

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

c 31-35

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

Ivy's Point of View

A week passed.

Seven days of lying in bed. Seven days of medicines and bandages and careful rest. Seven days of Luna Helena fussing over me like a worried mother hen.

But finally, I was healed.

I stood before the mirror in my room, examining myself. The burns had faded to faint pink marks. The weakness had left my limbs. My spiritual energy had fully replenished.

I felt better than I had in months.

Nell entered with fresh tea. "Young Madam, you look wonderful this morning."

"I feel wonderful." I stretched my arms above my head, relishing the freedom of movement. "Any news from outside?"

Nell set down the tray, a small smile playing on her lips. "Actually, yes. The servants have been talking about Young Master Bastian."

"Oh?"

"He's finally able to walk again. Barely." Nell's smile widened. "He still needs two people to support him whenever he moves. The physicians say his recovery will take at least another month."

I laughed. Actually laughed out loud.

Good thing I didn't marry that waste. His body can't even compare to mine.

Nell looked startled by my reaction, but she didn't comment.

"Is there anything else you need, Young Madam?"

"Yes, actually. Send word to Luna Helena that I'll join her for breakfast this morning."

"Right away."

She hurried off, and I began preparing for the day. Nell had laid out a simple green dress that matched my eyes. I dressed quickly, pinned up my hair, and made my way to Luna Helena's residence.

The morning air was crisp and fresh. Birds sang in the gardens. Servants bowed as I passed. Everything felt lighter somehow. Brighter.

The bond was broken. Bastian was no longer tied to me in any way. That Chapter of my life was finally, truly closed.

Luna Helena greeted me warmly when I arrived.

"Ivy! Look at you!" She clasped my hands, her eyes shining. "You're practically glowing. The physician was right. Your recovery is nothing short of miraculous."

"I feel like a new person."

"Come, sit. I've had the kitchen prepare all your favorites."

We settled at the breakfast table. Servants brought out dish after dish. Steamed buns. Congee with preserved egg. Stir-fried vegetables. Fresh fruit.

I ate carefully, paying attention to every bite. Every flavor.

This time, there was nothing wrong.

No bitterness hidden beneath the sweetness. No medicinal undertone. No silvervine root.

Interesting.

I had suspected as much. Whoever was tampering with the food wasn't doing it every day. There had to be a schedule. A pattern. Someone was being very careful not to raise suspicion.

I filed the information away for later investigation.

"I spoke with Alpha Alaric about finding a tutor for your father," Luna Helena said between bites.

I looked up. "And?"

"Unfortunately, he also recommended Professor Aldwin. He's truly the best scholar in the kingdom." Luna Helena sighed. "But his illness has worsened. The physicians say he may not survive much longer."

My heart sank. And then immediately lifted.

Professor Aldwin. Spirit Wasting. A condition only a shaman could cure.

"That's unfortunate," I said carefully. "Is there no hope for him at all?"

"None that the physicians can see. They've tried everything." Luna Helena shook her head sadly. "It's such a loss. All that knowledge, all that experience, soon to be gone forever."

"Perhaps I could visit him. Pay my respects before..." I let the sentence trail off.

Luna Helena looked surprised. "That's very thoughtful of you, Ivy. But are you sure you're strong enough for social visits?"

"I feel fine. Better than fine." I set down my chopsticks. "And if Professor Aldwin truly is dying, it seems wrong not to at least acknowledge his contributions to the kingdom."

"I suppose that's true." Luna Helena considered for a moment. "Very well. I'll arrange an introduction. But please, don't overtire yourself."

"I won't."

We finished breakfast with lighter conversation. Pack gossip. Upcoming festivals. The latest fashions from the capital.

But my mind was elsewhere.

Professor Aldwin was my key. If I could heal him, he would owe me a debt. A powerful, connected, respected scholar who owed me a favor.

The possibilities were endless.

After breakfast, I returned to my residence. But instead of resting, I summoned everyone.

Ash. Stone. Blade. Wolf. Shadow.

And Nell.

They gathered in my private sitting room, standing at attention. Five elite warriors and one loyal maid. All of them watching me with curious eyes.

