

## Chapter 9: Chasing Butterflies

### GIRL'S POV

The meeting with Ashteryn yesterday wasn't as bad as I had feared. He's rough around the edges—Evander's words, not mine—but the longer I lingered in his forge, the less he felt like a monster.

There was something quiet about him, something I recognized.

Evander said Ashteryn doesn't like people much. But I'm not so sure if that's true. I think, like me, he just prefers to stay hidden from them. I noticed it when he spoke to me and Evander. How he never met our eyes, kept his distance, and either hunched his shoulders or turned his face away.

His examination of my bracelet hadn't yielded much. He couldn't identify the metal either. But he didn't seem disappointed. If anything, he looked more determined than ever to figure it out.

"You can come back tomorrow," he said, his voice almost a grunt, as Evander and I left his workshop. "I'll try a few more experiments."

So now I'm waiting for Evander to take me back to him. But I can't help wondering what's taking him so long. The sun already sits high above the castle walls. That's how I know he's late.

I waited a few more moments, listening to the distant chatter of servants as they went about their morning cleaning in this wing of the castle. Still, no sign of Evander.

Maybe he forgot. A man like him probably had more important things to do. Maybe he lost track of time, buried in tasks far more pressing than escorting me anywhere.

With a quiet sigh, I rose from the chair by the window. My fingers lingered at the hem of my sleeve for a moment before I drew myself upright.

Ashteryn would be waiting. I didn't want to disappoint him.

The thought unsettled me. I hadn't gone anywhere outside my room without Evander or someone guiding me. But I remembered the path well enough.

I drew a deep breath, steeling myself, then pulled open the door and stepped into the corridor. My heart raced with every step; the vast hallway seemed to dwarf me, yet I pressed on without glancing back.

I'm going to find Ashteryn on my own.

I hadn't gone far, just a few steps beyond the back exit of the castle, when a voice stopped me cold.

"Why, hello there."

I froze mid-step.

It was a woman's voice, but not Grace's warm chirp or Emma's crisp tone. This one was smooth, overly sweet, almost sounded amused.

Mirael stood a few steps behind me, her chocolate-colored hair falling in loose waves around her shoulders, a faint smile on her lips.

"Well, look at you," she said, light and playful. "Stepping out all on your own. How brave. Where are you off to?"

I hesitated. "I... uh... I'm going to Ashteryn," I murmured, hands clutching my skirt. "He said to see him today."

Her smile deepened. "Ashteryn isn't going anywhere. You can see him anytime you want." She paused, a flicker in her eyes I couldn't place. "Why not come with me instead? That way, we can get to know each other... better."

My fingers dug deeper into my skirt.

The few times I'd met Mirael had been nothing but pleasant. Especially the last time, during dinner.

But today... she was being kind. Still, there was something in her eyes, something in her smile that unsettled me.

She tilted her head slightly, as if reading my mind. "I wanted to make it up to you," she said softly. "For last time."

She placed her hands over mine. "I felt terrible about what happened," she continued, regret in her eyes. "I didn't know your bracelet would do that. I'm really sorry."

Maybe she truly felt remorse.

It made me even more torn. I didn't want to disappoint Ashteryn by keeping him waiting, but I didn't want to let Mirael down either.

"What do you say?" Mirael asked. "Come with me, and I'll take you to Ashteryn afterward."

"Alright," I said nally.

She smiled again, this time showing a hint of teeth. "Perfect!" she exclaimed, clapping once. "Let's go. There's something I think you'll enjoy."

And just like that, I let her lead me away, even though every step made my skin prickle.

The path she took was unfamiliar. Stone gave way to packed earth, the cold sharpening with every stride. I could tell we were moving away from the heart of the castle. There was no more salt or swept stone, just snow that crunched under our boots and clung stubbornly to the folds of my dress.

I turned to her. "Where are we going?" I asked.

She didn't turn to look. "Somewhere quiet," she said, keeping her pace. "Somewhere we can be alone."

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that, but I followed anyway. After a while, we reached a fallen tree, half-buried in snow, its trunk worn smooth by time.

Mirael gestured toward it. "Come. Sit."

