's him."

I blinked, trying to make sense of his words. I understood only some of it.

Still, I nodded slowly. "Alright."

Evander grinned. "Fantastic!" His voice was bright, full of warmth. Then he crouched down to meet my eyes. "You're a brave girl, you know that?"

I wasn't. Not really. But hearing it from him made my face warm all the same.

He extended his hand, and I took it, once again struck by how cold his skin felt against mine.

As we stepped out of the room, my gaze drifted to the large door directly across the hall. I knew it was Kierygan's. I couldn't help but wonder if he was inside.

Evander seemed to read my thoughts. "He's not there," he said quietly. "He won't be back for a few days."

I didn't respond.

Silence settled between us as we moved through the corridors, down the sweeping staircase, and finally out into the open air beyond the castle walls.

We must have exited through the back of the castle because I didn't recognize this view. We walked for a while, until the stone path opened into a wide, clear expanse. Beyond it, thick woods loomed like a wall of green. A crowd had gathered in the clearing, all armed and in motion.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"They're our warriors," Evander replied. "Training."

He kept guiding me forward, and we began to pass them. I felt their eyes on me. Curious and assessing. It made my skin prickle. I tightened my grip on Evander's hand and moved a little closer to him.

He didn't say anything at first, but then glanced down at me with a soft smile. Maybe being a scholar really did mean he understood things, understood people.

Or maybe... I was just easy to read.

"They mean no harm," he said gently. "They're just looking because you're a bit of a delight to look at."

Before I could ask what he meant—or even gather the courage to—someone called out and stepped forward. The man was tall, broad, and had the kind of presence that made the air feel heavier. It was Orryx. I remembered him from before. He looked almost as intimidating as Kierygan... but he was smiling at me.

"Hello again, young miss," he greeted, his voice rough like gravel.

I blinked at him, unsure how to respond. Once again, Evander seemed to sense my confusion and... well, cluelessness.

"'Young miss' is just something we say when we don't know someone's name," he explained gently.

Orryx let out a low, growly sound. Something between a grunt and a sigh. "Still don't understand why Kierygan hasn't given her a name yet."

Evander chuckled. "I told Kier if he couldn't come up with one, I'd happily name her myself," he said. "But then he completely lost it—almost breathed fire in my face and said, and I quote, 'I found her. I name her.'"

Orryx raised a brow. "Bit possessive, don't you think?"

Evander only shrugged. They kept talking about me like I wasn't even there. I shifted slightly but said nothing. Eventually, Orryx gave me a small nod and a faint smile before bidding farewell and returning to their training.

Evander and I resumed walking.

My legs were beginning to tire when, just ahead, a strange little building emerged through the trees. It was a squat, stone cottage unlike anything I'd seen before. Its walls were darkened by soot, its windows narrow and fogged.

Smoke drifted lazily from a crooked chimney, curling into the sky. And even from here, I could hear a harsh clanging sound. I inched at first, unsure of what I was hearing, but Evander didn't seem bothered, so I forced myself to keep walking.

Evander slowed as we approached the cottage, the ringing now louder, more erratic. Like whatever was being worked on inside, it fought back.

He turned to me, his expression softer than usual. "Ready?"

I swallowed, then gave a small nod.

Without another word, he raised his staff and knocked. Three sharp, deliberate raps against the heavy wooden door. The clanging stopped. A few tense heartbeats passed before Evander pushed the door open and stepped inside, beckoning me to follow.

I hesitated at the threshold, the warmth inside wrapping around me like a thick cloak. The scent of metal was stronger here, mixed with something... earthier. I stepped in and held my breath.

Ashteryn stood near a massive block of metal, wiping his hands on a rag that looked more soot than cloth. Even hunched, he was enormous, his shoulders thick with muscle. His skin had a gray cast, like weathered stone, and his long, greasy black hair, streaked with silver, was tied back from his face.

But what struck me most, what rooted me to the spot, were the twin tusks jutting from his lower jaw. They curved slightly upward, ivory against the rough planes of his face, lending him a beast-like presence that made it hard to look away.

So this was why I'd been warned.

He squinted at me, eyes too bright for his dark, stony features, then grunted. "What are you standing there for? Sit."

The words were barked more than spoken, making my heart leap. I moved instinctively, dropping into the nearest chair before my legs had the chance to tremble.

His gaze lingered, assessing, before he turned away and began rummaging through a pile of tools on a worktable.

Evander chuckled, stepping toward me as if to shield me from him. "Easy now, Ashteryn," he said lightly. "Didn't Kierygan tell you to try being a little less terrifying?"

Then, turning to me, he added with a smile, "You'll be fine."

I hope he's right.