I studied each face in turn. These people would be crucial to my plans. Everything depended on their loyalty.

Time to find out where that loyalty truly lay.

"I have a question for all of you," I said slowly. "And I need an honest answer."

They waited in silence.

"Are you my people? Or are you Alpha Alaric's people?"

The question hung in the air. Heavy. Loaded.

Ash exchanged glances with the other guards. Nell shifted nervously on her feet.

Several seconds passed. The silence stretched.

Finally, Ash stepped forward. As the leader of the guards, it was his place to speak.

"Young Madam." His voice was steady. Certain. "Alpha Alaric assigned us to serve you. From that moment forward, we became yours."

"That's not what I asked."

Ash met my eyes without flinching. "We understand, Young Madam. You want to know if we would report your activities to the Alpha. If we would spy on you for him."

"Would you?"

Another pause. Longer this time.

"No." Ash's voice was firm. "When a guard is assigned to a master, their loyalty transfers completely. That is our code. Our honor. We do not serve two masters."

"And the rest of you? Do you agree?"

Stone nodded. "We are your swords, Young Madam. Point us where you will."

Blade spoke next. "Your secrets are our secrets."

Wolf simply grunted his agreement.

Shadow, the youngest, bowed his head. "I live to serve you, Young Madam. No one else."

I turned to Nell. "And you?"

"I've been with you since we were children, Miss Ivy." Nell's voice was thick with emotion. "You're more than my mistress. You're my family. I would die before I betrayed you."

Something warm bloomed in my chest. Gratitude. Relief. Hope.

"Good." I clasped my hands behind my back. "Because I'm about to do things that must remain secret. Things that cannot reach the ears of Alpha Alaric or Luna Helena. Not because they're my enemies, but because knowledge is dangerous. The fewer people who know, the safer we all are."

Six heads nodded in unison.

"From this moment forward, you will help me keep these secrets. You will guard them with your lives. You will speak of them to no one, under any circumstances."

Ash dropped to one knee. The others followed immediately.

"We swear it," Ash said. "By our blood and our honor. Your secrets are safe with us."

I looked at them. My people. My loyal followers.

For the first time since arriving at the Silvermoon Pack, I felt like I had real power.

Not borrowed power. Not conditional power. But power that belonged to me alone.

"Rise," I commanded.

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

Ivy's Point of View

They stood before me, waiting. Loyal. Ready.

It was time to tell them the truth.

"What I'm about to reveal cannot leave this room." I looked at each of them in turn. "If anyone discovers what I'm about to tell you, it could mean death. For me. For all of us."

The atmosphere shifted. Became heavier. More serious.

"I understand if that frightens you. If anyone wishes to leave now, before hearing my secret, they may do so. No judgment. No consequences."

No one moved.

I took a deep breath.

"I am a shaman."

Silence.

"Not just any shaman." I let the words sink in. "I am a top shaman. The kind that appears once in a thousand years."

Nell's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes went wide with shock.

The guards exchanged stunned glances. Even Ash, stoic and unflappable, looked shaken.

"Young Madam..." Stone's voice came out hoarse. "Are you certain?"

"I've known since I was fourteen years old." I clasped my hands behind my back. "I saved my father's life when every physician in the Crescent Moon Pack had given up on him. I brought him back from the edge of death using techniques that haven't been practiced in centuries."

Nell stepped forward, her face pale. "Miss Ivy, how... how is this possible? I've known you since we were children. I never saw any sign..."

"Because I hid it." My voice hardened. "My father made me swear to keep it secret. He knew what would happen if my uncle discovered the truth."

"Alpha Roland," Ash said grimly.

"Yes. If he learned that his brother's daughter was a top shaman, he would have claimed me as pack property. Chained me to the Crescent Moon Pack forever. Forced me to heal his warriors, save his allies, clean up his messes." I shook my head. "I would have been nothing more than a tool. A weapon to be used and discarded."

"So you pretended to be ordinary," Nell whispered.

"I pretended to be weak. Pathetic. Unremarkable." A bitter smile crossed my face. "It wasn't hard. Everyone already believed that about me anyway."

The room fell silent again. I could see them processing this information. Rearranging everything they thought they knew about me.