I obeyed, though the bark was cold and damp beneath me. She joined me with ease, her cloak fanning out as she sat gracefully beside me.

She crossed her arms as she turned to me. "You ought to have a proper name," she said, eyes narrowing. "It doesn't feel right calling you just 'Girl' anymore."

I thought of Evander and Orryx's conversation yesterday—how Evander suggested giving me a name, but Kierygan was not pleased. I looked down at my hands, folded in my lap.

"Kierygan said he wanted to name me himself," I said quietly.

For a moment, I thought her eyes darkened, but maybe it was just the light. When I blinked, they glistened again, cheerful, with a touch of amusement.

She waved her hand dismissively. "Well, the king can still do that," she said. "But I could give you a different name. A secret one. Just between the two of us."

I looked up. "A secret?"

She hummed as she nodded. "Something soft. Something lovely," she said. "Just for you and me. A name only a friend would know."

Friend. The word felt unfamiliar—yet strangely warm.

I nodded slowly. "Alright."

Mirael tapped her lips with one long finger, as if pondering something important. Then she said, "I think I'll call you... Mothwit."

"Mothwit?" I echoed, testing the unfamiliar word. "What does that mean?"

"It's a tiny, pretty ying thing," she said vaguely. "Light-loving. Curious."

She lifted her hand and conjured a flicker of light. A shimmer of silver wings appeared in the air—delicate, glowing, and soft. It circled lazily before landing on my knee.

I stared at it, mesmerized by its fragile beauty. "Is that a mothwit?"

She gave a low, musical laugh. "No, darling. This one's called a butterfly," she said. "But it's very close."

I looked up at her, meeting her gaze. "It's... beautiful," I said softly. "I like it."

Her smile widened, sugar-sweet. "Aren't you a darling little illiterate thing?"

I blinked. "What's... illiterate?"

Her smile only deepened. "Nothing to trouble your sweet little head about, Mothwit."

The butterfly lifted from my knee with a gentle ick of its wings. I watched it hover for a moment, then rise higher, weaving through the pale air.

"Don't let it get away, Mothwit," Mirael said behind me, her tone light and sing-song, almost teasing. "Follow the pretty butterfly. I'll wait right here for you to come back."

I hesitated, just for a breath, and glanced over my shoulder. She smiled and gave a small nod, as if encouraging me.

So I followed.

The butterfly shimmered ahead, flitting between branches heavy with snow. I stepped after it, boots crunching in the frost, heart light with wonder. It felt like a dream, chasing that soft glow through the forest.

The trees grew quieter. Thinner. And then... they were gone.

I blinked, stepping out into a clearing I didn't recognize. The world around me was stark and silent, all white and silver. The butterfly was nowhere to be seen.

"Mirael?" I called, my voice cracking.

No answer.

I turned to go back the way I'd come, but the forest wasn't there. Just a wide, endless sheet of ice, smooth and faintly glowing under the sun.

"Mirael?" I tried again, louder this time. But the only reply was the echo of my own voice.

Then I heard a crack. A sound like splintering glass.

I looked down. Thin, webbed lines were spreading beneath my boots. My breath caught. I staggered back, but that only made it worse. The cracks multiplied quickly, spreading outward across the ice.

Panic surged up my throat.

I took one slow, trembling step.

Another crack. Louder this time. Then the ice gave way with a shattering screech, and the world dropped out from under me.

The water swallowed me whole.

The cold was cruel, biting deep—but I didn't mind. I had lived in that tower for so long that, though I felt the chill, it couldn't claim me, no matter how hard I prayed it would.

It was the water filling my lungs that truly scared me.

I kicked. I fought. I clawed my way upward.

The surface was just above. It was so close. Just there. But it had already frozen over again.

I pounded on it with trembling fists. My cries turned to bubbles. No one could hear me. No one was coming.

My lungs burned, and my vision blurred. Just before the cold water could swallow me, I looked up—past the glassy sheet of ice, toward the sky.

At least I wouldn't die in that dark tower. For that, I could be grateful.

Then a fiery light tore across the blue heavens, streaking them with an angry, red glow. Terrifying, yet beautiful. I wished I could marvel at it a moment longer.

But darkness dragged me under.