"This is why you recovered so quickly from the bond-breaking ceremony," Ash said slowly. "You used your abilities to protect yourself."

"Yes. I prepared medicines beforehand. Spiritual tonics that cushioned the worst of the damage." I paused. "Bastian had no such protection. That's why he's still bedridden while I'm standing here talking to you."

Wolf let out a low whistle. "No wonder you weren't afraid."

"I was terrified," I admitted. "But I knew I had a chance. A fighting chance."

Blade spoke up. "Why tell us now, Young Madam? Why reveal this secret after keeping it hidden for so long?"

"Because I need your help." I began pacing slowly. "There's something else you should know. Something about Young Master Dominic."

They waited.

"The physicians have been lying. For six months, they've claimed to be treating him. Trying to heal him." My voice turned cold. "In reality, they've been making him worse. Sabotaging his recovery. Pushing him closer to death with every visit."

Gasps filled the room.

"Someone wants Dominic dead," I continued. "Someone with enough power to corrupt a royal physician. Someone who benefits from the heir's demise."

"Bastian," Nell breathed. "And Lady Margot."

"Most likely. Though I can't prove it yet." I stopped pacing and faced them. "But here's the thing. I can heal Dominic. I can bring him back."

The hope that bloomed on their faces was almost painful to see.

"His injuries are severe but not irreversible. Blood clots in his brain. Bone fragments pressing on his nerves. Things that regular physicians can't fix." I allowed myself a small smile. "But I can. It will take time. Three months of weekly treatments. But I can save him."

Nell let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob. "Young Madam, that's wonderful!"

"It would be wonderful. If it weren't incredibly dangerous." My smile faded. "Margot and Vivienne and Bastian are all watching. Waiting for Dominic to die so they can seize his position. If they discover that he's recovering, they'll try to stop it. Try to stop me."

"We won't let them," Stone growled.

"Which is why this must remain absolutely secret." I held up a hand. "No one can know that I'm treating Dominic. No one can know that I'm a shaman. The moment that information leaks, we're all dead."

They nodded solemnly.

"But there's another problem." I resumed my pacing. "My abilities can do more than save Dominic. There are others I could help. Others who could become powerful allies."

"Like Professor Aldwin," Ash said, catching on quickly.

"Exactly. His condition is called Spirit Wasting. The connection between his soul and body is deteriorating. Regular physicians can't see it, can't treat it. But I can." I turned to face them. "If I heal him, he'll owe me a debt. A legendary scholar with connections to the royal court, in my debt."

"That would be invaluable," Blade observed.

"It would. But I can't just walk into his house and announce that I'm a shaman. That would expose everything." I stopped in front of Ash. "Which is where you come in."

He straightened. "What do you need, Young Madam?"

"I'm going to create a persona. A mysterious healer who appears out of nowhere, cures impossible cases, and vanishes without a trace." I smiled. "A miracle doctor. Someone everyone talks about but no one can identify."

Understanding dawned in Ash's eyes. "You want us to play this role."

"I want you to be the face of this persona. The voice. The body that people see." I gestured to the other guards. "All of you. You'll take turns appearing as the miracle doctor. Different locations. Different times. Never a pattern that can be traced."

"And you'll be the one actually performing the treatments," Nell said.

"From the shadows. Always hidden. Always protected." I nodded. "The miracle doctor will build a reputation. Gain followers. Attract powerful clients. And no one will ever know that the real healer is the quiet, unremarkable wife of the dying Silvermoon heir."

Shadow spoke for the first time. "It's brilliant, Young Madam."

"It's risky," I corrected. "One mistake and everything falls apart. But if we succeed..." I let the possibilities hang in the air.

Ash dropped to one knee again. The others followed.

"Tell us what to do," he said. "We're ready."

I looked at them. My people. My conspirators. My soldiers in this secret war.

"The first step is Professor Aldwin." I began outlining the plan. "Luna Helena is arranging an introduction. I'll visit him as Dominic's wife, paying respects to a dying scholar. While I'm there, I'll assess his condition. Confirm my diagnosis."

"And then?" Nell asked.

"Then the miracle doctor will make his first appearance." I smiled grimly. "We're going to save a dying professor. And in doing so, we're going to change everything."

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

Ivy's Point of View

The moment I mentioned Professor Aldwin's illness, the room erupted.

"Young Madam, absolutely not!"

"You can't go near him!"

"It's too dangerous!"

Ash stepped forward, his face tight with concern. "The professor has the Withering Plague. It's highly contagious. Anyone who gets too close risks infection."

"I've heard the stories," Stone added grimly. "Three physicians have already caught the disease trying to treat him. Two of them died within weeks."

"The king sent him away from the capital because people were afraid to be near him," Blade said. "If you go there and get infected..."

"I won't get infected."

They fell silent.

"I told you. I'm a shaman." I kept my voice calm. Steady. "The Withering Plague isn't what regular physicians think it is. It's not a disease of the body. It's a disease of the spirit. The contagion spreads through spiritual contact, not physical."

Nell looked confused. "What does that mean?"

"It means I know how to protect myself." I walked to my desk and pulled out a piece of paper. "There are wards. Spiritual barriers that can block the transmission. I've read about them in the ancient texts. I know how to create them."

"Reading about something and actually doing it are different things," Ash said carefully.

"I've done it before." I met his eyes. "When my father was dying, I used similar techniques to prevent his condition from spreading to me. It worked then. It will work now."

They still looked uncertain.

"I understand your concern." I softened my tone. "Truly, I do. But this is our only chance. Professor Aldwin is dying. Every day we wait is a day closer to losing him forever. And with him, we lose our best opportunity to help my father."

Silence.

"Besides," I added, "if I can cure a disease that no one else can cure, imagine what that will do for our miracle doctor's reputation."

That got their attention.

Ash exchanged glances with the other guards. Some unspoken communication passed between them.

Finally, he sighed. "What do you need us to do?"

Relief flooded through me. "First, we need supplies. Plain clothes for all of us. Nothing that identifies us as Silvermoon Pack. We need to look like traveling healers, not nobles."

"I'll handle it," Stone said.

"Second, I need medical equipment. A proper physician's bag. Herbs. Instruments. Nothing too expensive, but nothing too cheap either. We need to look legitimate."

"I know a merchant in town," Blade offered. "He sells to healers. I can get everything we need."

"Good. Third, and most importantly, I need a disguise for myself." I paused. "I can't go as Ivy Calloway. Too many people might recognize me. I need to become someone else entirely."

Nell's eyes lit up. "I have an idea, Young Madam."

An hour later, I stood before the mirror again.

But the reflection that stared back wasn't Ivy Calloway.

It was a young man.

Nell had worked miracles. My hair was pulled back and hidden beneath a dark cap. My chest was bound flat beneath loose robes. A half-mask covered the lower portion of my face, obscuring my features while adding an air of mystery.

The clothes were simple but well-made. Dark blue fabric. Silver trim. The kind of outfit a wealthy merchant's son might wear. Or a traveling scholar.

I turned this way and that, examining every angle.

"Incredible," I murmured.

"You look so handsome, Young Madam!" Nell clapped her hands together. "Like a prince from a storybook!"

The guards gathered around, nodding their approval.

"No one would ever guess," Ash said. "You could walk right past Luna Helena and she wouldn't recognize you."

"That's the idea."

We set out within the hour.

Professor Aldwin had been sent to the Thornwood Pack to recuperate. It was a small territory bordering the Silvermoon Pack, known for its healing springs and clean mountain air. The king had hoped the peaceful environment might aid in the professor's recovery.

It hadn't.

The journey took nearly two hours by carriage. We traveled through dense forests and winding mountain roads. By the time we arrived, the afternoon sun was beginning its descent.

The professor's residence was a modest estate on the outskirts of the pack's main village. A stone wall surrounded the property. Guards stood at the gate.

And we weren't the only visitors.

A fancy carriage was parked outside. A man in expensive robes stood near the entrance, speaking with someone I couldn't see. He carried a leather bag embossed with the royal seal.

"That's Physician Harlow," Ash said quietly. "He's famous throughout the kingdom. Treats nobles and royalty."

"Another physician here to try his luck," I observed.

"If he can't cure the professor, our job becomes even more impressive."

We approached the gate on foot, leaving our carriage at a distance. I walked with confidence, my guards flanking me. Nell stayed close behind, playing the role of a humble assistant.

The butler noticed us immediately.

He was a thin man with a pinched face and suspicious eyes. He looked us up and down, taking in our unfamiliar faces, our plain clothes, our lack of noble insignia.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "State your business."

Ash stepped forward. "We are traveling healers. We've heard of Professor Aldwin's condition and have come to offer our services."

"Traveling healers?" The butler's lip curled with disdain. "We have no need of wandering charlatans. The professor is being treated by the finest physicians in the kingdom."

"With respect," I said, disguising my voice to sound deeper, more masculine, "the finest physicians haven't been able to help him. Perhaps fresh perspectives are needed."

The butler's eyes narrowed. "And who are you to offer such perspectives? I don't recognize any of you. Where do you come from? Which pack claims you?"

"We belong to no pack. We travel where we're needed."

"Convenient." The butler snorted. "More likely you're frauds looking to take advantage of a dying man's family. I've seen your type before."

"We seek no payment," I said calmly. "Only the opportunity to help."

"Help? You want to help?" The butler laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "Every week, strangers show up at this gate claiming they can cure the professor. Fortune seekers. Attention mongers. Scam artists. And every week, I turn them away."

"We're different."

"That's what they all say." He raised his hand and snapped his fingers. "Guards!"

Two burly men appeared from behind the wall. They were armed. They did not look friendly.

"Remove these people from the premises," the butler ordered. "And make sure they don't come back."

The guards advanced toward us.

Ash and Stone stepped forward, hands moving to their weapons.

"Wait." I held up my hand. "There's no need for violence."

"Young Ma—" Ash caught himself just in time. "Young Master, we can handle this."

"I said wait."

The tension was thick enough to cut. The butler's guards squared off against my guards. Neither side was willing to back down.

"You have ten seconds to leave," the butler said coldly. "After that, I cannot guarantee your safety."

I stood my ground. Thinking. Calculating.

There had to be another way in.

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

Ivy's Point of View

The butler's guards lunged forward.

They didn't get far.

Ash moved first. His hand shot out like a viper and caught the lead guard by the throat. One swift motion, a twist of his wrist, and the man was on the ground, gasping desperately for air.

Stone and Blade handled the other two with equal efficiency. A powerful kick to the knee that sent one crumpling sideways. An elbow to the jaw that dropped the other like a sack of grain. Bodies hitting the dirt before they even knew what was happening.

Three guards. Three seconds. All of them down and groaning in the dust.

The butler's face went white as fresh snow.

"What... what..." He stumbled backward, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste to put distance between himself and my guards. "Who are you people?"

I stepped forward calmly, adjusting my half-mask with deliberate slowness.

"I told you." My voice came out low and masculine, exactly as I had practiced. "We're traveling healers."

"Healers don't fight like that!" His voice had risen to a near squeak.

"These ones do."

The butler stared at my guards with new eyes. At their perfect stances, balanced and ready for more. Their controlled breathing, not even winded from the brief scuffle. The way they watched him like predators watching prey, assessing his every twitch and movement.

He swallowed hard. His throat bobbed visibly.

"I... I apologize for my rudeness." His tone had changed completely. Gone was the sneering condescension he had worn like a badge of honor. In its place was something much more useful. Fear. Raw, undisguised fear. "Please, I meant no disrespect to such distinguished guests."

"Then stop wasting our time."

"Yes, yes, of course." He wrung his hands nervously, twisting his fingers together until the knuckles turned white. "But you must understand, we get so many frauds, so many people trying to take advantage of the professor's illness—"

"I am no fraud." I stepped closer, letting my presence fill the space between us. "I am a traveling physician. I go where the sick are. Where others have failed, I succeed. That is my purpose. My calling."

"And you truly believe you can help the professor?"

"I don't believe. I know." I held his gaze through my mask, letting him see the certainty in my eyes. "Every other physician who has walked through those gates has failed. They've tried their medicines, their treatments, their so-called expertise. And yet the professor grows weaker every day. Every hour."

The butler flinched. I had struck a nerve.

"I offer something different." I let the words hang in the air like a promise. "I offer the only chance Professor Aldwin has left. You can accept my help, or you can watch him die. The choice is yours."

Silence stretched between us. Long and heavy.

The butler looked at me. At my guards standing alert and ready. At the three men still groaning on the ground, clutching their injuries.

Finally, he made his decision.

"Very well." He straightened his robes with trembling hands, trying to recover some semblance of dignity. "I will take you to see the professor. But if this is some kind of trick—"

"It isn't."

"Then follow me."

He turned and walked toward the gate with hurried steps. Physician Harlow, who had been watching the entire exchange with wide, disbelieving eyes, fell into step behind him.

We followed.

The estate was enormous.

I had expected a modest residence. A quiet retreat for a dying man to spend his final days in peace. Instead, I found myself walking through grounds that rivaled the Alpha's palace in both size and splendor.

Gardens stretched in every direction as far as the eye could see. Perfectly manicured hedges formed intricate geometric patterns that must have taken decades to cultivate. Fountains bubbled cheerfully in stone courtyards, their waters sparkling in the afternoon sunlight. Flowers of every color imaginable bloomed along winding pathways paved with smooth white stones.

We passed through an archway covered in climbing roses, their sweet fragrance filling the air. Then across a graceful stone bridge spanning a koi pond. The fish glittered like living jewels beneath the crystal-clear water's surface, their scales flashing gold and orange and white.

"The professor's family is wealthy," Nell whispered beside me, her eyes wide with wonder.

"Very wealthy," I murmured back. "More than I imagined."

We continued walking. The path seemed endless.

Past a swimming pool surrounded by marble statues of ancient wolves frozen in various heroic poses. Through a grove of towering oak trees whose gnarled branches formed a natural canopy overhead, dappling the ground with shifting patterns of light and shadow.

Across another garden, this one filled with exotic plants I didn't recognize from any herbalist's guide. Some had flowers that seemed to glow faintly in the afternoon light, pulsing with colors that had no name.

The estate seemed to go on forever. Every corner revealed another beautiful courtyard. Another tinkling fountain. Another carefully cultivated garden bursting with rare blooms.

Nearly half an hour passed before we finally reached our destination.

At the very back of the property, separated from everything else by a thick wall of ancient pine trees, stood a small cottage. It was simple compared to the grandeur we had passed. Stone walls weathered gray by time and countless seasons. Wooden shutters painted a faded blue that was peeling in places. A modest herb garden growing wild and untended out front, choked with weeds.

But there was something different about this place. Something heavy in the air that pressed against my skin like invisible weight. A wrongness that made my shaman senses prickle with urgent warning.

The illness. It radiated from the cottage like heat from a roaring fire.

"Professor Aldwin insisted on staying here," the butler explained, his voice dropping to a hushed, reverent tone. "He didn't want to risk infecting anyone else with his condition. The moment his illness worsened, he demanded to be moved as far from the main house as possible."

"A selfless man," Physician Harlow observed quietly.

"The professor has always put others before himself." The butler's voice carried genuine affection and deep sadness. "Even now, dying, he thinks only of protecting his family and servants from harm."

We approached the front door. The stone path was overgrown with weeds and wildflowers. Clearly, few people dared to come this close to the source of the contagion.

The butler raised his hand and knocked twice. The sound echoed hollowly through the stillness.

Footsteps inside. Slow. Heavy. Deliberate. The sound of someone who carried a great burden.

The door creaked open on rusted hinges.

A man stood in the entrance. Tall. Broad-shouldered. He wore a cloth mask over his nose and mouth, but I could see his eyes above it. Dark brown, almost black. Rimmed with angry red from exhaustion and unshed tears.

The butler immediately dropped into a deep, respectful bow.

"Young Master."

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

Ivy's Point of View

The butler stepped forward and bowed to the young man.

"Young Master Edmund, this is Physician Lin. A traveling healer who claims to have treated conditions others could not cure."

The young man, Professor Aldwin's son, looked at me with tired, skeptical eyes. "Another one."

"I understand your doubt." I nodded respectfully. "But I ask only for the chance to try."

He sighed heavily, his broad shoulders sagging with exhaustion. "Fine. Do what you will. Everyone else has."

I moved toward the bedroom door. Ash immediately stepped forward to follow me.

"Wait here," I said firmly.

"Young Master, we should accompany you—"

"You have no protection against the illness." I kept my voice low. "None of you do. Stay outside. I'll be fine."

Nell looked worried, her hands twisting in her skirts. "But—"

"I know what I'm doing. Trust me."

They exchanged uncertain glances but stayed back.

I pulled a cloth mask from my bag and secured it over my face, making sure it covered both my nose and mouth completely. Then I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room was dim. Suffocating. The air hung thick and stale, heavy with the smell of sickness and medicinal herbs that had failed to help.

Professor Aldwin lay in a large bed at the center of the room. The sight of him made my heart clench with sympathy.

He was a skeleton wrapped in skin. His face was gaunt and yellow like old parchment. His cheeks had sunken into deep hollows that cast shadows across his features. His hands, resting on the blanket, were nothing but bone and paper-thin flesh covered in age spots.

Every few seconds, a violent cough wracked his frail body, shaking him like a leaf in a storm.

I scanned the room quickly. Windows on all four walls. Every single one shut tight. Curtains drawn against the daylight. No fresh air circulating. No natural light penetrating the gloom.

No wonder he was getting worse. This room was killing him as surely as his illness.

"Open the windows," I ordered.

The butler hesitated, wringing his hands. "The previous physicians said to keep them closed. To prevent the illness from spreading to others—"

"They were wrong." I pointed at the nearest window with authority. "This room is a tomb. The patient needs air. Fresh air. Clean air. Open them. All of them. Now."

The butler looked at Physician Harlow, seeking confirmation. The older physician considered for a moment, stroking his beard thoughtfully, then nodded slowly.

"It... couldn't hurt at this point. The professor's condition can hardly worsen."

The butler snapped his fingers at a servant hovering near the door. Within moments, the windows were thrown open one by one. Cool afternoon air flooded the room like water breaking through a dam. Sunlight streamed in, chasing away the oppressive darkness that had settled over everything.

Professor Aldwin squinted against the sudden brightness, raising one skeletal hand to shield his eyes. Then he coughed again. A wet, rattling sound that seemed to come from deep within his chest.

"Don't bother with any of this." His voice was a thin whisper, barely audible. "I'm dying. Everyone knows it. Just let an old man go in peace."

"Father, please." Edmund rushed to his side, taking his father's frail hand in both of his own. "Don't say such things. We're trying to help you. We haven't given up."

"Help?" The professor laughed bitterly, though it cost him dearly. The sound turned into another coughing fit that left him gasping. "Twelve physicians. Twelve failures. There is no help for what I have, son. Accept it."

Edmund's face twisted with anguish, his jaw clenching tight. "There has to be something. There has to be."

"Let me examine him first," Physician Harlow interrupted, stepping forward with professional confidence. He set his leather bag on a nearby table and pulled out various instruments. "If you would allow me, Professor."

The old man waved a skeletal hand dismissively. "Do what you want. Poke and prod to your heart's content. It won't change anything."

Physician Harlow worked methodically, his movements practiced and precise. He checked the professor's pulse at several points along his wrists and neck. Listened to his breathing with a wooden tube pressed firmly to his chest. Examined his eyes by pulling back the lids. His tongue by asking him to open wide. His fingernails by pressing on them and watching the color return.

He asked questions about symptoms. About sleep patterns. About appetite and digestion. About the nature and location of pain.

The professor answered in a tired monotone, his voice growing weaker with each response. Yes, he couldn't keep food down anymore. No, he hadn't slept properly in weeks, perhaps months. The pain was everywhere and nowhere. A constant ache that had settled into his bones like an unwelcome guest that refused to leave.

After fifteen minutes of thorough examination, Physician Harlow stepped back from the bed.

His face was grim. His eyes held no hope.

"I'm sorry." He shook his head slowly, heavily. "The disease has progressed too far. His vital organs are failing one by one. His spiritual essence is nearly depleted entirely."

"Surely there must be something you can do—" Edmund started, desperation cracking his voice.

"There is nothing." Physician Harlow began packing his instruments back into his bag with careful, practiced movements. "I can give him medicines to ease the pain. To make his remaining time more comfortable and peaceful. But a cure?" He sighed deeply. "I'm afraid that is beyond my abilities. Beyond anyone's abilities."

The room fell silent except for the professor's labored breathing and the soft whisper of wind through the open windows.

Edmund looked like a man watching his entire world collapse around him.

"Now," I said, stepping forward with purpose. "It's my turn."

Physician Harlow glanced at me with something like pity mixed with irritation. "Young man, I admire your confidence. Truly, I do. But I have forty years of experience treating the sick and dying. If I cannot cure him—"

"Your experience is with conventional medicine." I moved to the professor's bedside without hesitation. "Mine is not."

I knelt beside the bed, bringing myself to the old man's level. The professor watched me with clouded, rheumy eyes that had seen too much disappointment.

"Another one," he murmured weakly. "Another fool who thinks they can cheat death itself."

"I don't cheat death." I leaned closer, holding his faded gaze. "I simply know things that others don't."

I placed my hand gently over his chest, feeling the weak flutter of his heart beneath my palm. Closed my eyes. Began to chant under my breath, words so quiet they were barely a vibration in the air.

The words were ancient. Older than the packs. Older than the kingdom. Inaudible to anyone but me. They opened my spiritual senses like a key turning in a long-locked door.

And suddenly I could see.

Not with my eyes. With something deeper. Something that existed beyond the physical world, in the realm where spirit and flesh intertwined.

The professor's body lay before me like a detailed map. I could see his failing organs, their light dimming. His weakened heart, struggling with each beat. His congested lungs, filling with fluid they couldn't expel.

But more importantly, I could see his spirit.

It was dim. Flickering. A candle flame guttering in a hurricane, moments from being extinguished forever. The threads that connected his soul to his body were fraying. Snapping. One by one, like ropes on a bridge giving way.

Spirit Wasting. Just as I had suspected from Luna Helena's description.

I traced the damage with my senses, following the decay to its source. Found it nestled at the core of his being. A dark mass, pulsing with wrongness. A spiritual parasite that was slowly, methodically consuming his life force.

That's why the physicians couldn't help. They couldn't see this. They were treating the symptoms while the true disease feasted unseen.

I withdrew my hand and opened my eyes.

"Well?" Edmund's voice was tight with desperate hope, his hands clasped together so tightly his knuckles had gone white. "Can you help him? Please, tell me honestly."

I stood. Straightened my robes.

"Yes."

The word dropped into the silence like a stone into still water.

Everyone stared at me.

"What?" Physician Harlow looked incredulous, his professional composure cracking.

"That's impossible. You barely examined him. You touched him for two minutes at most—"

"I saw enough."

"Saw enough? I spent fifteen minutes conducting a thorough evaluation using time-tested methods. You touched him briefly and hummed to yourself!"

"Sometimes two minutes is all you need when you know where to look." I turned to face Edmund directly. "Your father has a condition that ordinary physicians cannot detect, no matter how experienced they are. It's not a disease of the body. It's a disease of the spirit. That's why no medicine has worked. That's why he keeps getting worse despite everyone's best efforts."

"A disease of the spirit?" The young man looked confused, his brow furrowing deeply. "What does that mean?"

"It means I can cure him. But it will take time. Several treatments spread over weeks. And it will require methods that may seem... unconventional to those unfamiliar with the old ways."

Professor Aldwin stirred on the bed, his eyes focusing on me with sudden sharpness. "You're either a liar or a madman. Perhaps both."

"I'm neither." I met his faded eyes without flinching. "I'm a healer. A real one. The kind your physicians don't believe exists anymore."

"Father, please—"

"Don't get your hopes up, son." The professor's voice was sad. Resigned. Hollow with too many disappointments. "I've heard promises like this before. They always end the same way."

Edmund turned to me. His eyes were desperate. Pleading. The eyes of a man grasping at his last, fraying thread of hope.